

Maxine Thévenot • In The Press

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Sing Unto the Lord a New Song: Commissioning New Works for the Liturgy

By MAXINE THÉVENOT

“I should’ve made that left turn at Albuquerque.” For many who, like me, grew up with Bugs Bunny cartoons, this is probably the phrase that first comes to mind when they hear mention of the largest city in New Mexico, which is where The Episcopal Cathedral of St. John, the seat of the Bishop of the Diocese of the Rio Grande, is located. Since moving to Albuquerque, New Mexico from New York City in June 2005, I’ve seen this unique city become a bit faster-paced; I’ve watched it expand its city limits and acquire a few more new, fabulous restaurants; I’ve seen a few more movie stars up close and personal; and I’ve watched the classical and new music scene grow exponentially and had the pleasure of helping to invite and welcome composers, guest singers, instrumentalists, and conductors from across North America and Great Britain to the Cathedral of St. John, located in downtown Albuquerque.

Background

Cathedral Commissions was started in 2006 by my predecessor, Iain Quinn, under the auspices of the Friends of Cathedral Music (FCM) program, and I have been guiding it forward since 2010. FCM is a donor-funded entity of like-minded individuals and receives no funding from the cathedral’s operating budget. Gifts to Friends of Cathedral Music come as donations ‘in memory,’ ‘in thanksgiving,’ or through designated giving such as United Way. Friends of Cathedral Music funds special concerts (orchestral, chamber, and choral), educational projects about our pipe organ (the largest in the state), and other worthy educational events. Now in its 30th season, Friends of Cathedral Music continues to be a blessing for our congregation and community. Having support from the clergy and congregation is critical to running a successful commissioning program. The Cathedral Commissions weekend has always been a joyous time in the life of our cathedral: a celebration of creating, together, something unique for the liturgy. Becoming an active participant in creating a musical legacy for the congregation and choir members of the future is a process that enriches the broader Christian Church and surmounts denominational boundaries.

The Very Rev’d Kristina Ann Maulden, Dean of the Cathedral of St. John, writes: “Cathedrals are unique places where people accustomed to the quickly changing and anxiety-producing world can participate in liturgy that is anchored in the ancient and sacred. We are a source of a connection to the early church that roots us to something enduring and unchanging.

That connection is offered through our liturgy, the reading of Holy Scripture, and the music offered in the worship of God. It is remarkable to be part of the growing edge of our musical tradition as well. Cathedral commissioning gives a spark to new life in our spirits as well as expands our language to give glory to God. It is no small joy to hear brand new musical expressions offered for the first time in our physical space.”

In seventeen years of Cathedral Commissions, we have hosted composers from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Many of these composers have become friends of our congregation, clergy, and choir and have made special pilgrimages to hear our choir when we travel overseas as part of our international choir residencies. As part of this ongoing relationship, composers continue to send their works to be considered for inclusion in our liturgical services, and many send Christmas cards or check-in emails to the choir each year.

Process

The commissioning of a new work can be approached in almost as many ways as there are composers to commission. Guidelines on commissioning can be found on the AmericanComposers Forum website under Programs (<https://composersforum.org/anatomy-of-a-commission/>), and now many composers have information on their websites to help guide commissioning entities. What follows offers an insight into the distinctive features of our own Cathedral Commissions program. An essential part of our Cathedral Commissions process, once we have decided on our commissioned composer, found a sponsor(s), and completed the necessary negotiations, is to invite the composer to the Cathedral of St. John to work directly with the choir and choristers, either by conducting the premiere, accompanying the premiere, or by coaching the choir in two rehearsals and enjoying the premiere from the pew. The composer’s presence is important to us: as part of the Sunday worship service, the composer can meet other congregants and form a special connection with our community. We invite

