

Classical Commissioning program at the Canada Council

The Music Section of the Canada Council for the Arts is pleased to have Shannon Peet provide this overview of the Commissioning Program. The time for this is appropriate given the change with CLC rates and the nature of calls and letters we have been receiving. The purpose of this letter is to provide clarity concerning the current state of the program, the process by which it operates, some challenges it faces and some suggestions about applying for composers and commissioners.

Over the past ten years this program has grown significantly in requests from a variety of communities. This growth - plus the policy of allowing for multiple applications and having two competitions a year - has resulted in a 60% increase in applications. This has been matched by a 100% increase in available program dollars. However, even with this growth of access and funding, we recognize that not everyone's expectations are being met. We hope that this article will provide some answers to the feeling of frustration that a number of people have expressed.

Russell Kelley
Head of Music

As many composers are aware there are aspects of the Classical Commissioning Program that are complex and others that are quite simple and straightforward. The application forms and process of applying are quite simple. The evaluation process - due to the fierce competitiveness of the program - is much more complicated. The following information is provided to give an insight into the process in an attempt to demystify what happens when a commission application is sent to Council.

The program receives at each deadline anywhere from 150-180 applications. There are many senior, mid-career and emerging composers in a variety of genres: orchestra, opera, functional (music theatre/dance), choral and chamber music. These 'genres' are separated into their own 'pools' for appropriate comparison purposes - so one is not evaluating an orchestra work against a work for solo clarinet + electronics. If we receive enough electroacoustic applications, we create a pool for them as well. The 'chamber music' pool consists of all chamber music requests as well as all the new music organizations. The ratio of applications number 2:1, chamber/new music vs. orch/opera/chor/functional pool. Simply put, there are twice as many applications for chamber/new music than the total of all the others.

For a number of years, the program's success rate has been one-in-four. For each 'pool', we try to keep the same success rate so that all pools are funded equitably, as all communities, choral, orchestral, new music, depend on commissioning for their programming. In each pool there are again, senior, mid-career and emerging composers of very, very high quality.

As you can see, if it is possible to only fund one in four applications – currently more like one-in-six with the new rates – for every pool or genre eligible to the program, there will always be a number of commission requests for nationally known and very respected composers turned down. All juries struggle with the success rate – that is a given for most programs at Council.

However, the Commissioning program, unlike most other programs at Council, has two deadlines with multiple applications per commissioner and composer allowed at each. I always encourage composers and organizations to re-apply – sometimes over and over again. Here's why:

The parameters on the 'nature' of the project are few (compared with other project programs); basically, commissions are funded to enable professional artists (soloists, ensembles and organizations) to engage a composer to write a new work. Combine this open and generous criteria with the overwhelming number of extremely good proposals received each deadline. Each new competition consists of new jurors – with their own expertise and their issues; new types of competing applications and new numbers of applications in each pool, creating a new national comparison each and every time. The priority list of these Peer Assessment Committees is therefore potentially quite different each time.

Care is taken to award grants to both senior and younger composers, established and fledgling ensembles and toward regional diversity – accommodating the prominence of new music groups in centres across the country. The PAC (Peer Assessment Committee) considers both partners in the process – the organization and the composer – when looking for balance between genres, region, gender, cultural diversity and young/established artists

CLC Rate Increase: The rate increase had a significant impact on this past commissioning competition (March 2003). While the rates had not been raised in five years, the increases per minute were significant and the impact of these rates – applied across the board, even if applicants applied with the old rate – reduced the rate of success in this program from one-in-four, to one-in-six. This will have significant impact on the milieu. The point #3 raised in the fall newsletter – discussing the lack of flexibility in determining rates for younger/less

experienced composers versus senior composers is, in fact, very real. But it is Council's understanding that any structuring of fees (reflecting a number of issues – experience just being one of them) have historically, been the League's responsibility to resolve – not Council's. So when the League fails to determine how these rates should be applied, Council has simply continued their policy of applying the universal rate to everyone – as minimums.

