

Self-Publishing
By
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Today's technological world offers tremendous opportunity for composers and writers to publish, promote and distribute their own work. Professional publishers often refer to self-publishing in derisory terms, “vanity publishing” I prefer to define my work as, a self-published composer and writer since 1980, with the terms “refined promotion”. I know I will never be able to offer the same professional worldwide distribution service and perceived kudos as the major publishers, though I can offer focused marketing for my music. In an ideal world an independent company would publish my music and I would be able to devote my time to the writing and promotion of their catalogue of my music. “There in hangs the rub” we do not live in an ideal world. If a composer believes in his work then he or she has to be prepared to make tremendous sacrifice to promote and distribute his/her music.

I registered my company with companies' house way back in 1980 and subsequently was able to invest my own money in the promotion of my music. It was hoped the business resulting from this investment would generate income. That was also acceptable to the tax inspector, and so I was able to claim various tax allowances on the promotion and distribution of my scores. Over the years I have slowly invested in publishing facilities to enable the distribution and promotion of professionally presented scores. I have, also more importantly, developed a substantial database of professional performers who are interested and will consider new twentieth century music. I have not sold vast numbers of scores; rather I have given many complimentary copies of scores and parts to professional performers worldwide. This has resulted in performances, new commissions and recordings. The point is I have not had a vast income from the sale of scores but rather a “hidden return” in royalties and commissions.

I invested in a brand new digital colour photocopier that can be connected to a computer. It will also store scores in its memory. Not that expensive £5000 will buy you a brand new Toshiba that will print your score in booklet form A3/A4/A5 or what ever size you require.

At a government auction recently I bought 26 reams of excellent quality paper and card A2 for £16.00. Add the price of a guillotine and I have a vast store of good quality paper for a fraction of the cost. I can now produce a symphony score of 210 pages, which also includes a study CD, for 50p and that includes the cost of a service contract for the copier. No professional publisher can compete against those costs. I can also produce a twenty-page full colour catalogue of my music for distribution to libraries, music colleges, etc. for 60p. More importantly I can print/ update any number of copies whenever they are needed. All this at the press of a button. No large print runs, no expensive storage facilities.

There are a number of opportunities that present themselves via the Internet. A good professional web site, with ordering facilities, is essential. Make sure though you design it yourself or at least be able to update the information. C.D. Baby and similar Internet companies will distribute CDs. Organise and collect digital royalties. There are a number of other companies that can offer the same sort of service for sheet music sales. I am, though, not convinced this is a viable market for classical composers, particularly if the music is difficult. Most professional performers are incredibly supportive of composers but also have limited financial resources to invest in unknown music. I have always considered it better to offer a complimentary score in exchange for the chance of a reading and subsequent performances. (Get performance colleagues, if the music has quality you will get the money back in CD recordings and royalties.)

I have also invested in ISMN numbers essential if you are distributing your music worldwide. It is a jungle out there, and if you have not got the expertise and financial credence of a professional publisher you need to protect your copyrights in every way possible. Scores to the British Music Library and the Copyright Agency are also essential.

Membership of various music organisations is crucial. British Academy/ British Music Society/ British Information Centre/PRS/MCPS/Musicians Union/SPNM are but just a few of the organisations I have joined over the years. Obviously subscriptions are expensive but these can be claimed as a tax allowance. The point being that each one of these organisations offers information and promotional opportunities. There also offer a contact point for fellow composers. Sometimes a talk with colleague who has experienced similar difficulties can be a major moral boost and the mountain is not quiet as high if another has already climbed it.

To be self-published is a difficult and demanding route for any composer, though it is one that can bring artistic and promotional rewards. Publication by one of the major publishers, is the most favourable option, though, in the absence of such a luxury, if you believe in your work, the only choice is to self publish. It is also much better to negotiate with a publisher from a position of strength i.e. if you have been very successful as a self published composer the product will be in demand and you can dictate the terms.

Most classical composers or indeed professional performers are never going to have substantial financial returns for the huge investment of time and energy necessary to produce work of quality. All we can really hope for is the integrity of musical reward, which makes the work we do worthwhile. In an ideal world, society would value and reward our endeavour. Maybe one day they will. Until that day, the mountains are there to be climbed by all, but at least in the climbing we know we are not alone.

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