

# Commissioning Carillon Music

## A Guide to Getting Started

by Tiffany Ng with the GCNA Johan Franco Composition Fund

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### **Why commission new carillon music?**

Bringing a new musical work to life can be one of the most rewarding experiences of being a musician. In the process, you learn from the ideas that a composer introduces to carillon music, and become the leading interpreter and champion of the piece you've commissioned and premiered.

Increasing local engagement with the carillon involves finding and engaging new friends and allies for the bells. Commissioned composers who are new to the carillon will introduce their network of colleagues and listeners to carillon recitals, bringing new concertgoers to your tower and getting other composers interested in writing for it. If you commission a composer familiar with writing for carillon, you will further their commitment to the instrument and increase the chances that they keep writing more carillon pieces.

Much carillon music is written by carillonists ourselves, and our small profession is not yet richly representative of the artistic tastes, religious faiths, cultural heritages, and diverse demographics of the many listeners living and working within the sonic horizons of our towers. If your goals include attracting new concertgoers, you might commission music that explores ideas and styles beyond the musical tropes that have historically characterized our repertoire, commission music to celebrate your local community, and/or commission music on contemporary topics of local importance, so that your concert constructs new civic and cultural spaces for gathering, discussion, and celebration.

Commissioning music is an exciting adventure for performers and for our audiences. This document provides guidelines and best practices, especially for first-time commissioners.

### **What's In This Guide**

- *Getting Started*: selecting and contacting a composer; negotiating a fee
- *Funding for Commissions*: finding philanthropic, nonprofit, and sponsored support; alternatives to commissioning

- *The Process*: tower visits; carillon composition resources; communicating about project goals; offering feedback on scores
- *The World Premiere*: special event planning; audience-friendly design; leveraging co-publicity; rewards of recording; an ongoing learning process
- *Publication*: considerations for composers
- *Conclusion*: value to ourselves, composers, and the carillon profession

“Playing the carillon is often a solitary endeavor. Inviting a composer into the tower, and into the music-making process, has been even more joyful and rewarding than I had expected.” —Joey Brink (University Carillonneur, University of Chicago)

### Getting Started

To commission music means to pay a composer to write a particular composition for a specific purpose or event.<sup>1</sup>

To identify a composer, you might explore some of the following considerations:

- Has a composer expressed an interest in the carillon to you? Follow up!
- Is there a beloved composer in your area whose music would attract the community to the premiere? Offer them a tour!
- Is there an event or anniversary related to your carillon, institution, or personal life that you want to commemorate? Start early to find a composer who can write a piece for the celebration!
- Want to lift up a composer in your area who is from an historically underrepresented group? Search the [Institute for Composer Diversity database](#) by location, gender identity, ethnicity, and genre! You can also consult the [Annotated Bibliography of African American Carillon Music](#) (GCNA *Bulletin*, vol. 68, 2019, pp. 65-97) or the [International Bibliography of Carillon Music by Women, Nonbinary, and Transgender Composers](#) for underrepresented composers with prior carillon experience.
- Care about a local need or issue? Co-create an artistic work with community members to engage and empower local storytelling and problem solving through the arts! If you have good organizational skills, consult the [Continental Harmony Community Toolkit](#) from the American Composers Forum to see how. If your talents are entrepreneurial, explore Theresa Chahine’s “Co-Creating with the Community,” chapter 3 in her book [Introduction to Social Entrepreneurship](#), with a brief intro on [YouTube](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Meet The Composer, Inc., “Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide,” 2009.

- If you are unable to pay a commissioning fee but your carillon is at an educational institution, draft a call for scores and share it with the composition faculty to pass on to their students. Make it clear that you are 1) offering feedback on students' first carillon scores, and 2) offering at least one public performance on the real carillon, but that there is no commission fee. Set a deadline and specify when the premiere(s) will take place.
- If you are open to realizing inventive carillon projects that extend beyond traditional musical composition, [host your own Hack The Bells](#) open culture contest. Offer a cash prize and a commitment to organize a public presentation of the winning proposal(s).

Before you reach out to a composer, listen to a variety of their compositions and ensure that their music speaks to you. If available, peruse their scores. Ask yourself if you would be willing to learn their music and perform it repeatedly. A successful commissioning project may not necessarily result in an advanced work by a renowned, prestigious composer (although it certainly could), but should result in a work that appeals to you and that you will enjoy performing again and again.

If you are emailing a composer who has no prior carillon experience, you may wish to include videos of carillon playing, basic facts about the tower you play (number of octaves, pitch and weight of bourdon, type of neighborhood, etc.), and the approximate length of the piece you'd like to commission. Invite them to visit the tower with you. A composer's first visit to a carillon is a joyful and curiosity-filled event for the both of you, and you may learn much as they listen to the bells with fresh ears and watch you play.

