"...wow, that was incredible...

An Individual’s Guide to Commissioning Music
"...I want to hear that again right now!"

Commissioning New Music

By commissioning music—paying composers to write a new piece for a specific purpose or event—these individuals become active participants in the creation of a legacy of music for the future.

The reasons why they began to commission music are intensely personal and varied. A wife surprises her husband with a cycle of love songs for his birthday. A couple decides to commemorate their anniversary with music. A dentist celebrates his admiration for a favorite string quartet and, when the new piece includes the sounds of outer space, rediscovers his love of physics. A venture capitalist invests in composers. A medical doctor who does regular missionary work in the Third World funds sacred music as a demonstration of his devotion to God. A legendary philanthropist devotes his life to helping composers and listening intensely to music. And a group of friends form a Commissioning Club to fund new music projects.

Commissioning is a process. From the moment of inspiration and conception to the exciting night of the world premiere performance, there are decisions to be made, creative ideas to be tried out, and memorable moments when the composer, the performer, and performers collaborate in their own ways to give birth to a new work of art.

If you have never commissioned music, you might think you have to "know someone" in order to do it right. Chances are, if you attend your local symphony performances or performing arts series, you may already know someone who can begin the process of giving you advice. But how will you find a composer? Or musicians to perform the new work? How much will it cost? Is it tax deductible?

Meet The Composer (MTC) can help you find the answers. A nonprofit organization dedicated to composers and their work, MTC can provide assistance to bring your commissioning idea to reality.

In this book are answers to some basic questions about commissioning music and a chart of estimated costs. And throughout these pages you will find the stories of music lovers who, by commissioning the music of today, have become part of the music history of tomorrow.
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Sun Rings & Close Encounters

William Rubright, D.D.S.

A professor of dentistry at the University of
Iowa celebrates his love of music and science
by commissioning a string quartet composition
that incorporates sounds collected from the
vastness of outer space and far-away galaxies.

Football and basketball are big in the university town of
Iowa City where the 60,000 residents include 28,000
students. But the University’s Hancher Auditorium for the
Performing Arts is big too, important as a destination for
world-class musicians and as a presenter and instigator
of new music.

It was at Hancher that Dr. William Rubright, a university
professor of dentistry, and his wife began their love affair
with new music. Both of them had played musical instru-
ments “a little” as a hobby, as had their two children, now
grown. But once they heard the Kronos string quartet, a
whole new universe opened up...

“My wife, Amalie, and I began attending concerts at Hancher
Auditorium many years ago and that’s where, in 1988, we first
heard the Kronos Quartet. They were pioneers in experimental
music. It was the first time we’d heard anything quite like that.
It was exciting and I thought, how terrific to have that kind of
musical experimentation in a university setting where academic
excellence and experimentation should flourish.

Kronos has returned almost every year since then and we
enjoyed the performances so much that we started hosting a
party for the quartet after their performances. The Kronos
would bring their entourage, Hancher would invite some guests
and my wife and I would invite our friends—it would be quite a
houseful and always a good time. Over the years we got to
know the musicians pretty well.

Since I’d taught at the university for 35 years, it’s very close
to my heart and I wanted to give something back. Supporting a
group like Kronos by commissioning new music seemed like a
way to bring enrichment to a lot of people. So my wife and I
funded our first commissions through Hancher in the mid-1990s.

The whole thing gave you such an eerie feeling...

...experiencing the sounds of space.”
"My students are all fresh and eager to learn and excited. That's the quality I find in my involvement with new music—it's invigorating and creative and productive."

My latest commission was in the works for a few years and was performed last season. Entitled Sun Rings, it involved one of the University’s astrophysicists, Professor Donald Gurnett, who had been listening to and collecting sounds from outer space. The composer Terry Riley incorporated those sounds into his music written especially for the Kronos Quartet. It’s interesting that in addition to funding from me, the piece also got some support from NASA. I was surprised to find out NASA supports the arts sometimes and that was rather refreshing.

A few days before the premiere, Dr. Gurnett gave a lecture on campus, which was fun for me because I hadn’t been in a physics lecture hall since my student days—say about 40 years ago! Dr. Gurnett talked about the space noises—which sounded like whistles at times—and explained how he collected them. He used digital instruments to show the parameters of the sound frequencies visually. It was fascinating! Then David Harrington of the Kronos Quartet talked about his excitement in first hearing these sounds and Terry Riley explained how he used them in the music.

On the night of the concert, there was another hour-long lecture for the general public. And during the performance itself, there was a light show of outer space images so you had a visual experience too. The whole thing gave you such an eerie feeling as if you were right out there experiencing the sounds of space, while the music interpreted for you. It was terrific.

I was impressed with how many people showed up to hear this merging of two distinctly different disciplines—music and science. There was a lot of interest in the project and people talked about it for a long time afterward. It made me feel good when I heard people say that they appreciated my support. Amalie was still alive when we started our involvement with the project but she died the year before the premiere. So Hancher announced that it was supported by me in memory of Amalie and I thought it was the right way to remember her. The night of the concert, our son and daughter came from out of state and we had a lot of family members there. Friends came to the concert, saw her name in the program, and knew that she was still a part of something we really loved.

