

Tommy Dougherty

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

As a violinist myself, I feel perhaps the most comfortable writing for strings. Especially over the past four years, being in music school and having some of my closest friends be string players, I have always had an abundance of opportunity to write for string instruments. I've found too that a composer who is an active performer of an instrument is able to develop trust with the performer they are collaborating with, which is essential. This would be a contributing reason to my love for writing for strings.

One of the greatest challenges is certainly the amount of standard repertoire you are competing with. You have to have a strong voice and a true drive to go and write another solo violin piece or string quartet. It's common to find a lot of string quartet music that sounds like bad Bartók today, and everyone wonders, why did this need to be written? But I think the composers that have something new to say with these traditional instruments will always thrive because string quartets will always be played, violin recitals will always happen, and if your piece can consistently stand next to Beethoven quartets and solo Bach, then you as a composer have overcome a great challenge.

I enjoy writing for the string family because the violin is a creative outlet for me personally, whether it is performing or writing for it. It's been one of my closest friends over the years, and has certainly led me to many more (humans, in most cases)!

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 have had the recent (within the past year) urge to write small concerto-like pieces to showcase different instruments. I would love to write a piece for solo viola and chamber ensemble in the ten minute range. It's tempting to say that I would want to write a viola concerto, however I feel like a sinfonietta or chamber ensemble actually acts as a better supporting cast than a full orchestra in concerto situations. There are less issues in terms of balance between the soloist and the ensemble, and practically, the smaller ensemble is easier to assemble, and can be done more frequently.

I would also love to simply write for solo viola or viola and piano. The instrument is so unique in its voice type, color, and character that even simple instrumentations such as these would be exciting for me as a composer.

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.)

If I don't already know the performer, I love to hear them play, hear the pieces that excite them and challenge them as performers, and also for them to listen to some of my music in an effort to become familiar with each other as artists.

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

If someone who inspires me through their performing and their ambition as an artist approaches me, it is nearly impossible for me to say no. That's not to say that I would drop everything else that I am working on currently, but they are certainly added to the list and I make the time necessary to write them a piece that will complement and showcase them. If I were approached with a timeline that I felt I wouldn't be able to do my best work, then I would have to decline or ask the piece be written at a later date.

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

The instrumentation, length, number of movements are always a good starting point. I sometimes find it difficult to begin working if a performer has an idea for a piece that is incredibly specific (in terms of character, shape, style), but practical things like the length and instrumentation are helpful in the precompositional stages. In other words, if a performer were to say (I've never had this happen!) I want a piece that sounds like Stravinsky and quotes [insert piece] and has a big ending, I would feel like I wasn't the best candidate to write said piece because I wouldn't feel as if it were entirely mine. This is not meant to sound selfish or possessive, but rather, I would feel as if I were writing someone else's music, perhaps.

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

I love to communicate and go back and forth with a performer as much as they are comfortable with. I do think it is important that we each have our own time alone with the piece (me writing it, the performer preparing it), and it is imperative that each of our "alone time" is at the same level. A composer should not take a day or two to write an impossible piece and then have the performer slave over practicing for weeks. A composer shouldn't spend four months on a piece and then have their performer look at the piece a couple of times.

7. How far ahead of time should we ask?

This is entirely dependent on what type of piece it is (refer to question 5). I think the composer and performer should discuss what function the piece is, how difficult it will be, how many people will be involved, and how long it will be. From there, it is easy to gauge how long everything will take.

8. What do you expect in return?

The same level of dedication to the piece. There's the famous Beethoven quote that essentially says missed notes are excusable, playing without passion is unacceptable. Couldn't agree more!

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

Communicate! Honesty is always appreciated and essential. The process should be approached objectively and professionally, and after all of the hard work, there will be a happy composer and performer who have started a great relationship!