Be prepared for a composer to respond to your first message indicating that they are too booked to accept new commissions, or that they are putting you in touch with their agent.

Once you've contacted an interested composer and (if possible) given them a tour, negotiate a commissioning fee with them or their agent. The [NewMusicBox Commissioning Fees Calculator](#) can give a ballpark idea of the industry standard. You don't have to be rich; commissions can run from several hundred dollars to thousands. Negotiate a fee based on the length of the work, your budget, and the composer's reputation and career level. Mind the wage gap as you work towards a fair and equitable commission fee; the wage gap between white men and people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals remains a pervasive form of systemic inequality ([pay-equity.org](#)).

The commissioning fee only covers composition and notation of a finished score. The cost of music copying, recording, and personal appearances by the composer are separate, and should be agreed upon in advance.

It is standard practice that the composer owns the commissioned work and all rights to its use under U.S. and/or International Copyright Law. Many composers belong to a [performing rights society](#), such as ASCAP, BMI, BUMA/STEMRA (the Netherlands), and SABAM (Belgium), and thus all performances of the

commissioned work must be licensed. This might sound complicated, but may be fairly simple to accomplish. Ask the composer for details specific to their situation.

For other optional contractual considerations, consult "[Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide](#)" from New Music USA.

“Encouraging fresh artistic approaches, lifting up composers, engaging diverse audiences—these are just a few reasons to commission. Having commissioned over 60 works, I’ve learned that many people may not realize how within reach it is to get composers engaged. I hope for a future filled with new music by both carillon-performing and non-carillon-performing composers, including by composers of color, women, and music that represents many cultures, to broaden our art and make it relevant for the future.” —Ellen Dickinson (Director of Bell Programs, Yale University; College Carillonneur, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut)

## **Funding for Commissions**

There is no standard procedure to obtain arts commissioning funding in the United States. Here are some of the more common approaches in North America:

- Apply for music commissioning grants. These tend to be highly competitive, and some are location-based. Nonprofits that offer such grants regularly or occasionally include:
  - Canada Council for the Arts
  - Fromm Music Foundation
  - Jerome Fund for New Music
  - New Music USA
- Request funding from your carillon-owning institution for the commission and world premiere. You might offer to tie the premiere into a larger institutional event or anniversary.
- If you are in a position to pay part of the fee, invite a local arts supporter or philanthropist to match your contribution as a co-commissioner. A commission fee paid may be tax-deductible if a nonprofit organization is also part of the project.
- Apply for grant funding from local, regional, or national arts boards and community foundations:
  - To search for specifically formulated opportunities, use a grant directory. Besides [grants.gov](#), many directories are by subscription

only, so ask your public library or carillon-owning institution if they have access to resources like [GrantStation](#), [Pivot](#), or [Foundation Grants to Individuals Online](#).

- To cast a wider net, search directories like the [Foundation Directory Online](#) and the [Community Foundation Locator](#). Identify some foundations to pitch your idea to, even if they are not offering grants specific to the arts. To read about sending a letter of inquiry to a foundation, consult the book [The Foundation Center's Guide to Proposal Writing](#).
- Besides searching on keywords like "music" and "commission" and styles that might be relevant to your project like "jazz," get creative and search for opportunities that include "placemaking" and other terms for the carillon's multifaceted social value.
- Find a foundation's Request for Proposals (RFP) that you care about, and propose a relevant commissioning project. One resource is [RFPs by Candid](#), but check your local listings too.
- Find a community-invested local business to co-sponsor the commission and world premiere in return for recognition and a chance for their employees to participate. Examples might include credit unions, B Corps, companies with corporate social responsibility policies, or any prominent businesses in your area.

Finally, while this requires a longer timeline and is more demanding of the composer, you can support a freelance composer in applying for composer and artist residencies that would allow them time and space to focus on a particular project (see the *Further Resources* section).

If you know carillonists who have successfully applied for relevant grant opportunities, ask if they might be willing to share their proposal and proposed budget so you can see an example.

“When I started playing the carillon in 1963 there was very little contemporary carillon music. I wanted more music for everyone and took several opportunities to commission new works. What fun that was! One competition with monetary prizes at U-M helped many students and faculty realize what could be played on the bells.” —Margo Halsted (Associate Professor Emerita of Campanology, University of Michigan)

## The Process

*Onsite visit(s).* If possible, schedule a second tower visit with the composer to demonstrate playing techniques, varied harmonies and textures, and to answer follow-up questions. Let them hear the carillon's full dynamic range from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* as it sounds like on the ground. Give the composer an idea of your de facto audience: who lives and works in the community?

*Make sure the composer has the basics at hand.* Notate the range of your carillon on a grand staff, including the range of the pedalboard, and highlight any missing pitches. If you play a heavy carillon, notate the point at which it becomes difficult to play virtuosic passagework, rapidly repeating pitches, and/or thick chords. If you play a carillon with weak trebles, notate those.

