

Parlaying a second performance into a world-class encore: a new model breathes life into new works

by Maureen Dowdell for Vocal Area Network

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Somewhere in the world, a bewildered composer looks at the score of his or her beloved choral composition and wonders why the phone never rang after the piece premiered and why no additional performances were booked.

Whether male or female, amateur or professional, novice or veteran, composers share a common experience where gaining additional performances of choral works is concerned. All too often, after a successful premiere and countless hours shopping the score (including recording

demos, mailing CDs, calling conductors; acquiring mailing lists; writing newsletters; updating websites; attending networking meetings, choral performances, conferences, and festivals; booking public speaking engagements; social networking; submitting works to competitions; applying for grants; learning marketing strategies from publishers and publishing agents), the composer reluctantly puts the composition to rest on the shelf of a forlorn bookcase with only the footnote of a hope that one day it might be resurrected from a dusty chest: perhaps found years later in the composer's attic by heirs sorting through remnants of the estate or discovered on a flash drive in the piano bench. This example may sound dramatic, but, all too often, for too many choral composers, the call for a second performance never comes, regardless of the caliber of the work.

Recent interviews with a number of choral composers provided some insights into this issue:

Is it possible that the shelf life of a contemporary choral work is only one performance?

Mark Zuckerman, a composer living in Roosevelt, New Jersey, posits, "There does seem to be [something] in this culture. I don't know whether it has anything to do with the Olympic mentality or something like that, but people are much more eager to get the premiere performance than the second one."

Welsh composer Hilary Tann of Schuylerville, New York has been writing exclusively to commission since 1980 and is commissioned through 2013. She agrees, "Clearly, the works are programmed because they're commissioned. It's the later performances that are the problem."

According to composer Patrick Valentino of Roslindale, Massachusetts, "Most competitions, or commissions or awards, anything that involves a performance is usually for one performance. And, overwhelmingly, it's for a premiere performance because most organizations, I think, are interested in being able to say that they've given the premiere of a piece, and that they're interested in getting new music out there and not just perform a piece that has been performed twenty times before."

So it would seem that, after weeks, months or even years dedicated to creating a choral work and acquiring a premiere, the work to make the composer and the composition visible begins.

According to the survey "Taking Note: A Study of Composers and New Music Activity in the United States" commissioned by the American Music Center and the American Composers Forum, "Sixty-three percent of professional composers do self-promotion." Hilary Tann explains, "It used to be that publishers selected composers and then promoted them," Publishers aren't doing that anymore. So we are extending the base, as it were, so we are now pulling into our different communities."

"We always like to think they haven't gained a second performance yet!" muses Valentino. "The pieces that haven't yet had a large impact or had as many performances as maybe I would like, I'm always in the effort of marketing them, bringing them to more audiences, bringing them to the attention of other music directors, and just sort of a grassroots motivation which I'm sure is common among many, many composers."

Zuckerman notes that it is difficult getting new works out anywhere and adds, "Still, the best way of getting a piece played by anybody is to develop a relationship with them--and that takes a lot of doing."

With many conductors and ensembles dedicated to bringing new works into existence, why are composers finding it difficult to keep new works circulating in the repertory?

Far removed from the patronage systems of old, today's choral composers have unprecedented control over their careers. With technology available to streamline the work process; service organizations providing networking, commissioning and career development opportunities; and granting bodies and commissioning groups providing financial resources, composers have an array of tools to develop their careers. They are no longer limited to composing within a dictated theme and structure. Composers now have the freedom to choose subject matter and how they set text to music, with a palette of musical periods, genres, languages, and styles to explore. These freedoms, however, bring unique challenges in marketing the work.

Conflicting marketing realities may pigeonhole a work after its premiere. Composers depend on concert performances to gain exposure for their work, but a successful premiere far from guarantees additional programming opportunities. Tann reports, "Sometimes word of mouth will carry news of a good performance, but quite often I have felt, especially with smaller ensembles, that the publicity machine doesn't work so well. And so, I have a couple of good pieces that are sitting waiting for their second and third performances."

Many ensembles rely on ticket sales to survive. Ah, there's the rub... Building an audience is an art that often hinges on the appeal of a premiere performance to generate media coverage. A number of ensembles build their reputations on introducing new works which is a key factor in generating grant and award opportunities. An ensemble's ability to increase media coverage, enhance its reputation, and generate grants and awards based on a second or third performance is rare.