One of the most important aspects to me in supporting Hancher and new music is the active outreach program. In the days preceding the performance, the visiting artists really extend themselves into the community and play for school children and other groups. I think this is essential, something that must be done. As part of my involvement with our local music scene, I’ve also started supporting a terrific early music duo called Red Cedar Music.

My professional career has been spent in the college of dentistry, mostly with third year dental students who are in their mid-twenties. They are all fresh and eager to learn and excited. That’s the quality I find in my involvement with new music—it’s invigorating and creative and productive.

I plan to do more commissions for the Kronos Quartet. Through commissioning, I’ve met so many interesting people I wouldn’t have known otherwise. I’m looking forward to giving the next party at my house where people can get to know the artists. Getting people together to enjoy each other’s company—for me, that’s really fun.

"It made me feel good when I heard people say that they appreciated my support."
"I woke up to the idea of commissioning music when I turned 50..."

Based in San Francisco, Kathryn Gould is a founding partner of Foundation Capital and is regularly recognized as one of the country’s most accomplished venture capitalists. She has been featured in Forbes magazine’s "Midas List" of Tech’s Best Venture Investors and has a primary focus on investing in the telecom, networking and enterprise software sectors.

Outside of work, Kathryn describes herself as a “serious violinist, painter and pilot, and a frivolous boogie boarder.” But as a devoted concert-goer and musician, Kathryn wanted to become more involved in encouraging composers to reach audiences. She embarked on a project called Magnum Opus.

To help her achieve her new music vision, Meet The Composer enlisted three orchestras in the San Francisco area (Marin Symphony, Oakland East Bay Symphony, Santa Rosa Symphony) to form a consortium to commission a total of nine new works. Each orchestra will premiere three of the works, as well as give subsequent performances of the others.

Kathryn is putting her money and her energy where her mouth is and the project was launched in 2003.

"It’s a big goal but what the hell? I’ve done the impossible before. I’m one of the only women in venture capital, so challenges don’t bother me.”
I woke up to the idea of commissioning music when I turned 50, saying okay, I’ve been hugely successful in business, I’ve made all this money and now what can I do? One of my biggest disappointments in life has been new music. I do believe there are a lot of composers out there writing wonderful music but their music isn’t being heard.

I love music. It’s always in my head. I worry that the orchestras are suffering and the audience all has gray hair. Art music is going to die if it doesn’t reconnect with the audience. So I started trying to discover why music was in this state. After having a bunch of conversations with other music lovers and realizing I wasn’t alone in this, I decided I had to do something.

My violin teacher, Karen Denley, pointed me to some professional music people. Through conversations and email exchanges, I came away thinking that with enough money, forcefulness and determination, we can reinvigorate art and orchestras.

It’s a big goal but what the hell? I’ve done the impossible before. I’m one of the only women in venture capital, so challenges don’t bother me.

To one composer I asked, what would inspire you to write your best work? He suggested the plan of writing a piece several orchestras would play. Apparently everyone wants to give money for a premiere, but it’s hard for new music to find a second, third, and fourth performance. So that became the idea for Magnum Opus. It’s designed from the composer’s point of view to meet that need.

So, I had the idea. But I didn’t have the contacts. Then I found Meet The Composer, which provided the way in and helped me develop the project every step of the way. As a venture capitalist, I consider myself a pretty good picker of people—it’s my skill and it’s important to me to get the right people involved. The composers for the first round are Kenji Bunch, Ingram Marshall and Kevin Puts.

I’ve got enough money for the pilot program to last two to five years. Then, if we get good results—and it may happen faster than that—I know a lot of people who have said they’d be interested in helping. But first we have to create a track record.

“What is amazing is that commissioning does not cost very much money. And you can really make something happen.”

My hope is that people will take pride in creating a new sound that reflects the culture we have here in the Bay Area and Silicon Valley. It’s a unique and pretty interesting area. Maybe we’ll end up creating a new school of new music here. That would be fabulous and I’d love to be part of it.

I play quartets with Walter Hewlett and Paul Brest, president of the Hewlett Foundation and every time we play together they ask how the project is going. There’s obviously tremendous interest in this.

My second musical project is a collaboration with Villa Montalvo, which has a 300-seat auditorium where world-class performers—like Midori and Joshua Bell and the Eroica Trio—perform. There we are developing a commissioning project for performers.

What is amazing is that commissioning does not cost very much money. And you can really make something happen. I’m not in this for fame. The Magnum Opus project doesn’t even have my name on it. I just want to go to a concert of new music and go wow, that was incredible. I want to hear that again right now! That’s why I’m doing this.
"Our kids will understand we're doing something as a family for the future."

Music and Family
David and Barbara Thomas

A son’s music lessons inspire his parents to take up instruments they hadn’t played for many years. The experience opens up a whole new world and results in a premiere at the Kennedy Center.

David Thomas, co-founder of the Leitner Thomas Group, and Barbara Thomas, CEO of HBO Sports, are the devoted parents of a teenaged son and daughter. They live in Manhattan and describe themselves as “die-hard Westsiders.”

