

CoMA Midwinter Composers
St Hilda's College, Oxford
Wednesday 2nd to Sunday 6th January 2019

We welcome composers of any style and background, using whatever mode of musical communication - be it standard notation, graphic scores, text or some other form of instruction - as long as it's clear and easy to understand.

It is good to come with an open mind. Whether or not you already have your own style or compositional voice, this course is all about how to expand your thinking as well as your techniques. The aim is to delve into your imagination and direct your music towards deeper, newer and unexpected areas.

Our composition tutors on these courses offer a friendly and supportive approach to tuition that is both challenging and deeply instructive. The focus is on string writing, composers being required to write for amateur string orchestra and a professional string trio. In addition, and entirely at the discretion of those attending the course, there is a session allocated each day for writing as a composers' ensemble.

Group tuition classes and one-to-one composition tutorials are an integral part of the course as are workshops performing the works submitted by those attending the course. Composers are free to record all sessions for private use, including those with the professional string trio, and to attend the concerts in the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building presented by the string tutor.

Composition Guidelines

The string orchestra for the Midwinter Course comprises around 16 violins, 6 violas, 10 cellos and a double bass (this may change slightly). The sight-reading ability of the most able players (of which there are only a few) is about ABRSM Grade 6/7. Most players are somewhere in the region of ABRSM Grade 4/5. There are some who have only been playing two or three years and are more in the region of grade 2/3. For the purposes of this course we suggest ABRSM Grade 5 sight-reading standard as a maximum level of difficulty for parts. If using scales, it is best not to exceed three sharps or flats, preferably no more than two. Ensure any use of extended techniques and contemporary notation is clearly explained.

We strongly recommend against divisi as this increases the difficulty level. However concertino/ripieno texture works well, although you may find that in practice doubling the solo parts is necessary. Composers may provide simpler orchestral parts (such as violin III, viola II and cello II) for the less experienced players, but these are not essential. Given the number of cellists, some can be asked to help cover a bass line.

The key thing is to aim to express yourself musically avoiding unnecessary technical difficulties. Many of the participant string players may be encountering new music for the first time and are more used to older pieces for string orchestra, of which there are many. As an ensemble string orchestra is well represented with some of the finest and most well-written music for strings. Listen to as much as you can to get the soundworld in your head – a list of works is at the bottom.

Writing for mixed ability amateur string orchestra

What do you need to think about with mixed ability strings? In conventional string orchestra you will have five “sections” violin 1 & 2, viola, cello and double bass. The numbers of instruments decrease usually as you get lower so writing anything *divisi* for the bass may not be possible. The clue with this compositional exercise is “mixed ability” and your job as a composer is to make an interesting score whilst remembering that your performers’ experience of notation, technique and playing together in large groups is not that of professionals. In working sessions there will be a limited amount of time, and what we want to do is “make music”, so think very clearly about anything that is unclear or may take hours of practice and working out as you write.

- **NOTATION** It doesn’t matter what kind of notation you use ranging from conventional crotchets and quavers to graphic score but make sure that it makes sense. Make sure that anything unusual is clear or has clear instructions and explanations. Could YOU perform it and make sense of it if it were put in front of you as a player? If you need to take half an hour to explain how something works or a technique there is something wrong with your input. If questions are asked you need to be able to explain what you intend.
- **STRING TECHNIQUES** The range of ability in a mixed string group may mean that some players have not yet dealt with all the techniques that are possible. Be careful about your use of unusual techniques, be careful about piling lots of techniques on top of one another. Remember, the more players are trying to work out techniques and or even attempting for the first time, the less they are getting on with playing your music. If you’re uncertain about bowing, don’t put it on your music. If you’re not a string player listen to some string music to get the soundworld in your head and look at some scores.
- **SOLOS AND HIGH MUSIC** It’s possible to have some solos in your music but be careful how challenging these might be. Also, going very high on instruments can lead some of the less able players to struggle and can also lead to tuning problems. If the notes might be on lower violas is there any reason to have very high cellos for example – always be thinking about what make most sense and will work relatively quickly so the “music” can be rehearsed.
- **PARTS AND SCORE** The parts and score need to match up. Bar numbers and Rehearsal Letters need to be there so that everyone can orientate themselves quickly in rehearsal sessions. Make sure that as much information to do with articulation, dynamics and phrasing is there. Technical information *SUL PONT PIZZ* etc goes above *Dynamics p pp ff mf dolce espressivo* etc goes below. Tempo markings are also essential and mood words “darkly” or “wild” in English is just as good as Italian. **CUES** long bars of rests can be confusing and players can get lost so sometimes it’s good to show another part as a cue.
- **FAST and RHYTHM** The string family offers a huge array of colours and techniques. As a composer you need to think carefully about how you deal with such a large body of similar sounding instruments: sections of mixed ability can be hard to move around, especially rhythmically - that's if you're after precise rhythms. If you are working with fast music try to give some comfort to players by working with things that fall on beats of the bar or similar – you can add the complexity - if you want it - by how it sounds in total but how it looks does not need to be impossibly awkward. For mixed ability players FAST music can challenge both individuals and also the ensemble playing of sections, try to make anything fast relatively straightforward so that the speed does not get in the way and don’t overload fast music with lots of changes of technique. Fast music means moving the bow faster and left hand fingers faster both of which can challenge nursery slopes players.