the composer to speak to the congregation and choir about their work as formally or informally as they feel comfortable (either before or following the liturgy at our Dean's Forum), which further reinforces that important connection. Some of our commissioned composers have chosen to stay for extended periods in the Albuquerque area (New Mexico is known as the Land of Enchantment for a reason), thereby strengthening the relationship between us all and leaving room for a true friendship to blossom and grow. In February 2012, we had the pleasure of hosting Philip Moore as our commissioned composer. He stayed in Albuquerque for two weeks to facilitate the rehearsal schedule and performance of his commissioned work, combined with a concert with orchestra a week later. The concert included two large-scale works, one of which was Philip's Concerto for Organ and Strings, for which I played the organ part and he conducted. The orchestra, comprised of a mix of New Mexico Philharmonic and Santa Fe Symphony players, loved working with Philip as conductor. He truly brought the best out of them. The other half of the program was Faure's Requiem, which I conducted. Philip played the organ part alongside the chamber orchestra, and the Cathedral Choirs sang it. Philip's ears for romantic registration on our Reuter organ were truly inspiring, and having the occasion to work with him collaboratively has been one of my most memorable musical experiences and launched a long-lasting friendship. In May 2014, we welcomed the wonderfully gregarious British composer Andrew Carter, who stayed in Albuquerque for nine days. His energy was infectious (he was seventy-five at the time of his visit!). He not only wrote us a gorgeous anthem on a Christina Rossetti text but also helped by conducting (with tremendous enthusiasm) a one-hour public concert of his music, including the second known American performance of his Organ Concerto in C, for which I played the organ part. His visit allowed extended time with our choir members, congregants, clergy, and host family. Also, it allowed him to work with professional orchestral musicians in New Mexico, thereby enlarging the circle of connection. Again, this friendship continues ten years later. More recently, post-pandemic, the Cathedral Choir and select Cathedral Choristers have had the immense pleasure of working with Canadian composer Sarah Quartel and the American-Canadian composer Zachary Wadsworth. Our 2023 composer-in-residence, Zachary Wadsworth, shares these words about his experience with our commissioning program and why commissioning works for the church is important. I, like so many, was drawn to the Episcopal Church because of its powerful liturgical and musical traditions. But what kept me in the church

was its openness to newness and to contemporary voices. To me, a musical, liturgical practice that draws solely from the past, no matter how beautiful, feels walled off from contemporary life and limited in its meaning to future generations. So commissioning programs that create new music for worship written in a variety of musical styles and languages are investments in the traditions that we all love, and they connect the lives of past Christians to those living now, and to those living in generations to come. That's what makes the commissioning program run by the Friends of Cathedral Music in Albuquerque so special: it's a model of this kind of care for (and stewardship of) past, present, and future. When I was approached by Canon Maxine Thévenot to write a work as part of this program, it was clear that her goal was not only to solicit a new piece of music, but it was also to create a new work that spoke to the specific needs and interests of the Cathedral of St. John. The resulting work, a trilingual setting of the Beatitudes, was my attempt to connect past music (often in Latin) to the lived experience of the congregation (in English and Spanish). This commission revealed to me the importance of commissioning music with a sense of place and purpose. I would encourage anyone who wants to commission a new work for their parish to ask one vital question: "Who is this piece for, and how can it mean the most to them?" The uncertainties and precariousness of international air travel, overall choral health, and the ongoing navigation through a pandemic necessitated our 2021 premiere and contract to be amended and delayed to 2022. What a joy it was to finally meet, greet, and make music with Sarah Quartel. Her commission marked the first choir and organ work in her catalog. Part of our commissioning weekend includes a time for the composer to meet one-on-one with the organist who will be accompanying the work. In this case, I was the privileged one to be at the organ under Sarah's excellent direction. In this special time together, going through the score ahead of meeting with the choir, registration is agreed upon. Sometimes, changes to the score occur as the composer hears their music on our Cathedral organ and in our space for the first time. I will never forget the tears of joy that radiated from Sarah's face when she first heard her work based on Thomas Troeger's text, "Density of Light." It was a powerful and deeply meaningful melding of mind, heart, and spirit and a unique time of bonding – two Canadians tearing up over a beautiful creation amid the southwestern desert. We later took the tram car up to the top of the Sandia mountains to play in some snow. Memorable on so many levels!

Relationship

An especially important relationship is that between

the sponsor(s) and the composer. We always aim to provide the opportunity for social time for the sponsor(s) and the composer over a shared meal or two, and where possible, we arrange a choir party to coincide with the composer's visit. Meeting the creator of a new work can make a world of difference to how we respond to the music placed before us. Therefore, finding the right sponsor for a particular composer requires knowing both parties' personalities and should be the responsibility of the Director of Music or whoever runs the commissioning program. It's crucial that when the composer and donor meet in person, you are as sure as possible that they are compatible people and that nothing should jeopardize the fulfillment of the contractual terms. In our commissioning scheme, the donor and composer are never directly in touch until the donor receives a copy of the new work. The donors are invited to attend the first rehearsal of the newly commissioned piece with the choir, organ, and composer. They are encouraged to observe the continuation of the creative process as we all strive to realize the composer's intentions. Following that first, often very exciting rehearsal, there is usually the opportunity for fellowship time for everyone involved.