When David and Barbara travel abroad, they enjoy seeking out the local music scene. A decade ago, they found themselves in Prague and realized that no matter what the concert was, in Czechoslovakia there was always at least one Czech piece on the program. “What is it about us Americans?” David asked himself. “We would never do that.” This observation brought David and Barbara to a resolve to support American composers and American music and for Dave to join the board of Meet The Composer.

Then they heard the world premiere of the Disney Millennium Symphonies performed by the New York Philharmonic in 1998 and realized that one person (in this case, Michael Eisner at Disney) could make a tremendous difference in the world of music.

"One of the big hurdles for people who might want to commission new music is that they can't just look up a composer in the yellow pages."

But the real inspiration for commissioning a new work of music came from their hands-on experience...
David: About ten years ago, our son began music lessons on the recorder and the flute. As I watched and listened to him, I found myself really wanting to retrace what it felt like to be a student.

Barbara: Dave began taking lessons on the clarinet again, which he played in high school. Then he started in on the saxophone. He was having so much fun that it encouraged me to take piano again.

D: I began six lessons with a luminary in the field, Albert Regn, who plays with his group, the American Saxophone Quartet. Studying with him provided an amazing window into the New York music community.

B: I love playing the piano, but when it came to contemporary music, I felt like a neophyte. But by studying music ourselves, we got to meet so many people and we learned so much from the interactions.

D: I am now surprised when I hear people like my mother-in-law say oh, I don't want to hear any 20th century music. Then I put on a CD and she'll say go on, that's lovely! What is it? And it's the latest music. There's still the immediate misperception that new music is esoteric and hard to listen to. But that's simply not true about music being written today.

Since I love music for the sax and AI has played new music for many years, one day he said if you're interested in commissioning, I could hook you up with a composer and the American Saxophone Quartet would perform the work. He suggested that composer Bob Mintzer, one of the original members of the ensemble, write the piece. Then AI persuaded Leonard Slatkin to conduct the new work with the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center. So quickly we had a composer, ensemble, venue and an orchestra.

B: I heard the piece for the first time on opening night. I was surprised to find that I was really nervous. It was like watching a new play that I had directed or written. Or like the birth of a baby!

D: The National Symphony was so gracious. After the concert, Slatkin invited us onstage with the participants to take questions from the audience. I think that made the audience aware of how new works come into existence. The best question asked was how does it feel to composition a work of music that is played here at the Kennedy Center? That gave us a chance to talk about all the emotions involved for us.

B: Afterward we had a great celebration with the musicians and a reception with Leonard Slatkin and everyone stayed until late. What a party. And all the time, I felt so proud of what they had accomplished.

D: Barb's parents came to the Kennedy Center for the premiere and I said to her father, you should do something like this. When he said he couldn't afford it, I said, Jack, get five of your friends to join in so it's $5,000 a couple and you can listen to samples of the music together. And he said, oh we could do that.

I serve as president of the Trevor Day School and now we are contemplating a new project there. It's based on the St. Paul Suite that Edward Elgar wrote as a commission for the St. Paul School in London—a very famous and beautiful piece of music. Our idea is to have a group of parents raise a meaningful amount of money, maybe $50,000, and hold a competition for a "Trevor Suite." Perhaps some movement could be playable by students. But part of commissioning is not to inhibit creativity. You have to leave composers some leeway.

B: One of the big hurdles for people who might want to commission new music is that they can't just look up a composer in the yellow pages. They might not know where to start. That's what's good about an organization like Meet The Composer, because it has a network to connect everyone.

D: Meet The Composer is going to provide the professional guidance for our Trevor Suite project. What's attractive is that the school prides itself on a sense of community and this is a way to channel that into something permanent. In the future, the music can be played at graduation or on the first day of class or whenever. The idea has generated a lot of excitement and people have begun to rally around. There are a lot of schools and universities that would easily be in a position to do something like this.

The Kennedy Center premiere was a big weekend for our family. We still have the memorabilia from our trip to Washington around the house and we talk about it from time to time. As to what effect our musical activities will have on our children, it's too soon to say. But my teenage son has been making music on his computer with the Sibelius software, and he recently surprised me by saying he plans to take a music composition course when he gets to college. Over time, our kids will come to understand the significance of commissioning new music. And if we can accomplish our next project, the Trevor Suite, they'll understand we're doing something as a family for the future.

"It was like watching a new play that I had directed or written. Or like the birth of a baby!"
"It was the best way to create something eternal."

Variations in a Life

Judy Goldberg

Originally planned as an anniversary gift, The New Goldberg Variations became a memorial that celebrated the life of a beloved husband with a passion for music.

When Judy Goldberg of Newton, Massachusetts met Robert, her husband-to-be, on a blind date, he arranged for them to attend the opera—as ushers.

From the beginning, Robert, a computer scientist, and Judy, who plays the piano, shared a passion for music. For their wedding, they asked a friend, pianist Robert Levin, to perform a few of Bach's Goldberg Variations. But the officiating rabbi was so delayed, that the assembled wedding guests heard all of the variations twice.

Throughout their close and happy marriage and the raising of four children, music remained at the center of Robert and Judy's life. For their 25th wedding anniversary, they decided to commission a new set of Goldberg Variations. But Robert became ill with cancer and died before the project could be realized.

Judy Goldberg told the moving story of how this new work became a celebration of Robert's spirit and love of music...