With the exception of one or two (world-renowned) composers, all applicants apply the rates as minimums and all composers are awarded at the same rate. In the absence of agreement on a two-tier system or any other system that would establish an application of rates that incorporate: experience vs. inexperience; age or numbers of years of practice; or the most contentious of all, whether the rates apply equally to composers with or without jobs or tenured positions, composers will continue to confront these issues themselves with extreme discomfort when they sit on a Peer Assessment Committee – and when they see how quickly the allocated budget is spent.

When applications have young composers tackling big projects (large works or very long works or both) for the first time and the applicant hasn't demonstrated that they can handle this risk – i.e. there is a bit of 'over-reaching' in the application - PAC members will usually recommend a shorter work at the correct CLC rate despite their unease about awarding these first-time initiatives at the same rates of far more established composers. Current program policy does not have a practice of awarding partial grants, except in cases where applicants specify such.

Given the initial observations of the impact of the rate change, the Music Section is therefore proposing to engage the CLC in a dialogue that begins discussing alternatives such as partial funding or a tiered system that would allow for a more equitable distribution of funds within a limited budget. In all other programs at the Canada Council grants awarded represent a **contribution** to the project request. It is preferable for composers to follow guidelines determined in consultation with their own service organization than to determine arbitrary, short-term solutions themselves when sitting on a Peer Assessment Committee.

Here are some statistics from the past three years: (Some variation is accounted for by ineligible or withdrawn applications, 'highly recommendeds', and budget variance. Electroacoustic has not been broken out for all stats, just examples.)

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<p><u>2002 spring:</u> # of applications: <u>153</u> <u>36</u> funded # of orch app's : 22 # funded: 6 # of opera : 4 0 # of choral : 9 1 # of mth/dance : 113 # of ch/nm : 101 23</p>	<p><u>2002 fall:</u> # of applications: <u>177</u> <u>41</u> funded # of orch app's : 22 # funded: 7 # of opera : 6 1 # of choral : 13 4 # of mth/dance : 17 3 (1 electro) # of ch/nm : 120 26 (4 electro)</p>	
<p><u>2001 spring:</u> # of applications: <u>179</u> <u>43</u> funded # of orch app's : 23 # funded: 6 # of opera : 11 2 # of choral : 16 4 # of mth/dance : 8 3 # of ch/nm : 122 28</p>	<p><u>2001 fall:</u> # of applications: <u>158</u> <u>40</u> funded # of orch app's : 18 # funded: 6 # of opera : 8 1 # of choral : 15 2 # of mth/dance : 6 1 # of ch/nm : 111 30</p>	

A list of jurors over the past three year period include:

Howard Bashaw, Owen Underhill, Michael Bussière, Walter Buczynski, Rodney Sharman, Hélène Prévost, Gilles Tremblay, Richard Sacks, Gilles Gobeil, Linda Nessel, Stephen Chatman, Barbara Croall, Piotr Grella-Mozejko, Marc Tremblay, John Rea, Martin Arnold, Paule Préfontaine, Randy Raine-Reusch, Harry

Freedman, Shirley (Sawatsky) Elias, Marc Hyland, Christopher Butterfield, Marie Pelletier, Bongani Ndongana, Serge Arcuri and Kathy Armstrong.

(This list does not include jurors for the Jules Leger Prize).

Changes to the Program:

The Music Section is always reviewing the program with an eye to improving the clarity of the criteria and the opportunity for success. In the past year, new criteria has been put into print that elucidates the process – usually from the point of eligibility. For example, increased access to information on the Web had resulted in an increase of applications from non-professional organizations – high school bands, orchestras, community marching bands etc. By putting into print criteria that was more or less ‘understood’ by the regular users of the program, this program has been brought into a tighter alignment of Council policy – to serve professional artists and arts organizations. **Please read the application guidelines to make sure that you are all aware of the changes.**

As well, the Auditor General requires that payment of grants be made only to the recipient – the commissioner. The only exception to this rule, allowing composers to be paid directly, are when commissioners are foreign based, resulting in an unnecessary change of currency.

