

# Getting Your Music Published

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Rick Modlin is manager of music development for OCP. He has recorded a jazz album (*Joy to the World*, [ocp.org/10993](http://ocp.org/10993)), written liturgical and choral music, and arranged many OCP compositions. He is an active parish musician in the Archdiocese of Portland in Oregon.

Writing music for the liturgy is a rewarding thing. As a composer, I never tire of hearing when a parish is using a piece of mine. After all, that's why composers write—to have their music used.

Getting your music into the hands of more people is the goal of becoming published, but it can be daunting and even a little mysterious. Having worked on both sides of the publishing process for twenty-five years, I've picked up a few hints along the way. If you're an aspiring composer (or just curious), this article is for you.

## What happens when music is sent to a publisher?

The ways in which publishing companies accept new material for publication can vary considerably in the details, but the basic flow is:

1. New work is received,
2. then reviewed,
3. then declined or
4. accepted; if accepted, the new work is
5. put under contract,
6. then edited and engraved (typeset),
7. then released to the public.

The order and/or concurrence of these steps may vary slightly, but that essentially is the publishing process.

## What you need to know as a composer about the details

Publishers receive music in different ways. Some publishers do not accept any unsolicited material. Those that do have an open submission process (like OCP) usually have guidelines about how to submit new material. Follow these guidelines closely. If you have a question about the submission process, save yourself some uncertainty: contact the publisher and ask before submitting something.

Publishers get lots of submissions. The review process takes time. Be patient. But be gently persistent too. If the submissions guidelines say that you'll receive a reply within three months, then on the third-month-and-one-day, if you haven't received a reply, send a cheerful inquiry.

Publishers prefer to spend their time on music that they are going to publish, rather than on music that they're not. That may seem obvious, but the point for you as a composer is that if your piece is declined without comment, let go of the urge to find out why. Unless you already have a relationship with the publisher, you're probably not going to get detailed comments. Instead, send your music to another publisher, or set it aside and write something else (And see "the last word" below!).

If your piece is accepted, congratulations! The hard part now is to be patient again. Publishers typically release different types of publications, all of which may have different schedules for publication. Your music might be on a six-month track for getting published as a single octavo, or it might be wanted for a project that is three

years in the making (perhaps a new hymnal, for instance), or there may be twenty-seven other pieces ahead of it in the publishing queue. Fair questions to ask your publisher: in what form will my piece (likely) be published, and what's the (approximate) timeline?

Your type of contract will vary between publishers as well. Key points for you to note as you compare publishers include: 1) Term of the contract; 2) Royalty rate, and whether it is paid on first sale or after publishing expenses are recouped; 3) Frequency of royalty payments; 4) Your access to the material, such as your ability to use it in personal projects; 5) Discount on purchase of copies; 6) Future material; 7) Promotional activities.

Once the editing and engraving/typesetting process for your music has begun, the publisher's costs are accumulating rapidly. It is best not to introduce changes to your score at this point. In fact, many publishers charge for "author's alterations"; that is, they reduce the author/composer's future royalties to cover the cost of any changes the author/composer makes after the work has passed a certain point in the publishing process. So, two hints: first, rework/edit/revise your music before submitting it for publication; and secondly, stay in contact with your editor! If you feel that you need to make a change to your music, tell your editor as soon as possible.

Once your music is released to the public, your contract likely allows you to receive a certain number of complimentary copies and a discount on purchases of more. Your publisher will want your help promoting the work, and so may either request or require you to engage in promotional activities.

### Why does music get rejected?

There are many reasons a publisher may decline your music. Here are a few common ones:

- **The manuscript is unreadable.** In these days of ubiquitous software notation programs like Finale and Sibelius, it is becoming very uncommon to see actual hand manuscript anymore. Nonetheless, the disorganization or sheer messiness of a typeset score may still cause reviewers to decide it's not worth the effort. Lesson? Run your score past a colleague before submitting it to a publisher. Get feedback, and make it look as good as you can. By the way, always, always, always include a metronome marking!
- **The submission guidelines weren't followed.** If the guidelines specify no more than three submissions, don't send eight. If the guidelines say that the publisher is not accepting certain types of pieces, don't send them.
- **The publisher already has multiple versions of the text you've set.** If you are setting Psalm 23, for instance, it will have to stack up against some pretty strong competition.
- **Publishers' resources are limited.** The publisher must choose between numerous potential projects; funding all

of them is not possible. Perhaps you've submitted a piece for children's choir, and the publisher has already spent its allotment for children's music for the year.

- **Of course, the quality of a composition—or lack thereof—is the largest obstacle to becoming published.** The craft of composition is a subject too lengthy for a short article like this. If your knowledge of composition, songwriting, theory, arranging, and orchestration are limited, start there. Take classes, study privately. Publishers have lots going on. A publisher may go to the effort and expense of turning your dining-room demo into sheet music, but don't plan on it. Show your music to colleagues and solicit their suggestions. If you're weak in an area, show it to someone who is strong, and take their advice. Make it as good and as polished as you can before submitting it.

As I mentioned earlier, you probably won't learn the specific reason(s) why your music is declined. So, keep studying, keep writing, keep improving, and keep trying.

### The "pending" category

The publisher may see something of interest in your music, but wish for changes to be made before accepting it for publication. Be flexible. If a publisher is successful, it's in part from knowing what its customers are looking for. If your publisher asks for a change to your score—or even many changes!—be as accommodating as you can.

Some very common changes that publishers of liturgical music ask of their composers:

- Add more verses
- Change the key
- Add one or more measures of music in strategic places
- Change the title
- Add an instrument part
- Simplify sections of the music
- Fix the choral writing
- Rework the lyrics, etc., etc.

As the composer of the work, you can say no to any requests. Be aware that the result may be that your submission is declined. Neither option is wrong. Decide what's most important to you as the composer—maintaining the piece's original integrity, or getting published—and act accordingly.

### The last word

Don't be discouraged. Sarah Hart, with hundreds of published songs to her credit, once laughingly told me, "Songwriters eat rejection for breakfast!" Even veteran songwriters, composers, and authors have new works turned down. Be persistent, and keep writing!

For more information on OCP's submission process, visit [ocp.org/en-us/submit-music](http://ocp.org/en-us/submit-music).

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