"Yo-Yo kept this commissioning project alive for us. It was the most positive focus of that terrible time for me and I'm sure for Robert too."
Approaching our 25th wedding anniversary, we were talking about how blessed we were to find one another. Robert suggested we commission some new Goldberg variations.

I had done some work with the musical organization Young Audiences, and we had become friends with Yo-Yo Ma and his wife Jill Hornor. Our first step was to ask them how to go about it. Yo-Yo said we should involve people we cared about. Without a second's hesitation, and even though the original variations were written for keyboard, we immediately said we care about you, will you be involved? To our delight he agreed.

Another connection was made through one of Robert's partners, whose first cousin is the composer John Corigliano. And when we called him he loved the idea, but he thought it was a little presumptuous for one composer to walk in Bach's footsteps. So he suggested we have several composers each write a variation and put them together like a collage. It was a generous way of thinking.

Robert and I were on this great celebratory kick planning how we would do it all. It was just then that Robert got sick. He was 48 and had so much energy and zest for life. You never expect cancer to strike. It's the last thing you imagine happening. It was four months from diagnosis to death.

But Yo-Yo kept this commissioning project alive for us. It was the most positive focus of that terrible time for me and I'm sure for Robert too. Yo-Yo would come and bring tapes of various composers for us to listen to and he would talk about the project. In the course of those four months, Robert and I listened to music in the hospital and at home. And together we made a short list of the chosen composers.

The six composers—John Corigliano, Christopher Rouse, Peter Lieberson, Kenneth Frazelle, Peter Schickele, Richard Danielpour—were all so friendly and willing to get involved. They received the project with open arms. After all, commissioning is the affirmation of what they do.

Then after Robert died, I let things go for a while when I was beginning the healing process. Along the way, I went to one of Yo-Yo's concerts. He was playing with Emanuel Ax and when we were introduced, he had heard about the Goldberg project and asked if he could be involved too. That was serendipitous and thrilling.

So the New Goldberg Variations turned out to be a memorial for Robert. But I didn’t want it to be sad. I wanted it to be a celebration and we went forward with that feeling.

Each of the six composers wrote five or six minutes of music based on the Goldberg Variations. I was very loose about what that meant. I felt they should be free to do what they wanted, but some of the composers actually wanted more guidelines.

I talked to each of the composers and had conversations with them. I wrote a letter about Robert and our life together. On the business side of things, I hired an attorney to help me deal with the publishers and also to help me make sure I treated them all equally. Everyone was very agreeable.

It helped that I knew people already to open some doors. You need that. Meet The Composer can be a very helpful conduit and liaison for someone who wants to commission. One valuable thing is having the guideline of costs Meet The Composer published. What deters a lot of people from commissioning is that they have a wild idea about how expensive it might be. It's really very doable, like buying a painting or a nice wardrobe.

The New Goldberg Variations premiered in Jordan Hall in Boston in 1999. Seven hundred people came to hear it. Since then, Yo-Yo has played it in Europe and Japan and at Carnegie Hall. The Variations just keep getting performed and I get calls from other instrumentalists telling me they have just played it. It is a gift that keeps giving back.

From the initial stage as a gift of love from my husband to me for our anniversary, it has been a beautiful thing. And I'm very privileged to have been able to do it.

In terms of the memorial aspect, it was the best way to create something eternal. People come and people go. Helping to create this new work of music was a way of beating the system. How wonderful to be able to do that.

"It is a gift that keeps giving back. I'm very privileged to have been able to do it."
"...my son worked with us to begin a project we call Soli Deo Gloria...

...Those are the words Bach put at the end of every composition: glory to God alone."

**Music and Faith**

**Richard Gieser, M.D.**

Commissioning music based on sacred texts for the glory of God is just one of the many ways that Dr. Dick Gieser, M.D. lives his faith. He also spends several weeks a year as a medical missionary in the Third World.

Dr. Richard Gieser, M.D. was a junior in college when one day he was listening to an LP of Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony and suddenly "really heard" the third movement. This revelation started him off on his musical journey of listening and commissioning.

In addition to his private medical practice in Wheaton, Illinois, Dr. Gieser spends a day a week teaching at Loyola University. His wife, Marge, is an artist who works in sculpture and textiles and has constructed three-dimensional wall-hangings for churches, as well as a banner for Coventry Cathedral.

Besides an intense engagement with the arts, the couple share the fact that they were born overseas—Dick in China, and Marge in Egypt—to missionary parents. They met as students at Wheaton College and have two daughters, one son, and 12 grandchildren.

Each year, the couple spends time abroad as Dick does medical missionary work. So far, their activities have taken them five times to India, twice to China, as well as to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Nigeria, Uganda, Ghana, Bulgaria, Romania, Mongolia and Siberia.

Wherever Dick is—whether at home in Illinois or in the furthest corners of the world—he finds music. Or he makes it happen...
Once in Siberia we offered to pay musicians to play a concert for us. They needed the money and we wanted to hear music. It was October and the heat wasn’t turned on. Six musicians showed up in formal clothes. Here we were in a small room, where your breath turned the air white, and we heard this long amazing concert of Russian music. That was unforgettable.