Finally, a change to be implemented in the near future is to request that the commissioner write a short project description. This will assist the PAC greatly in evaluating the context of the project request. As the program becomes increasingly competitive, this information becomes more important in the assessment of a file. It will also assist in grounding applications in a deeper intention as few artistic directors describe their commission as part of any artistic project, vision or even rationale. (This is the case most of the applications – even from senior organizations. In this regard, well-prepared applications are as necessary in the Commissioning program as in any other competition, in any other granting program). The majority of applications have neither party taking responsibility for stating the purpose of the commission. Therefore the addition of a very short project description will be very effective in determining the impact of a potential work. Which leads us to the next aspect of this article.

Tips on Applying:

Understanding the competitive nature of the program, there are ways in which composers and commissioners can clarify and strengthen their applications.

Many applications lack a signature from the composer – or a complete contract. Contracts take many forms, but no matter how formal or informal, they must have the pertinent details – that match the application form – and it must bear the composer’s signature. A short letter from the composer indicating his/her intentions to the project doesn’t hurt either. Besides the signature being required, these factors lend the impression that the composer has had a part in the application and has expressed his or her commitment. It is amazing to witness the numbers of applications where there exists not the slightest imprint of the composer in this collaborative application process, yet they are the partner most present in questioning their lack of success. (This is not to say that composers are not welcome to request feedback. On the contrary, beyond the intention of this article to offer general advice, individual consultation is always possible.)

Even more important is the preparation of support materials – audio and scores from composers, C.V.’s and bios from commissioner, performers, and composers. There is a detailed **Notice to Composers** on the final page of the application form (which is supposed to be sent by the commissioner to the composer) explaining how not to waste valuable time at the jury presentation by organizing well your support material. This page is available on the Canada Council Web site. I cannot emphasize this aspect enough.

C.V.’s: Composers: please do not send in a 15-page C.V. that lists every work going back 30 years. Neither do photocopies of 30-yr old CMC brochures put the best foot forward. Only a 2-page resume and a 4-page list of works are allowed. Pages beyond this maximum will not go to the jury. Updated, edited, concise C.V.’s are essential.

Audio: Listening time IS limited. (see Notice to Composers). Unless composers really believe that the first minute of their works indicate the best example of their writing, PLEASE cue your audio. The impact of cuing audio and scores cannot be underestimated when listening to hundreds of works at a time. In addition, Peer Assessment Committees have little patience to sit through stage introductions, CBC announcements, tuning, stage management or even extended applause on your audio. If your examples cannot be located quickly the jury will move on – automatically. Believe it or not, 90%! of audio is submitted without cuing, identifying tracks, or sometimes even checking at all to see if that hastily-burned CD even worked!

Note: Composers often ask whether to send their most recent work or an example closer to the instrumentation, scale or style of the requested commission – even if its older work. Out of the two examples, one must submit something that is closely related to the proposal. If one has NOT written for strings, voice, piano etc., please send something (another solo instrument example) that might

suffice. The other work submitted could either also support this example OR show a new compositional direction, or what you believe to be your best work. Here too, a short note explaining your choices may assist in the evaluation of the file.

Notification: Due to the volume of files in a national competition, letters are only sent to the commissioners. Please ask the commissioners to inform you upon receipt of their notification or please call them first before calling Council for results.

Finally, it is becoming more difficult to obtain commitment from composers to take part in the Peer Assessment Committee process. This applies particularly to senior composers and composers who hold teaching positions. Yes, the current six-day process is a big commitment but a peer process needs peers! (Please note that due to Council regulations one cannot commit to a jury if you have been used on another, recent jury; if you have applied to the program; or if you are in the midst of a Grant to Individual.) Officers try to line up jurors well in advance but often must wait for the applications to be opened to know if potential jurors have applied. So if you know that you are not applying, are available late October and late March, and might be interested to take part, please feel free to contact the Officer.

I welcome and encourage composers across the country to let me know if they are available and interested. If you know you have a sabbatical approaching, please consider doing your jury 'duty'. Its hard work, but it is fun, it pays well, and it is extremely informative!

Shannon Peet