- OPEN NOTATION/ALEATORIC NOTATION It's perfectly possible to give free rein to individual members of the orchestra as opposed to thinking as section units. In this kind of notation be very clear with your instructions, be very clear what the conductor might indicate for everyone and make sure you are relatively specific about the gestures, speeds, articulations notes and rhythms that you want.

We're not expecting anything in the styles below but here is an array of different musics which bring the sound of strings and string orchestra to life with skill.

- Bach Air on a G String
- Bartok Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste
- Britten Simple Symphony
- Elgar Serenade for Strings
- Grieg Holberg Suite
- Lutoslawski Funeral Music
- Penderecki Threnody for Victims of Hiroshima
- Tippett Concerto for Double String Orchestra
- Stravinsky Apollon Musagete
- Warlock Capriol Suite

Writing for professional string trio

Whilst it is not a requirement to do so, we do suggest you bring a piece with you or at least some musical sketches. There are no specific guidelines. Members of this year's string trio include

- Tristan Guerney <https://scottishensemble.co.uk/musician/tristan-gurney/>
- Ruth Gibson (viola) <http://ensemble360.co.uk/biographies/judith-busbridge/>
- Robin Michael (cello) <http://www.resonusclassics.com/robin-michael>

Writing for Composers' ensemble

The composers' ensemble, being made up only of the participants on the composition course, offers a quite different pallet with its own unique challenges - most notably how to blend such a random ensemble.

One way to make use of such a group can be to write in 'open score' format - where you compose up to 4 lines, with or without the addition of keyboard and percussion. These lines (divided roughly into the soprano, alto, tenor and bass registers) need to be playable by any instrument in its given register. This interesting and thought provoking way to construct a piece of music allows for many potential future performances, since any group of any size should be able to perform it. Indeed, so successful has this approach proved to be that it is now the mainstay of CoMA's commissioning programme.

Duration of string pieces

We recommend pieces should be from 3 to 6 minutes in length.

Presentation of the work

- We require PDF's of the scores and each of the parts
- Handwritten and computer-generated scores and parts are equally acceptable as long as the notation is clear.
- Staves in scores should be minimum 5 pt
- Staves in parts should be minimum 6.5 pt. Include page numbers and choose appropriate places for turns. Put in bar numbers and page numbers. Rehearsal letters are also useful.
- It is essential that scores are consistent with parts in all respects; including checking that all the bar numbers and rehearsal letters match up between the score and all the parts

Finished string pieces or works in progress?

Ideally you will present completed works. If this is not possible then an unfinished piece or one or more musical ideas or sketches are acceptable as long as the score and parts are totally consistent, legible and presented in the formats outlined above.

How we want to receive the string pieces

Please email a copy of the score and each of the parts in PDF format to info@coma.org or deliver to CoMA @ Rich Mix 35-47 Bethnal Green Road, London E1 6LA. We will then make sufficient copies of parts for the orchestra players.

It is your responsibility to produce a conductor's score plus a copy of the score for the composition tutor and additional copies for those participating in the composers' course (we will advise on how many once we know how many are attending the course). The conductor's score should be printed on both sides of the page in A4 portrait and wire bound (not plastic). If this is not possible then single sided A4 is the next best thing.

Deadlines

- String orchestra: by email or to CoMA office no later than Thursday 27th December 2018.
- String trio: at registration on Wednesday 2nd January 2019
- Composers' ensemble: nothing needs to be done in advance but do bring an instrument and/or one or more sound sources (anything from sticks and stones to computer sonics and consumer gadgets).

Questions: email info@coma.org