Three Tips for Composers Submitting to Competitions
By Mike McFerron

As the title indicates this article is written for composers, but there is a lot of good information for organizers of competitions as well. First, organizers need to remember that composers are helping the organization and new music world in general by submitting their music. And second, composers sacrifice a great deal to submit their work. They donate a lot of good will with their music to be sure. Composers on the other hand should recognize that the organizer is on their side. They want your music to be great and to succeed. They want to help the cause of promoting new music in the world – they love new music. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be providing an opportunity for you and your music. In addition to submitting your music, you are also submitting yourself. With every submission you make, you build a professional reputation. So…

1. Follow the Guidelines

Read all the guidelines carefully. This may seem obvious, but it’s remarkable how often this step is ignored. If the competition is for a piano trio, don’t send your piano quintet. Again, this may be obvious, but if you discover a great opportunity that you don’t quite qualify for -
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John Bilotta, SCION Editor
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scimembers

scimembers is a member-driven e-mail mailing list that is intended to facilitate communication between members of the Society on topics of concern to composers of contemporary concert music. It conveys whatever notices or messages are sent by its members, including announcements of performances and professional opportunities, as well as discussions on a wide variety of topics. For more information, including how to join and participate in the listserv:

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you don’t qualify. If you have to be under a certain age and you are not—don’t apply. The organizers are generally looking for something specific. Most have goals and agendas for the opportunity they are providing, and they aren’t going to suddenly change so your work can be chosen. Rules and guidelines are typically in place to improve the efficiency of the process. Sometimes those rules are governed by funding sources and are beyond the direct control of the organizer. A granting organization or a donor will often define the contest to a great extent. Opportunities that support composers and new music are a good thing even if you don’t agree with a competition’s rules or guidelines.

There’s a false assumption held by some composers who believe they should send their music to everyone because it gets their name “out there.” I once received nine CDs from one composer for a call that asked for one work. It’s the dreaded “exposure” argument. Of course, name recognition is important in this business, but only because of the music and reputation that is attached to it.

If the organizer asks you not to send an MP3 by email, don’t do it. If a competition is seeking works for two violins and a viola, don’t send your string quartet. Don’t submit two works to an opportunity that asks composers to submit only one work. As earlier, this may seem obvious, but astonishingly these are examples of things that happen quite frequently. Not following guidelines marks you as unprofessional and problematic. Organizers want to help you submit your works and organizers want your music! However, anytime you don’t follow guidelines, your submission falls out of a designed system and there’s a chance that your submission could be disqualified, overlooked, or simply misplaced.

Never send a recording you have not double-checked to make sure it sounds the way you want it to. This applies to audio files you are going to upload and to CDs you are going to send via post. If the competition is anonymous make sure your name does not appear on any of the anonymously requested materials; if a pseudonym is required make sure it’s on all appropriate materials. When sending hard copies that do not require anonymity, make sure your name and contact information is on everything. If you submit a score and a CD, have your name on the CD also, plus the title of your work. If your work is not accepted for the competition, who knows, it might be used later, and you want the performer to be able to contact you. When submitting a score, it’s a good idea to put an accurate timing of the work in an obvious place—perhaps the front cover. Also, make sure your score is completely legible and with all necessary performance instructions. When preparing your score, consider consulting the Major Orchestra Librarians Association guidelines: http://mola-inc.org/m/articles/view/Music-Preparation-Guidelines-for-Orchestral-Music

Consider carefully before contacting an organizer directly. Often times, answers to your questions are in the call for submissions, so read those guidelines carefully before contacting the organizer. Remember, every minute you ask of a competition organizer is multiplied many fold. Also remember that in case of conferences and festivals, the organizers are likely organizing and hosting the conference while doing their ‘day jobs’.

Don’t inquire about when selections are going to be made unless you really need to know. Some organizations do include the notification date in their calls, but some do not. Of course there are times when knowing the notification date is important, and you should contact the organizer if that’s the case and explain your situation. For example, many of the composers who come to a festival I direct, Electronic Music Midwest (EMM), are also planning travel to other festivals and conferences. For them, they are trying to work out a travel budget, and knowing about EMM results is extremely important. I’m sure there are other exceptions such as submissions to publishers; however, knowing when the results are going to be announced for most competitions is generally not going to affect you. Before you write that email, simply ask yourself if you really need to know. A note to organizers: consider including a “results expected by” date in your call for submissions.

