

Maxine Thévenot • In The Press

An article printed in The Diapason, November 2016.

The Cathedral of St. John Celebrates Ten Years of Cathedral Commissions

By Maxine Thevenot

Albuquerque is the largest city in New Mexico, in which is located the Cathedral of St. John, seat of the Bishop of the Diocese of the Rio Grande. Since moving to Albuquerque from New York City in June 2005, I've watched this unique city become a bit faster-paced, 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, 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 program, which 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 23rd season, Friends of Cathedral Music continues to be a blessing for our congregation and community. Having support from the clergy and congregation is key 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 completely 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.

Dean's Message

I asked the Dean of the Cathedral of St. John, the Very Rev. J. Mark Goodman, to offer a few words about the Cathedral Commissions program.

"The role of cathedrals in the Church has shifted significantly from Medieval times to the present. While cathedrals continue to be civic and cultural centers in community life in England and Europe, that position has diminished as societies have become more secular and multicultural. Particularly in the United States, the place of cathedrals in the community has undergone profound change, with only a few, like the Washington National Cathedral or St. John the Divine, having the stature they once enjoyed. As the place of cathedrals has changed, there is one aspect of the life of these churches that has continued to draw attention. Cathedrals are still centers of cultural life, experimentation, and patronage. Visual, theatrical, and musical arts, as well as dance, sculpture, and architectural expressions, are supported by cathedrals throughout the Episcopal Church. The Cathedral of St. John is no exception. A growing and vital part of St. John's support of music has been its underwriting of special commissions over the years. Dr. Maxine Thevenot, Canon Precentor-Director of Cathedral Music, has reached across the world of composers of sacred music to ensure that inspiring and powerful choral works continue to feed the hearts and souls of people in Albuquerque, and that the commissioned composers are encouraged in their vocation. The premiere of each year's commission is a time of excitement and anticipation for the choir and the congregation. Each of the works to date, unique in form and genre, has been challenging for the choir and warmly received by cathedral members. When the time comes for the rehearsals and first performance, the composer arrives in Albuquerque for a residence of between one and three weeks. This is a time eagerly awaited by those who serve as hosts, for sharing meals and quiet conversation together opens a window into the mind of the composer and aspects of his or her life that provide glimpses into the currents that flow into musical creativity. To serve as hosts for Andrew Carter, the 2014 Commission Composer, was a time of joy and sharing for our entire family, and experience we won't forget. The Cathedral Commissions Program is a powerful and vibrant part of the musical and spiritual life of the community of faith that is the Cathedral of St. John. In ten years of Cathedral Commissions, we have hosted composers from America, 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 this ongoing relationship, composers continue to send their works to be considered for inclusion in our liturgical services and even send Christmas cards each year.

The Commissioning Process

The process of commissioning a new work can be approached in almost as many ways as there are composers out there to commission. Guidelines on commissioning can be found on the Internet; a good place to start is the American Composers Forum website (composersforum.org) under "Programs." 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 sponsors, 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 rehearsals and enjoying the premiere from the pew. The composer's personal 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, leaving room for a true friendship to blossom and grow. In February 2012, we had the pleasure of hosting Plulip Moore as our commissioned composer. He stayed in Albuquerque for a two-week period to facilitate the rehearsal 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, comprising 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, sung by the Cathedral Choirs; I conducted and Philip played the organ part alongside the chamber orchestra. Philip's ears for romantic registration on our Reuter organ were truly inspiring, and having occasion to work with him collaboratively has been one of my most memorable musical experiences to date. In May 2014 we welcomed the wonderfully gregarious British

composer Andrew Carter, who stayed in Albuquerque for nine days. His energy was infectious (at the time of his visit he was 75!), and he not only wrote us a gorgeous anthem on a Cluistina 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. This gave him extended time with our choir members and also allowed him to work with professional orchestral musicians in New Mexico, thereby enlarging the circle of connection.

Relationship

An especially important relationship is that between sponsor and composer. We always aim to provide the opportunity for social time for the sponsors 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. Finding the right sponsor for a particular composer, therefore, requires knowing the personalities of both parties somewhat and should be the responsibility of the director of music, or whoever runs the commissioning program. It is important that when the composer and donor meet in person that you are as sure as possible that they are compatible people, and, of course, 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 to be premiered. The donors are invited to attend the first rehearsal of the newly commissioned piece with the choir, organ, and composer, and 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 important social time for everyone involved.

Resources

A commission should aim to 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), and so it makes sense to showcase its wonderful tonal and color palette. The organ has a terrific Tuba and a memorable Trompette en Chamade, in addition to beautiful flutes and strings. It is important that the composer gratify those who have invested in the long-term use of the cathedral organ, and therefore it is important that he or she 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, our choir personnel

change. One season you might have a particularly strong bass section, the next you might find yourself with an excellent 11-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 are 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 particular 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 very fine soloists within the choir, and that, too, is something for the composer potentially to incorporate, at his or her discretion. It is important, therefore, that you, the commissioning party, know which strengths and weaknesses to communicate to your commissioned composer.

Text

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 them 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 of "In the bleak midwinter." Yes, it can be done, but the composer will have to somehow overcome 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 really 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 11

years now, I have a sense of whether it will be love at first sight(read), or whether the work is one that will grow on them with time. The collective response of the congregation, too, immediately following the premiere performance, always manages to surprise me. The commissioned works have evoked a variety of responses, 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 sanctuary. However appreciation is expressed, we will all have been changed by hearing a new 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 especially written 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 have the opportunity to know and work with a composer. In October 2016 we performed all of 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. A few of the works, however, had only received one performance, their premiere, until our tenth anniversary concert this past October. Having the opportunity to restudy and relearn some of the less-performed anthems we've commissioned allowed us all to see our own growth as musicians and as storytellers. It allowed those of us who have been there for each commission to see this story of creation by our cathedral body, to share in the joy of renewing relationships with past donors, and to share stories of our time with each composer who came to visit us in Albuquerque and make new music with us. Our next opportunity to celebrate a new work written for us will be Sunday, March 5, 2017 (Lent I), when we will give the first performance of a new work by the celebrated, award-winning U. K. composer, Cecilia McDowall. I encourage any reader of this article who has a choir and a good organ accompanist to contact these composers or their publishers, secure a personal copy of these anthems/canticles, and see if any of these works might be a good fit for your choir. We have recorded several of these commissioned works and hope to record the remainder of the works in the near future. At the right is a listing of all of the works commissioned since the

Cathedral Commissions project began in 2006. The listing shows the month in which the work was premiered, the commissioned composer, the title of the work, the sponsor(s), those who either conducted or accompanied the cathedral choir(s) for the premiere performances, and lastly how a person can best acquire a copy of any of these commissions.