Then there are budget considerations. Philadelphia composer Andrea Clearfield states, "Many of my choral works involve large forces--soloists, chorus, orchestra. I find it difficult to obtain second performances of these big works, especially in these economic times when organizations may be cutting back on programming large contemporary pieces."

Matching the ensemble's level of competency with that of the composer's music adds another layer of complexity. Dr. Deborah Simpkin King, the Artistic Director and Founder of Schola Cantorum on Hudson (SCH), explains, "The challenge of preparing new works and the time-intensive rehearsals needed to master the rhythmic and tonal complexity that are often the calling card of contemporary pieces, present hurdles for composers in acquiring performances."

The language of the text may also pose a barrier to encore performances. Composer Polina

Sergeevna Nazaykinskaya of New Haven, Connecticut has been unable to acquire a significant performance of her work saying, "The main problem is it is in Russian. In terms of the music itself, it is accessible. I am sure a chorus can sing this, but I probably should translate it into English."

Finally, the lack of access to new works and to direct involvement with the composer deters some conductors and ensembles from programming second and third performances. "The thing about choirs is that they generally develop a strong regional following," says Zuckerman. "The choir directors have a devoted group of composers to whom there is mutual devotion, so they tend to program a lot of people that they know, and they tend to be pretty local to that group."

So, although conductors and performing forces may have strong rationales for passing on second or third performances, this premiere-focused practice does tend to create a short shelf life for new works.

Does this "one-hit wonder" phenomenon affect composers' willingness to create new choral works?

For some composers, the lack of second performance opportunities has dissuaded them from writing in the choral genre. Then there are composers of the ilk who proclaim, "We write what we write." Others are finding ways to secure additional performances by concentrating on more lucrative segments of the choral market with less imposing barriers to entry. Steve Cohen, a composer living in New York City, reports, "Certain choral works like Jewish liturgical works have been fairly easy to get programmed. I have a lot of connections in that area. For secular pieces, the opportunities are not as plentiful for me... You move to where you are most accepted. I'm not saying I won't write a secular piece again; I would either have to find a text I absolutely must set or someone is asking me to write it."

Valentino, who is the Music Director at a Catholic church, has also recognized that writing works centered around a specific religious theme or time of year, while limiting the appeal of the work, enhances its marketability to music directors looking for specific repertoire. "Sacred music is sort of unique among choral music in that it has such a great rate of performance in the sense that sacred music can be a part of a concert as much as it can be a part of a religious service," says Valentino. "If I wrote a text that was tied to a specific day of the church calendar, it becomes very marketable around that day."

With the segmentation of the market shifting the landscape of new choral music, and the prospect looming of composers writing only to commission or forsaking creating new choral works altogether, one innovative ensemble has taken action.

A new model breathes life into new works...

While planning repertoire for her ensemble's fifteenth anniversary season, King considered programming works with minimal performance histories. Long a proponent of active composers, she asserts, "Over the years, as we have had the privilege of premiering works by a number of composers, we have increasingly come to recognize what is an acknowledged difficulty within the composers' community: procuring that elusive second performance."

To draw awareness to the issue, King made an artistic decision to weave a thread of second performances throughout the season. As she began to research this programming concept, she quickly encountered a stumbling block: there were no resources available that compiled those types of works, and no template for what she intended to do. Short of scanning headlines of major news publications throughout the world for reviews of choral premieres, how were these works to be found? Further, if she were to conduct the massive amount of research needed to locate these pieces, wouldn't it make sense to share the results with the greater choral community rather than just a handful of composers, singers and audience members associated with SCH?

A new model of musical interdependence between composers, conductors and ensembles...

Those unanswered questions proved to be the catalyst that would motivate King to address the 'second performance issue' head on. A formative experience years earlier with composer Randall Svane had placed the issue in her sights. Her ensemble performed the world premiere of Svane's thirty-minute a cappella composition entitled *Mass* in 2006. The premiere received accolades, yet the composer's efforts to secure a second performance proved fruitless. King worked collaboratively with him in seeking additional performances. Ultimately, those efforts culminated in an invitation to perform the European premiere of the work at Sunday High Mass in the Salzburg Dom in Austria during the famed Salzburg Festival in August of 2008. King remarks, "The success and fulfillment found in that performance were profound for composer and performers alike. The experience planted within us a desire to somehow address the 'second performance issue' with successfully premiered works."