If you are commissioning a work that includes other instruments or electronics, indicate your carillon's transposition. If you plan to take the piece on tour, indicate the standard concert carillon range and typical missing pedals.

*Share compositional resources with the composer.* Many new composers will appreciate seeing examples of quality carillon scores of varying styles, to get a sense of notation practices, and of musics that speak highly to you, the performer-commissioner. Be careful not to inadvertently steer a composer towards a single style. Share a good number of contrasting examples so they don't feel obligated to recreate what has already been explored.

In addition to their work with you, composers can draw on resources for carillon composition such as:

- NewMusicBox's [Composing for Carillon](#) guide by Joey Brink, with videos and notated examples
- "Composing for the Carillon" downloadable PDF and video by John Gouwens, linked from the [GCNA Franco Composition Fund page](#)
- "[Composing for the Australian Carillons](#)" downloadable PDF from the Carillon Society of Australia
- [Composing for carillon](#) Google Drive compiled by Tiffany Ng, with sample scores, recordings of contrasting carillons, audio sample sets of different carillons, recommendations on composing for carillon and electronics, and considerations for composers writing in avant-garde idioms
- "[Componeren voor Beiaard](#)" by Mathieu Daniel Polak, a free PDF download (in Dutch) from [Beiaardcentrum.com](#)

*Communicate your future hopes for the piece.* If you want to commission a major work that is lengthy and challenging, you might only have the capacity to perform it at the premiere and on rare special occasions. If you want to commission a work

that you can dust off regularly and/or take on concert tours around the country or world (a boon to the résumés of early career composers), you may want to commission a work that is technically easier to play on unfamiliar towers and that can be adapted to fit smaller carillons. Endeavor to align your expectations with the composer's about future performances, even though you are not obligated to do so.

*Communicate your goals for the project and its desired social impact.* Discuss the scope of the contribution or change you want this project to make. This is particularly important for socially-engaged projects because many composers haven't gotten to compose for public spaces. Even if you engage a composer known for exploring contested current issues, they may still feel unsure about introducing that element to a carillon owned by a prominent institution or to a concert to which not all passersby have "opted in." Be frank about your comfort zone as well.

*Discuss program notes.* Ask the composer if they are willing to provide program notes to be reprinted in recital programs and publicity. If the commissioned work will be in an experimental or avant-garde style, ask the composer for notes focused on guiding the nonspecialist listener through the sonic arc of the piece, highlighting easily recognizable moments so listeners who get lost can find their way. New music for carillon can be hard to follow because the performer is out of sight. Experimental composers often see their works performed for audiences literate in avant-garde styles, so make it clear if this is the first time your audiences will be encountering such music and are in need of a guide.

*Collaborate as much as the composer is comfortable with, and set an early deadline for a first draft.* Because idiomatic carillon performance involves many quirks that you know through embodied experience, offer to make the compositional process a back-and-forth rather than waiting for the final score to give feedback. Offer to try out sketches of melodies, passages, and harmonies and to send recordings back to the composer. Be prepared for most composers to decline because they are not comfortable sharing preliminary drafts. For this reason, it's important to set a due date for the first draft at least 6 to 12 weeks before the world premiere, so you have time to work on the score and figure out which difficult passages involve novel, challenging, and exciting new techniques for you to master, and which passages are unidiomatic and in need of revision.

“I consider my commissions as my permanent contribution to the carillon world. It is one way to be remembered.” —George Gregory (Professor Emeritus, San Antonio College; Carillonneur, Central Christian Church, San Antonio, Texas)

## The World Premiere

The shape of the world premiere is up to you, and it's a grand opportunity for a special occasion! The following questions may help you plan ahead.

### *Design variables:*

- Will the premiere be a standalone performance, or part of a longer concert program or festival? (In a longer program, the best spot for the premiere is usually at the beginning or end.) Or will the premiere be part of a showcase event that gives a stage to other local performers, attracting their followers?
- What date and time will ensure that your event doesn't conflict with other community events?
- Will you live-stream the premiere online?
- Can volunteers provide refreshments or other special-event hospitality?

### *Crafting an audience-friendly premiere:*

- Who are your target audiences and what will it be like for an audience member to hear something totally new? How can you share enough about the piece with them to make hearing its premiere an engaging experience?
- What if the audience can't see you, and you're premiering multiple new or unfamiliar pieces? Consider having an emcee, or ringing tellers corresponding to the numbered pieces on the program so your audience doesn't get lost.
- If the composer is present, how can the community get to know them? Through a pre-concert talk with the composer, a post-concert reception, classroom visits, workshops?