Similarly, don’t send “follow-up” emails under false pretense. The key words here are “false pretense.” If you legitimately have a question about your submission, you should absolutely follow up for confirmation, but I often get emails from composers asking me if I received their submission and then continue to tell me how special their submission is. This might not be a problem for some competitions, but in our case the composer can login and view/edit their submission until the deadline and this is made very clear when they submit. Just know that sending a follow-up email is not a way to get your piece sent to the top of the stack, and by the way there really isn’t a “top of
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the stack” anyway – most competitions go out of their way to be fair and objective. Instead, sending such a letter may just make you look desperate and it could affect your professional reputation. So, do not send an email explaining what inspired you to write the work or the symbolism of your use of C♯ minor or the 6-Z17 hexachord. If the organizers want to know that, they will ask in the submission guidelines. Trust that the adjudicators are sophisticated enough to “get” your music. In short, let your music and your submission speak for itself.

2. Be Professional

Be nice. That’s possibly the most important piece of advice in this article. Nobody wants to work with a difficult person. Recognize that much of what happens in the new music community is through the efforts of volunteers, and understand that you are likely not contacting a big corporation with a 24/7 internationally outsourced support staff. When you contact an organization, you will be communicating with a real person. This person is probably just as busy as you are, so be patient and accept that from time-to-time, problems and errors will occur.

Sign your emails. Yes, again this might seem obvious, but I’m always astonished by the number of anonymous emails I receive with only an email address attached. They’re usually short and to the point, which is great, but think about how difficult it is to answer a question like this: “Hey, did you get my submission?” Imagine receiving this email where “Hey, did you get my submission?” was the complete email and you received it while juggling four other calls! A relevant subject heading helps tremendously. Include your name, your submission, and the name of the competition. If you have been given a submission identification number, be sure to include it as well.

Consider carefully what you write on social media before posting. I’m not talking about pictures of you doing a keg stand (although probably not a great idea to post that either), but avoid complaining that a competition or conference didn’t accept your work. You’ll likely sound petty. Be careful of claiming that a competition is “rigged” or unfair. Too often, I’ve read complaints by composers about the results of a competition or how a competition was administered. Sometimes it’s a consequence of a misunderstanding that could be cleared up with a simple email to the competition organizer. Before publicly smearing an organizer, make sure you know all of the circumstances, and more importantly ask yourself what is to be gained. I have a colleague who often tells his students that in this field if he doesn’t know someone, someone he knows does. Be aware of the reach of your social media posts. There may be people who see your tweets or Facebook posts that you don’t know or intend to reach. Indeed, it’s a small world.

In a similar vein, there’s nothing to be gained by sending a snotty note to an organizer. For example, if you don’t like that there’s an entry fee (I don’t like that myself), then don’t submit! If there are other requirements you don’t agree with, remember that you’re under no obligation to submit to the opportunity. This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t voice your concern or engage in conversation about the requirement, but too often I have seen people with very legitimate arguments do themselves and the community a disservice by engaging in personal attacks and inappropriate discourse. Unfortunately, there are many composers who have burned bridges and don’t know it. It’s one thing to disagree, and it’s another to be disagreeable.

3. Promote, Promote, Promote

Promote new music opportunities generally, always promote the opportunities that accept your work. Promoters need audience and press. In general, audience draw and press mentions are essential to any production. Composers should be aware that every presenter and producer is counting on and watching how you promote their event. Effort counts and means a lot.

A composer that organizes an opportunity for others is quickly recognized. If you haven’t managed a new music call for submissions, you should! When you do such, however, make sure you focus on others and not yourself. Having a festival or concert where 90% of the works presented are yours isn’t likely going to be positively recognized by your peers. Supporting others is an attractive quality and identifies you as a contributing member of the new music community.

Some composers feel that their compositional masterpiece is the only thing necessary for their success. It is not. A successful composer needs to be professional with their craft and their career. This includes how they represent themselves, how they conduct themselves, and how they
promote themselves within our community.

My Credentials: If you got this far, you may be wondering who this guy is, telling you what to do. Over the years, I have produced a number of concerts and created several calls for submissions. I am one of the developers of musicAvatar (http://www.musicavatar.org), an online system that makes it easy for composers, ensembles, and producers to manage new music calls. Additionally, I currently chair the Society of Composers, Inc. Executive Committee and I am the founder and co-director of the Electronic Music Midwest Festival (http://www.emmfestival.org), which has presented over 800 new electroacoustic compositions over the past 16 years, and I have also produced many concerts at venues ranging from the small recital halls at Lewis University to warehouses on the south side of Chicago.

These thoughts are not solely my own. Special thanks to the following contributors and advisors of this article who have also contributed greatly to the new music community by organizing a large number of opportunities for composers: Christopher Coleman, Amy Dunker, Anne Neikirk, Mark Phillips, M. Anthony Reimer, James Paul Sain, Robert Voisey, and Gerald Warfield.