Anywhere we go I like to sponsor impromptu organ concerts in the local church. Organists don’t make much money and they love to play so I offer $75 or so for a private concert. It’s a win-win situation.

By doing this, I’ve heard organ concerts in cathedrals from the Hague to Portugal to Chicago. It’s always an adventure. Once I was at a really boring conference in San Antonio, Texas. I found the local church and got a hold of the organist, who agreed to put on a concert the next afternoon, and I invited all my colleagues. We had a great time.

At home we host about a concert a month and I started a classical music concert series in our church. And then my son, who is great at getting things organized, worked with us to begin a project we call Soli Deo Gloria. Those are the words Bach put at the end of every composition: glory to God alone. We raise money and commission large sacred works for chorus and orchestra. The conductor, John Nelson, is our music person who picks the composers and the subjects.

John has been a life-long friend because our fathers went to college together. His was a seminary teacher in Costa Rica and my parents met there to work as my high school graduation gift. John and I met in Costa Rica, attended Wheaton, and later spent time together in New York City.

Our first Soli Deo Gloria commission was Misereere by Henry-Mikhail Gorecki with the Lyric Opera Chorus and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1984. Since then, we’ve commissioned Window Rock by George Aramisowicz, which told the story of Peter, and Devarah by Paul Schoenfield, in which the text is narrated by an African-American preacher: Augusta Reade Thomas wrote Daylight Divine for us and Christopher Rouse composed a Requiem Mass that will be done next year in Rotterdam and at the National Symphony in Washington, D.C.

Finding a venue for the performance isn’t always easy. Just because you commission a piece of music, doesn’t mean you have a place to perform it. For instance, it’s surprising that not too many orchestras are going to play Rouse’s Requiem Mass, even though it’s by one of the world’s great living composers. But it’s 90 minutes and a big commitment. So now we’ve decided to change our focus and scale back to make our next project suitable for smaller orchestras and church choirs.

We’re learning. And I’m not even talking about the projects that have bombed! One lesson I learned is that the really great composers have to be free to write their music. That is easy to say, but it took us some time to realize and sometimes we put so many demands on projects that we lost some great commissions along the way.

We also commission music for family members. The first one was John’s idea. For my son’s wedding gift, Gorecki—who was in town for the Misereere premiere—wrote a piece and played it in our living room. Then for my son’s birthday, we commissioned Justini Tamusia, Uganda’s most famous—and probably only—composer of note. The Kronos Quartet has recorded a piece of his and we met him when he was getting his PhD at Northwestern. We probably gave him $500, which was a lot of money for us. The piece is played on the piano and the words are in Ugandan! That was a really great evening, so interesting.

Two years ago, we asked the composer David Gordon to write piano pieces for our twin grandchildren—we described them and said the girl is like a bumblebee and the boy is steady and calm—and the pieces turned out just like them.

We give a children’s concert each year when we invite all the grandchildren and any other children we can round up. Some great performers come to play, like Robert Orth and Gidon Kremer. And we have fun because we take out all the furniture and set up folding chairs. Kids love it.

Every New Year’s Eve, we host a concert and hire a couple of opera singers and some wonderful local instrumentalists. Starting with the millennium year, I asked three of my friends who were fine public speakers, to give us some words of wisdom interspersed with the music. We’ve been doing that ever since and it adds a kind of seriousness to the affair.

My wife and I learned from our parents whose lives were dedicated to service as missionaries. Living in the Third World makes you realize how much we have here at home. The most precious thing we have is not money. It is time. What we do—like giving away four weeks of our time in the Third World every year—is just a thanks to God for what He has given us.
"There is a benefit in discussing new musical ideas... you get away from your own tunnel vision."

The Commissioning Club
Hella Mears Hueg

In the Twin Cities, a dynamic group of friends gets together and collaborates in commissioning music. When Hella and her husband Bill joined the club, they found fun, friendships, and a new way to open their ears.

Born near Dusseldorf, Germany, Hella Mears Hueg grew up in an academic and musical household—her father was an historian and gifted amateur pianist. She was 14 when World War II ended and it was then she discovered theater and music, attended symphony and chamber music concerts and made friends with musicians. "When I was a teenager," she remembered, "the world opened up with exciting things that had been verboten, and that impacted highly on my political outlook."

Trained as an actress, Hella enjoyed a professional career in the theaters of Germany. In the 1960s, she married her first husband, who was an inventor and industrialist, and together they settled in the Twin Cities and supported the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. They shared their love of music and traveled the world—he is now deceased. More than two decades ago, she married her second husband, Bill Hueg, an agronomist who, before his retirement, taught at the University of Minnesota. They have a large farm where they grow flowers and trees.

For Bill's 70th birthday, Hella wanted to give him an appropriate gift...

"Our meetings are always very noisy and funny—and there is a lot of laughter."

There are wonderful poems by Rilke translated into English and I thought how wonderful it would be to set those to music as a 70th birthday present for my husband Bill. I had met the composer Libby Larsen and she had become a friend so I proposed this idea. We read poems to find the right ones, including love poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose words became the cycle's title: Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers. We worked hard to find good translations and rehearsals took time as well. It took a year for the song cycle to evolve. I love darker timbres, so I requested a mezzo soprano with a cello, and then a piano was also needed. Of course we wanted to keep it all a secret from Bill so whenever Libby phoned me at home, she used another name. And he never suspected!
"We meet after dinner at each other’s homes and we talk about potential projects, music and musicians we have heard, and about our families."