That desire now fueling her very real dilemma, King rose to the task. With the aplomb of a seasoned artistic director and the chutzpah of a fledgling entrepreneur, King transformed a programming obstacle into an industry-changing opportunity. In the process, she created a new model of musical interdependence between composers, conductors, and ensembles: Project Encore™ of Schola Cantorum on Hudson--a searchable database of choral works that have been premiered, but have not garnered significant additional performances--is revolutionizing the process of programming new music.

The database, accessible on SCH's website (ScholaOnHudson.org), provides detailed information about new works, links to composer and publisher websites, sound files and sample pages of scores. King says, "We knew that we had to address, at least, the accessibility barrier to programming new works if we were to promote their healthy circulation in the choral repertoire, so we created a centralized location online where premiered works are more easily accessible to conductors and ensembles. We included sound files in the database to help address any intimidation or learning-curve issues that might inhibit ensembles from programming these works."

Where gaining a second performance traditionally depended on a composer's ability to "shop" a score, Project Encore offers a cost-effective, one-stop solution to increasing visibility for composers as well as making works available to conductors and ensembles. Tann, whose work *Paradise* is represented in the database, surmises, "We are somehow becoming a community united by email, and MP3s and PDFs. And so, I think [of] the Schola Cantorum on Hudson effort as, in a way, you know, it takes a village, as creating the community. But the community isn't a geographical one, it's one that unites our interests across these spaces."

Clearfield, whose compositions *Fire and Ice* and *The Golem Psalms* earned inclusion in the database, adds, "It is also a brilliant idea to be able to search the database for pieces that fall within certain thematic categories. Thematic programming has lately become very successful as it can bring together communities and can involve educational components and attract a wider audience. Project Encore can direct conductors to works that might fit particular programs or pairings."

In support of the Project Encore initiative, SCH committed to programming works from the database as a major portion of its fifteenth season. The organization also instituted a Featured Composers Series to complement the database initiative. Dr. Roger H. Wesby, Associate Professor of Music at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York, was selected as the 2009-2010 Featured Composer. His works are also represented in the database.

The Project Encore initiative has received enthusiastic support from the American Composers Forum. President and CEO John Nuechterlein says, "Project Encore is a wonderful way to catalog and promote the best of new choral repertoire for the field. It is not always easy for composers to secure performances beyond the premiere, and I applaud the effort of Schola Cantorum on Hudson to share top-notch work with other choruses through this database." Nuechterlein serves on the Project Encore Advisory Council along with Robert Schuneman, President of ECS Publishing; composer and conductor Randall Stroepe; and Nicholas Cleobury, Founder and Conductor of

England's Sounds New, among other positions.

The database also motivated the New Jersey State Council on the Arts to award a renewable grant to SCH, commenting, "There is a good program in place which gives a second performance opportunity for new works, which is not common in this industry, and is a very good artistic practice."

Perhaps most importantly, since its official launch in October 2009, the initiative has gained the attention of eminent conductors. Charles Bruffy, conductor of the Kansas City and Phoenix Chorales, recently programmed a piece that he found in the Project Encore database. *Joys Seven*, composed by James Ludwig, was originally premiered December 7, 2008, by the Stewart Consort, at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York. In December 2009, the Kansas City and Phoenix Chorales, under the direction of Bruffy, presented the second performance of Ludwig's setting of this traditional English carol.

SCH invites composers to submit one composition per calendar quarter for possible inclusion in the Project Encore database. A review panel comprised of well-respected conductors in the international choral community evaluates and, subsequently, recommends new postings from the body of works submitted. The next deadline for submissions is May 15, 2010. Submissions are received on an ongoing basis, with new quarterly uploads projected for the first of June, September, December and March.

SCH is showcasing a number of Project Encore compositions this season. For more information about SCH and its activities, visit ScholaOnHudson.org or call (201) 918-3009.

Maureen Dowdell is a singing member of Schola Cantorum on Hudson. She sits on its Artistic and Membership Development Committee and serves as the organization's Director of Public Relations.

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