### *Leveraging co-publicity:*

A world premiere is a wonderful chance to attract new audiences:

- Find strategic partners to leverage publicity effectively. For example, a commission to celebrate the Lunar New Year could be co-promoted by Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Southeast Asian cultural and advocacy organizations as well as by local Asian-owned businesses and leaders.
- Write and distribute a press release to streamline your outreach efforts. You might even attract media coverage.
- Set out a sign-up sheet for your carillon mailing list at the premiere so you can keep new listeners coming back!

### *Recording:*

Investing in and planning ahead for a quality recording can be of great value to you and the composer. Composers often present their work to colleagues, share with their networks, and necessarily advocate for themselves. If you make a recording (live or in a separate recording session), they can share it widely,

amplifying exposure to the carillon, you, and your instrument. Giving the composer a quality recording is also a great way of saying “thank you!”

If you can, hire a recording engineer or recruit a tech-savvy volunteer. For a live recording, it’s best that you not be involved in the execution so you can focus on performing the premiere. Otherwise, find a handheld recording device, or two or three, place them strategically inside and outside the tower, and recruit a volunteer to help you run a sound check to find the right recording level for each unit. Choose the cleanest, clearest recording afterward.

*We are all learners:*

Keep in mind that the world premiere is not always the best performance you’ll give of a brand new piece. Do your best, but also don’t be disappointed if you make a mistake. You will get to know and enjoy a piece at a deeper level through repeat public performances. Furthermore, if you perform the piece in another state or country, you can mark on those programs that you are giving the “Michigan premiere” or “Polish premiere”!

Commissioning music is thrilling because you are empowering the creation of something unexpected and unpredictable. You may fall in love with the piece, but you may not always fully connect with the finished product of every commissioning project. It is still your responsibility to deliver the best performance and audience turnout that you can. Composers who are new to the carillon may find their voice on their second or third composition, so keep in touch with them.

“Music is only good insofar as it brings people together. I have been ‘brought together’ with many people through my collaborations as both performer and composer. Each project has brought me unexpected friends, and each friend has enriched my life in unexpected ways.” —Neil Thornock  
(Professor of Composition & Theory, Brigham Young University)

## **Publication**

Some composers are self-published, and some publish exclusively with one publishing house. If your composer does neither and you think their score would have broad appeal, encourage them to explore publication options. Explain differences between the GCNA, which is peer-reviewed annually and does not pay fees to composers, ACME, which evaluates submissions on a rolling basis and is commercial, and other print and online distribution outlets.

## Conclusion

This guide is just a starting point. Build a checklist of what you learn through each commissioning process so you can revisit your best practices for the next commission, and the next!

Commissioning music is crucial to the future of our profession. Premiering new music used to be a cultural norm. A shift occurred in the 19th century, as classical musicians turned away from new music and focused on playing music of the past.<sup>2</sup> What if that shift had happened earlier? Today we might have little music from our most beloved historical composers. Set your sights high and commission prominent composers who will write landmark works. And also commission composers early in their careers, as they may write for carillon throughout their lives, enriching our repertoire and writing works that will become tomorrow's favorites.

“One composer told me that she had to reformat her résumé to accommodate all the venues I'd added to it during my concert tours.

Championing early-career composers lets me feel that my work as a musician matters, now.” —Tiffany Ng (University Carillonist, University of Michigan)

## Further Resources

### General

Meet The Composer's [Commissioning Music: A Basic Guide](#) (2009) [PDF download]  
*Contractual considerations, commissioning fees, licensing*

[Commissioning by Individuals](#) [webpage]  
*Concise guidance from the American Composers Forum, including tax-deductible commission fees*

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<sup>2</sup> Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

## Community engagement

The "[Undesirable Elements](#)" theatre series by Ping Chong + Company [webpage]  
*An example of the process and results of co-creating with communities*

"[Cultural Empathy Requires More Than Soundbites](#)," by Kareem Rostoum (Aug. 18, 2017) [article]  
*Ethical considerations in commissioning music for social impact*

[Animating Democracy](#) [website]  
*Toolkit for arts organizers interested in arts for social impact*

## Strategic partnerships

[Arts Partnership Movement](#) [website]  
*Resources to share with potential business co-sponsors on partnering with the arts, including case-making tools for why business/arts partnerships are good for employees, companies, and the community*

[Municipal Artist Partnerships](#) [website]  
*A guide to forging creative partnerships between local governments and artists (relevant to municipal and state carillons)*

## Composer Residencies

[American Composers Forum: Opportunities](#) [website]  
[The Composer's Site](#) [website]  
*Starting points to search for composer-specific residencies; but also use a search engine and check your local listings for artist residencies for which any kind of artist, including composers, is eligible*

[Continental Harmony Community Toolkit](#) [PDF download]  
*Detailed guidance from the American Composers Forum on how you can organize a meaningful composer residency and world premiere in your community*