The songs were sung at a surprise party at our home in 1994. Bill was delighted. Afterward, we held a public performance at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Libby is very generous and gracious and every time the songs are performed in the neighborhood, she lets us know and of course we attend.

At that time, I was aware of the Minnesota Commissioning Club in our community. It was formed by Jack and Linda Hoeschler and each member agrees to contribute a set amount of money each year ($2,000 each year per couple) for five years to commission five or more works of music. Some of the members were already friends of ours and when one couple rotated out, they invited us to join. Our meetings are always very noisy and funny. We are five couples—including three professional musicians and music lovers and supporters—and there is a lot of laughter.

We meet after dinner at each other’s homes and we talk about potential projects, music and musicians we have heard, and about our families. We have refreshments and desserts. And often there are eight people talking at once! How in the world can something evolve out of such chaos? If you had a lot of hubris, you would say the universe was created out of chaos after all. But a stranger might think we were crazy.

Often one couple brings a project idea and we agree on it and pursue it. The others support it through whatever networking they can give. In the meantime, everyone is thinking three years ahead. As a group we want to have different kinds of compositions as well as spread our support around various musical organizations. Sometimes ideas come through someone’s special interests—like, if you want to commission an oboe concerto, you probably already have an oboist in mind. Since I have a strong bias toward the darker sounds, Bill and I put our money where our interest is, so we also sponsor the principal oboe chair for the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra and the principal bassoon chair for the Minnesota Orchestra.

At our club meetings, sometimes ideas get shot down. Other times there is enthusiastic support but for some reason the project never takes shape. It’s a process and never completely straightforward. But I love it and along the way you have a lot of fun and you really get to be intimate friends.

For one of our premieres, members of the group traveled together to Norway. My next project will be in Germany in 2004-5 and we’ll get a group together to travel there to hear the premiere—we are putting the plans for that project through the wringer at our next meeting.

What’s fascinating is that each person comes to the group with a different perspective. I started with a particular interest in the combination of words and music in song. Someone else might come with a passion for one particular instrument, whether it’s viola or piano. They’d say, wouldn’t it be great to have a new piece of music for this instrument, and from this first idea could grow a whole new understanding that can go beyond this piece.

A commissioning club can form like a book reading group. There is such a benefit in discussing new musical ideas and shaping them. You get away from your own tunnel vision when you hear other people’s opinions and ideas, and it helps shape your interest, knowledge and vision.

My personal growth has been in appreciating contemporary music. I had no idea what I was missing. I had always loved and known music intimately, but through listening to new music and new composers, I find that now when I go to a chamber or orchestra concert, I’m most comfortable when there is a new piece on the program! Of course I still love Bruckner and Mahler, but now I hear contemporary music as taking their colors and making something new that challenges me. You must continue to grow as a person—the Commissioning Club has been a learning experience for us.

“"It’s a process that’s never completely straightforward. But I love it and along the way you have a lot of fun and you really get to be intimate friends.”
“If you don’t like contemporary music, you can blame us for that whole week at the Philharmonic.”

Maurice and Lillian Barbash might be called musical "Insiders." For 27 years, Lillian has directed the Ipip Arts Council on Long Island. She has established and overseen a performing arts series that offers free events as well as concerts by such star ensembles as the Juilliard and Tokyo string quartets. She has also presented performances by the New York Philharmonic on Long Island for 25 consecutive seasons. And Maurice has been active in musical organizations since his retirement 15 years ago when one of his daughters took over his very successful residential development enterprise.

Together, Maurice and Lillian helped found the Long Island Philharmonic and have served on the board. The couple also founded the Bayside School Arts Education Fund that enriches school music curriculums in a variety of ways, such as bringing artists to classrooms. Last year the school district was cited as one of the 100 best in the nation for music.

Both say they have never been musicians. Lillian took piano lessons as a child, but didn’t like to practice. At the age of 50, Maurice tried the clarinet but said he “blew his brains out.” Nevertheless, they passed on their enthusiastic love of music to their three children, who all studied music. And among their six grandchildren, one is a whiz classical pianist and jazz saxophonist—the grandparents are watching his progress with great interest.

"As long as we’re alive and have a few bucks left, we’re going to commission music. It’s one of the most pleasurable things we do."
Maurice: Our experience with commissioning began one day when we were driving somewhere and listening to WQXR. Our 40th anniversary was coming up and I said, do you want to have a party? Just then the music ended and the announcer said, "That was Dumbarton Oaks by Stravinsky, commissioned by Mr. So-and-So in honor of his and his wife's anniversary."

Lillian: I said, that's what I want! I'd like to commission a concerto for Yo-Yo Ma because we knew him a little and our kids went to school with him. Luckily we had an inside trick because our daughter Cathy was then the orchestra manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra and Yo-Yo was scheduled to perform there.

M: So we went to his concert and saw him afterwards and he immediately said well, who do you want to compose it? My funny reaction was they're all dead! I said you choose because I really don't know the contemporary composers. He picked one of his old college professors, Leon Kirchner. Then our daughter asked Maestro Muti if he would conduct the premiere with the Philadelphia Orchestra and he said sure! It was that easy for us. But I know that's not always the case.