Resources

A commission should make the best use of the resources available. We have a fabulous organ at the Cathedral of St. John (Reuter Organ Company, opus 2210, 65 ranks), so it makes sense to showcase its wonderful tonal and color palette. The organ has a terrific tuba, a memorable Trompette en Chamade, and beautiful flutes and strings. The composer must be able to gratify those who have invested in the long-term use of the Cathedral Organ, and therefore, it is essential that they can write idiomatically for the instrument. We also look for composers who can write music tailored to our Cathedral Choir(s). Over the years, as is common to all choirs, the choir personnel change. One season, you might have a particularly strong bass section; the next, you might find yourself with an excellent eleven-member tenor section! You'll want the composer to exploit that wonderful musical gift in the commission. It is important to help guide the composer with a clear set of parameters for what you're after in a work. Do you want four choral parts throughout, or are you happy with a little or a lot of divisi? Do you have soaring high sopranos or rich low basses? It helps the composer if they know how your choir sounds at its best. In the case of our Cathedral Choirs, in more recent years, we have had the pleasure of our senior girl and boy choristers joining the ranks of the Cathedral Choir, and so writing specifically with those voices in mind has also become an option for a commissioned composer. We have some

outstanding soloists within the choir, and that, too, is something for the composer potentially to incorporate at their discretion. It is important, therefore, that you, the commissioning party, know which strengths and weaknesses to communicate to your commissioned composer and what the desired outcome may be.

Text

The selection of text is usually the first point of artistic discussion. The choice of text is initially dictated by the liturgical season in which the premiere is to take place. Beyond that, sometimes the donor wishes to help select a text, and sometimes the composer wishes to have complete control over the text used. Keeping a clear line of communication is key to coming to any agreement. I can say from experience that choosing a text that isn't too specific will encourage many more future performances, and this is something that makes your donor beam with great pride: a second or third hearing of "their piece." Be sure to let your donor know when you've scheduled "their" work. Donors often love inviting friends and family to hear the work they helped bring into the world. Asking composers to write something fresh and new on a familiar text is particularly exciting and potentially very challenging. Imagine being asked to write a new anthem on the text "In the bleak midwinter." Yes, it can be done, but the composer will have to overcome somehow the inevitable comparisons with Darke and Holst. Writing music for an unfamiliar text can be equally inspiring, with the possibility of creating a new favorite text to uplift people in their liturgical experience.

Response

The first read-through of a newly commissioned work is akin to presenting a family member with their Christmas gift: you hope they'll like it immediately. I usually receive the score weeks before introducing it to the choir, and, having worked with this choir for 19 years now, I have a sense of whether it will be love at first sight(read) or whether the work will grow on them with time. The collective response of the congregation immediately following the premiere performance often surprises me. The commissioned works have evoked a variety of reactions, from an immediate appreciation shown by a burst of applause (something which, as Episcopalians, we very rarely allow ourselves) to a hushed sense of the whole room holding its breath for a moment while the final sounds dissipate into the acoustical space and time of the cathedral. However appreciation is expressed, we will all have been changed by hearing a marriage between this new music and this text for the very first time. Singing a new work by a composer whose name you had only previously seen in print but whom you have now met

in the flesh is thrilling. Singing music written especially for your choir and congregation under the direction of the person who created it brings a new perspective when singing any other piece of music by that same composer. The Asian proverb, "Better to see something once than hear about it a thousand times," resonates strongly when we are afforded the opportunity to know and work with a composer. In October 2016, we performed all the Cathedral Commissions to date in a public concert. Several of the works on the program had, over the years, become "go-to" anthems for all sorts of occasions, including international and national tours and special occasion services such as ordinations, funerals, and weddings. However, a few of the works had only ever received one performance – their premiere. Having the opportunity to re-study and re-learn some of the less-performed anthems was invaluable. It permitted us all to see our growth as musicians and as storytellers. I look forward to our twentieth anniversary of the Cathedral Commissions program; whenever we program a commissioned anthem, stories and anecdotes are inevitably shared during the rehearsal time. These stories are passed along from more seasoned choir members to the newest members, and often, good laughter is had over these shared stories. This retention of institutional memory helps create, nurture, foster, and continue relationships. These memories allow us to continue to share the joy of renewing relationships with past donors and remind us of the joy and delight surrounding the excitement of making new music. During our choir residency at Rochester and Canterbury Cathedrals in the summer of 2023, our music listing included no less than fourteen living composers, five of whom we have commissioned works from. This infusion of "new music" was remarked upon most favorably by the clergy, music staff, and those worshipping at both cathedrals. Two of our donors to the Cathedral Commissions program happened to be on this particular choir tour; they were thrilled to hear the music they helped give life to being sung and played in a new, vast, sacred space. Connections abound! As services at Canterbury Cathedral are live-streamed, it also meant that those donors back home in Albuquerque could also be "present" for the UK premiere of their work sung and played in these sacred places. I encourage any reader of this article who has a choir and a good organ accompanist to make contact with these and other composers and their publishers, secure a perusal copy of their anthems, masses, canticles, or other works, and see whether any of these works might be a good fit for your choir. We have recorded several of our commissioned works and hope to record several more.