

Roger Zare

1. Do you like writing for strings? What are the challenges? What do you enjoy?

As a violinist, I feel comfortable with the technical aspects of string instruments, and I really enjoy the challenge of trying to get the most out of each string instrument that I write for. I want to be a friend to the performer and strive to write as idiomatically as much as possible. Writing music that seems hard and complex but is not as difficult to play is one of the greatest challenges that I face when writing for strings. The thing I love most when writing for strings is the huge variety of sounds and techniques at my disposal.

2. If you had to write a piece for viola, which could be of any form or style, what would it be like? And why?

I would love to write a concerto. And not just any kind of concerto—an epic one. After writing my first concerto a few years ago (for clarinet), I've been itching to write more for other instruments. I love the challenge of pitting the soloist against the ensemble and trying to keep things balanced and intelligible. Composing is full of problem solving, and certainly figuring out how not to drown out a solo viola with an orchestra is a problem worth solving. I gravitate towards the romantic ideal for the concerto, with the soloist as protagonist, combining this with much more modern forms and musical languages.

3. What would you want us (instrumentalists) to do before we approach you for a commission? (e.g., play for you, send you a recording, listen to your works, etc.)

Before I write a commission, I would like to hear the person I'm writing for in some way, either live or via recording. I also want to get to know your personality a bit, as this informs me just as much how I'm going to approach writing a piece of music for you.

4. Under what circumstance and for what reason would you accept/reject a commission?

I think the only reason currently that I would turn down a commission would be if I knew I was too busy and wasn't going to have the time to write it on time and be satisfied with the piece. The final product reflects mostly on the composer if it is poor.

5. How clearly of an idea for the piece should we have before approaching you? (e.g., instrumentation, length, number of movements, etc.)

Length and instrumentation are the main parameters that I want to know when I receive a commission. Sometimes I'm also interested in knowing what else will be on the program and where the work will be premiered, as that can give me ideas about what I will write. You can feel free to tell me anything else you may want in the piece, though I won't necessarily take it all into consideration if it doesn't work with my ideas. Starting with a completely blank canvas is one of the most daunting and difficult tasks for a composer,

so I'm happy to be able to start with a few basic limitations.

6. How and how much can we take part in the creation process?

I really love working with the performer if I have the chance. I'm very interested to know what you do well, and what you'd rather not do, so I can tailor the piece to your abilities. Once I get started writing the piece, I may or may not send you the work in progress for feedback, depending how confident I feel about how it's coming along.

7. How far ahead of time should we ask?

I can compose quickly, but also tend to be busy with a line-up of residencies and future projects in the works. While I've occasionally composed 10-minute pieces in under a week, I prefer to have at least three to six months advance notice when asked to write a commission of that length, if not more. If you're able to ask a year in advance, that is ideal (though in that case, you should certainly remind the composer about the work at some point down the road). Also, definitely give the composer a deadline that gives you enough time to master the music before the performance. Deadlines create inspiration for me, and I will do my absolute best to finish ahead of them. If it's a true commission and you're paying, it is a good idea to write and sign a contract with the composer.

8. What do you expect in return?

At the very least, I expect the commissioned work to be premiered and to receive a recording. I also expect that I receive some kind of compensation, whether it be money or taking me out to dinner or something else. I take issue with people using the word "commission" too lightly, taking off with the music without paying the composer or even really showing any gratification for the hard work that went into writing the music. Now that I'm out of school, composing is what I do for a living, and commissions are a business transaction at heart. That is not to say I won't write a piece for a friend for free every now and then—it just shouldn't be called a commission. There are numerous funds and grants that offer money to performers to commission composers—Fromm Foundation, Jerome Fund, the American Music Center, to name a few. Also, organizing a consortium of a number of performers to commission a new work is a win-win for everyone involved, as it defrays the individual costs of commissioning. Ten people each pitching in \$100 is much more feasible than one person coming up with a whole thousand.

9. Any other things we should know or be aware of?

Performers should never be shy about approaching composers about commissioning new works! Music is a living tradition and commissioning us ensures that it stays alive. I rarely write works that aren't either commissioned or already have performances scheduled, partly because it is much more difficult for me to concentrate on creating a piece of music when I have no idea who or what it is for. When you commission a work,

it is something that you can take ownership of in a way that you just can't with standard repertoire.