L: Our luck continued. Yo-Yo warned us that it was possible that the new concerto would be played once and never heard again. That's the risk. And we said, well, at least we'd have a tape to pass on to our grandchildren. But as it turned out, the work was recorded and the CD won a Grammy! A pretty amazing outcome.

M: We were skiing at Taos on the night of the Grammy awards. Yo-Yo faxed us a congratulations to our hotel! There was just one fax machine at the post office and two sisters who ran it. And one comes running up to us with the fax in her hand, which of course she had read. She said, is this from the real Yo-Yo? Of course we traveled to Philadelphia, then to Cleveland and to Boston to hear the piece played. Then it was performed at Avery Fisher Hall in New York with Leonard Slatkin. We attended rehearsals and the recording sessions and the all the time we had a blast.

L: Our first commission was so successful and we had so much fun, we decided to do it again for our 50th anniversary. We thought of Emanuel Ax because he's such a generous musician. In my work as director of an arts council, I arrange concerts in public schools with soloists who are performing with the Long Island Philharmonic. Once Manny did a wonderful school visit and then when I tried to pay him the honorarium, he refused to take the money, saying that he was out there anyhow and was happy to do it. He was the only one who ever did that and I never forgot it. So when we broached the idea of the new work, I reminded him of that time. He said, so you're doing this because I'm a nice guy? And we said, exactly!

M: We asked Manny to choose the composer and he picked Christopher Rouse, who had never written a piano concerto. After the premiere with the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Slatkin, Manny played the concerto all over the world. He told us it got an exceptional reception in Zurich and last summer we heard it at the Proms in London.

L: For us, the key was to approach the soloists because they will make every effort to get performances.

M: Since Yo-Yo and Manny had been playing together for over 25 years, we then thought let's do a double concerto. Yo-Yo co-opted it for his Silk Road project and brought in the composer Bright Sheng. The work was premiered in March 2003 at the New York Philharmonic. The orchestra's executive director, Zarin Mehta, had the idea to program the three works we commissioned all in the same week! I guess we'll go down in history somehow. I've been telling people, if you don't like contemporary music, you can blame us for that whole week at the Philharmonic.

We know that because Lillian is a professional in the field, as is my daughter, it was easy for us. For others who are looking for a way in, I would say that contacting an organization like Meet The Composer would be a good first step because that's where the expertise and contacts are — an instant network. New music can be daunting and even insiders don't necessarily know what composers are out there right now. For instance, we had heard of Christopher Rouse, but not Leon Kirchner or Bright Sheng.

L: But now as a result of our commissioning, I'm more receptive to listening to contemporary music. Before the Kirchner piece, I confess that if the radio was playing contemporary atonal music, I would switch to a different station. I could do Stravinsky and Shostakovich but not much beyond that. But now my ears have been stretched! I saw Lulu at the Met the other night and I just loved it.

M: As long we're alive and have a few bucks left, we're going to commission music. It's one of the most pleasurable things we do. Commissioning is a way for people who love and appreciate music, but who can't play an instrument, to make music. We feel we participated in making three pieces of music. That's got to be some kind of ego trip! And one of the great side benefits is you get to be an insider by meeting and becoming friends with so many musicians.
"It all began supporting composers. This was a time when Phil Glass was driving a taxi..."

Los Angeles Legend
Betty Freeman

I heard the first performance and I didn't like it—it was too pretty, too sweet for me. I went back a third time and around the fourth time, I began to hear it differently. By the sixth time, I really liked it!

She is arguably the most influential philanthropist of contemporary music. Legendary in the music world, Betty Freeman has supported an astounding array of the most important composers in the past 50 years.

By her own count, since 1961 she has made over 300 grants, commissions and gifts of financial assistance to over 70 composers, often early in their careers. Her philanthropy is informed, passionate, and aesthetically wide-ranging. She has commissioned a virtual who's who of important composers, including John Adams, John Cage, Philip Glass, Lou Harrison, Conlon Nancarrow, Harry Partch, Steve Reich, Terry Riley, Ned Rorem, Virgil Thomson, and LaMonte Young.

A resident of Los Angeles, Freeman is friends with a wide international circle of composers, musicians, painters, dancers, and artists of all genres. She was the subject of David Hockney's early masterpiece, The Beverly Hills Housewife, which hangs in her dining room. Hockney's montage portrait of Betty Freeman (opposite page) pays tribute to another aspect of this extraordinary woman: she is an artist in her own right. As an art photographer, Freeman has created a trove of composer's portraits that are another expression of her love of music.

My father was a philanthropist who gave to hospitals, to Israel, and to education. He was always aware of the needy, the poor and the sick. So I learned this lesson early that it is better to give than to receive. Eventually I found a place for myself in helping with music.

So many people with means have a kind of museum mentality. But I couldn't care less for buildings, buildings, buildings! Patrons like to see their names on walls so it's often easy to get support for putting up some new edifice. My passion is for the music and the composers.
“Pretty soon I learned that it wasn’t enough to commission or compose the piece. There had to be performances.”

