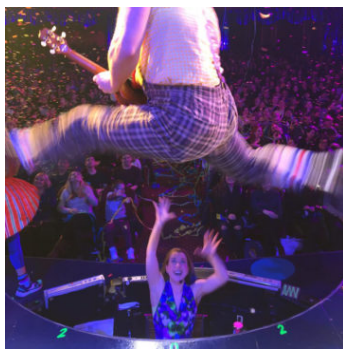


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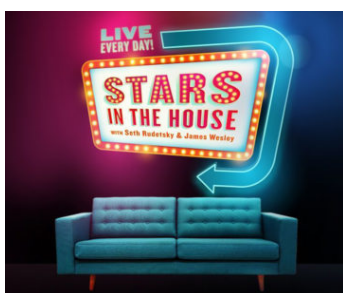
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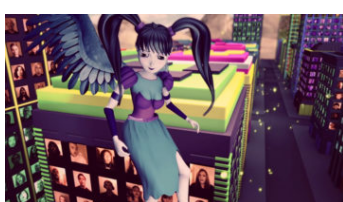
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CULTURE CHANGE

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LET'S BREAK THE MONEY TALK TABOO

DALE TRUMBORE · MARCH 2018

At a Chorus America conference back in 2011, I heard Stephen Paulus say that his commissioning rate was about \$3,000 per minute of music. Listening to that number ring in the air was oddly thrilling. Until then, I had no idea what professional choral composers charged for new pieces, especially composers as successful as Paulus.

More recently, I experienced the same jolt when reading an [article](#) by Roxane Gay in which she states the exact amount she received for two of her book advances. Few of us are willing to be that transparent.

Why is this so? When it comes to payment, why are artists frequently so unwilling to cite real numbers?

There are many factors at play here, including guilt. Many emerging musicians may wonder how they could charge for something they love doing, or that others might do for free. A musician's financial background may also determine the kind of work they take on. They may depend on getting high-paying commissions in order to manage a mortgage or support their family. The opposite may be true: They may have a family or partner that supports them, or a well-paying teaching position. The wide disparity in need and desire for income among composers can translate into major discomfort around talking money with our peers.

It doesn't help that most composition programs don't address how composers might go about charging money for their work. It has taken me years to feel comfortable quoting a fee and knowing how flexible to be with that number. I imagine that much of my initial hesitancy would have been helped by hearing even one of my professors speak openly about how they charge for their music, or what fees they thought were reasonable for a newly graduated composer.

Instead, most young musicians are expected to learn how to manage their finances on their own. Many do eventually figure this out, myself included. Over time, I've learned how to merge my drive to write music with my need to pay the bills, and my rates have gone up substantially.

Throughout high school, I often wrote music without considering whether it would even be performed; most of it was not. When a local composition contest brought about not just the first public performance of my music but also a \$500 award, it felt like a lot of money.

I began to use composition contests, particularly choral ones, as testing grounds for what music would connect with performers and conductors. In college, I asked talented friends to let me write them pieces in exchange for a good recording. Soon after finishing my undergraduate

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degree, I received my first paying commission for \$1,000; a second commission followed a little over a year later.

As I became more familiar with what it would take to make a living as a composer, I realized that writing choral music was both work that I loved doing and that could potentially earn me a substantial income. I began to pursue more paid opportunities to write for chorus. Over time, I met more choral conductors in grad school, sent my music out to conductors I'd cold-emailed, had my first choral work published and started attending annual choral conferences. Securing new choral commissions began to feel less like a mystifying process, in which a benevolent email appeared in my inbox and offered an arbitrary amount of money, and more like a recurring, even steady part of my life as a composer.

Opportunity costs factor in, too. If I accept a commission that doesn't pay well, I still have to devote the same amount of time to it that I normally would.

The more choral music I wrote on commission, the more comfortable I felt charging money for my work. I valued my music more when I thought about it in terms of time. From start to finish, writing a new piece can take anywhere from a month to several years. Essentially, a commissioning fee buys my time. It pays my rent and other living expenses so that I can make writing that piece my primary focus. Opportunity costs factor in, too. If I accept a commission that doesn't pay well, I still have to devote the same amount of time to it that I normally would. I may even have to decline other work in order to fulfill that contract.

Sometimes we value our work more after another musician sees its potential first. This has happened to me a few times. I didn't start charging \$1,000 per minute for choral works – my current rate – until two years ago. A conductor who had programmed my music in the past offered to commission me, saying something like, "I assume you charge \$1,000 per minute, so we'd be happy to offer you that." At the time, that amount – \$4,000 total – was the most I'd been paid for a piece of that length.

That kind of exchange demonstrates the different preconceptions that artists bring to the value of their work, and that's exactly why it's so important to make discussion about money less taboo.

So how do we broach the subject? I've found it helps to start with friends or colleagues you know well. Instead of inquiring about their personal rates, ask for input. You might say, "This ensemble wants me to write them a new piece. What do you think would be a reasonable fee to quote them?" Allowing for flexibility in their response and talking about fees as a range rather than an exact number can create space for an honest conversation about how artists go about making a living.

Since so few musicians receive formal training about finances, pooling our knowledge about money can prove invaluable. It can give us the clarity and insight we need to merge our artistic and financial goals. For me, discussing money with musician friends has inspired new strategies for how I'll reach my long-term goal to make 100 percent of my income from composing. Last year, 45 percent came from commissioning fees and royalties for choral music, 20 percent came from writing non-choral music and 35 percent came from teaching private piano and music theory lessons. In the future, I plan to pursue higher-paying commissions and to promote my existing choral catalogue to conductors so that my income continues to grow.

Over the last year, my focus has broadened beyond choral music to include more chamber and orchestral works. I'd like to write more longer and larger-scale pieces, so I'm occasionally willing to work for less than usual if that means I receive unique performance opportunities. Often, these larger works receive a substantial amount of royalties through performing rights organizations like BMI or ASCAP.

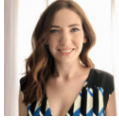
As an undergraduate, I began crafting a strategy for my career that I've now pursued for over a decade: Write a lot of choral music, but don't limit myself to it. Vary choral writing so that I have a wide range of pieces for high school, collegiate and professional choruses. Eventually, build a large catalogue of steadily-performed works. Combine recurring royalties with income from new commissions to generate enough money to live on. In addition to this, take on commissions to write instrumental works when I find those opportunities thrilling and meaningful.

Becoming secure in the value of my work has been essential to my growth as a composer.

Becoming secure in the value of my work has been essential to my growth as a composer. Speaking openly about money reinforces that value, and it's shown me that a brief moment of

discomfort in bringing up the subject with friends or potential collaborators shouldn't deter anyone from initiating those conversations. Whenever a musician speaks openly about money, everyone in the conversation profits.

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