I found the music world through contemporary art—I was a collector. Then I met composers like John Cage and, in 1964, Harry Partch. I’ve always been like an Indian with one ear to the ground, curious about what’s going on. So I’d heard Partch’s music on a Columbia LP and admired it, and then I met this remarkable man. At the time he was so poor, he had been living in his car for six weeks. I couldn’t not help him and just let him die—it was that serious. And so I did what I could to keep him going for the last ten years of his life.

So it all began by supporting composers. This was a time when Phil Glass was driving a taxi and his wife had a soup kitchen in SoHo. I was helping a lot of composers—John Cage, Lou Harrison, LaMonte Young, and later Steve Reich—just helping them get by.

Gradually, these composers became better known and when they were asked to write a piece, I supported it. Pretty soon I learned that it wasn’t enough to commission or compose the piece. There had to be performances so it didn’t end up just being played in a studio. In the 1970s I began to commission only for performances by a specific ensemble or orchestra or opera company.

I’m constantly excited by what the great composers of today are writing—I’m a big fan of Harrison Birtwistle in England. Pierre Boulez is a great friend. Milton Babbitt—simply wonderful. And Glass, Reich, Adams, Thomas Adès, Osvaldo Golijov, Mikel Rouge...there are so many I can’t name them all. People ask how I find composers but really it’s a small world, much like the contemporary art scene. Once you get to know a few people, you quickly know many more.

I go to concerts as often as possible, but only when there is a piece I’ve never heard. Unfortunately, that’s not as frequent in Los Angeles as it should be. I go to Europe every year where I hear a lot—usually to England, Germany, and Salzburg, where, when Gerard Mortier was directing the festival, he did exciting things. Last year I was in Lucerne to hear a young Austrian composer, Olga Neuwirth.

For someone thinking about commissioning, you have to consider that the cost can vary. You have to take into account how long the piece is—three minutes or three hours? And how many performers there are—a solo is completely different from an opera. Does the piece need a libretto? I always cover the cost of the scores, which can be a big item. For instance, if it’s an orchestral piece, you have separate parts for each of the instrumentalists in addition to the full score for the conductor.

And there is the commissioning fee itself. Recently I heard about a composer who was calculating his rate for a solo piano piece as $1,000 a minute. So a three-minute solo piano piece, for instance, would be $3,000. That was his way of thinking about it and I thought it was not unreasonable and his rate was in line with what the well-known composers might get.

Sometimes things just don’t work out. I commissioned a piece from a wonderful person who was the right person for the project, but the music didn’t turn out as well. I never ever mind the failures though because without them you don’t know what the successes are.

For about 20 years, I was married to a wonderful Italian man, Franco Assetto. He was from Turin and hated contemporary music. He only liked Verdi and Rossini. But he insisted on going to every concert with me. I could never sit next to him though because he would make these awful sounds—ah, uh—he was dying!

We hosted musicales here in our home for ten years. About six times each season, I would invite two composers. Each would talk for 15 minutes or so and then play music—with live musicians or on a recording. Then the composer would answer questions. It was a very successful format.

Since he didn’t like the music, my husband stayed in the kitchen. He lived to cook, so he would make pasta for 100 people. After he died in 1991, I tried to continue the series for two years but when the tenth anniversary of the series came, I knew it was time to stop. And on the day of the last concert, the mayor made a declaration of Betty Freeman Music Day in Los Angeles. The most surprising thing that ever happened to me in commissioning was when I commissioned the libretto and the music of the opera, L’amour de loin by Kaija Saariaho. I heard the opera in rehearsal and I didn’t like it. I heard the first performance and I didn’t like it—it was too pretty, too sweet for me. I went back a third time and around the fourth time, I began to hear it differently. By the sixth time, I really liked it! You don’t have to go seven times to everything, as I do. But contemporary music demands a lot from you. You must use your mind to ask what the composer is doing. The great composers of today are writing marvelous things and I never get tired of the adventure of listening. ■
Meet The Composer is a national organization founded in 1974 to foster the creation, performance, dissemination, and appreciation of music by contemporary composers who write in every style of music. Since its first commissioning program was launched in 1988, Meet The Composer has helped create a legacy of music for our time—more than 700 new works.

The programs of Meet The Composer reach all 50 states and annually involve more than 800 composers who represent the full spectrum of contemporary American music by writing in such idioms as classical, opera, jazz, folk, electronic and more. Meet The Composer’s core programs include Commissioning Music/USA; Meet The Composer Fund; New Residencies; Music Alive; New Music, New Donors; the JP Morgan Chase Regrant Program for Small Ensembles; Global Connections; and Compose Yourself.

What happens as a result of these programs? Composers in K-12 classrooms give students the unforgettable experience of composing their own music. Arts and community organizations of all kinds host resident composers and get to know these creative artists one-on-one. Ensembles large and small throughout the nation commission new music and present multiple performances of new works. Composers are given the resources to participate in the performance of their music by holding illuminating discussions with audiences. And composers are given the opportunity to travel abroad for performances and artistic collaborations.

For those individuals interested in commissioning new music, Meet The Composer can help. The experienced MTC staff members can provide a nexus of information, support, and expertise that bring together composers, arts organizations, foundations, and individuals interested in the creation of the music of our time.

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