

Immortalized in Sheet Music Tips for Composers Trying to get their First Acceptance Letter

By Robert Clayson

Ever since I started composing music with an extremely old version of Finale, it has been a life goal of mine to have a composition published. Back then I mostly wrote music for marching battery percussion, but now I write for other areas of percussion as well. My first professional publication came in 2018 with “Dance of the Music Box Figurines” for solo 4.3-octave marimba (published by C-Alan Publications), but there were quite a few rejections before that happy day when my wife called to tell me that I had gotten an acceptance letter in the mail!

I am not famous for my compositions, and you will never hear me say that my compositions are ground-breaking or moving the genre of classical percussion forward. However, I have had some success publishing for percussion over the past several years, and I would like to share some of the things I have learned about the publishing process. I hope that by sharing my experiences I can help others who are going through what I did when I first began submitting pieces for publication. In particular, I will share a few things that I believe will help increase your chances of getting an acceptance letter.

TIP 1: BE PATIENT

One of the hardest things I have had to master is the act of waiting patiently. When I first started submitting pieces for

consideration, I got incredibly irritated at how long it took to get some kind of communication from publishing companies, especially because it seemed like all they had to do was give me a yes or no answer. The longer it took to hear from a company, the less optimistic I would become.

It is important to remember that you are just one person in a world full of people who are trying to get their pieces published. What’s more, a publishing company *isn’t* just giving a simple yes or no answer. There are many things that a publishing house has to consider before they make a choice on your submission (more on those later).

Learn from my mistakes: just because it takes a long time to hear back from a publishing company doesn’t mean they are ignoring you. A particular company might get back to you within a couple of days, but it could also take months to receive a response. For reference, I have waited as little as a couple of hours to receive an unofficial “yes” via email, but I’ve also waited for eight grueling months only to receive a rejection letter.

TIP 2: REJECTION IS PART OF THE PROCESS.

I have received numerous rejection letters over my short time as a composer. My track record of acceptance vs. rejection is certainly not good, and it might not be very good for you when you start out, either. When I first started submit-

ting compositions, another mistake I made was having doubts about whether or not I was a good composer, or whether or not the music I was composing was worth anything. I would not call myself a great composer, but I also don’t “phone anything in,” so to speak. Every piece that I send to a publisher is something that I believe serves a specific educational purpose, or is something I enjoy performing myself. As long as you believe you are making the instrument more fun to play for performers and more enjoyable for audiences, you are writing good music. Revolutionary music? Maybe not — but we can all agree there is room in our recitals and concerts for all kinds of music. This is all a long way of saying that, just because your music is rejected by a publisher, that doesn’t mean it is bad music.

Here are a few reasons why you might be rejected that do not have anything to do with the quality of your piece:

1. The publisher is not experiencing a high volume of sales in the genre of your piece.
2. Your piece is too similar to something else that they already offer in their catalog, or it might be too similar to a piece they just accepted yesterday.
3. The publisher does not feel that your piece will sell as well as some of the other pieces that have been submitted for review, and they can only commit to so many projects each year.

These reasons are always hard to ac-

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cept, because they breach the “music should be music for music’s sake” argument that often gets brought up in these discussions. However, there are some things to remember: First and foremost, the publisher agrees to publish their products at their own expense, not yours. They are literally taking a gamble with each new product they decide to sell. Also important to note is the fact that publishing companies are businesses that are responsible for earning a living for their employees. There is no nice way of saying this, but publishing companies exist to make money, just like any other business. If the publisher does not feel that your piece will sell for them, it is unlikely they will take a risk on it, regardless of the piece’s musical or artistic quality.

TIP 3: CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

Now that I have spoken about being patient and facing rejection with as much grace as possible, I want to offer some advice that should help you get your pieces published. I’ve already spoken briefly about not phoning anything in, but before moving on, I think it is worth emphasizing the importance of taking pride in your work, proofreading carefully, and always putting your best foot forward when submitting anything for consideration by a publisher.

Beyond always holding yourself to a high standard, my first piece of advice is to be open-minded about where you send your submissions for consideration. Don’t pigeonhole yourself to one publishing company. Everyone needs to start somewhere, and I have found that many people don’t get that start with their first choice of publisher. Remember, you shouldn’t measure your success in regard to where you start; measure it by where you finish. You may build a lasting relationship with the company that gives you your first acceptance letter, such that you don’t have

to wait for acceptance letters from other publishers anymore. As the saying goes: if Mom says “no,” go ask Dad!

Second, it is important to submit the right pieces to the right publishers. This might seem like common sense, but I would not submit a monumentally difficult four-mallet marimba solo to a company whose customers are middle school band directors looking for solo and ensemble music. I always ask myself these three questions when considering the best publishing company for each piece I submit:

1. What does this publisher have in its “most popular” category?
2. What does this publisher already offer in the genre of your piece?
3. Do you feel that your submission is unique enough to stand out, while also being a good fit with the other offerings in their catalog?

Finally, do everything in your power to convince the publisher that your submission will be an instant bestseller with minimal effort on their part. This includes making sure that your submission is as close to professionally engraved as possible. Whenever I lead discussions on teaching marching percussion, I bring in two examples of music for the audience to look at. One of the examples is just notes written on a page, and the other is the same piece of music that has undergone five minutes of engraving. I have not had a single person tell me they would prefer the un-engraved sheet music, and it seems reasonable to assume that publishers feel this way as well.

While it might not be necessary to make sure every detail is 100% correct, it always helps to have a strong starting place. It is also a good idea to make sure you send both a high-quality audio and video recording of your submission. Even if videos are highly edited and shot over multi-take performances, video recordings make the pieces seem more playable,

which might be the deciding factor when it comes time to hit the “buy now” button on the website. Having this resource at the time of submission makes your piece more attractive to the publisher, as it is more likely to appeal to their customers.

CONCLUSION: BE PATIENT, DON’T GIVE UP, AND MAKE SMART CHOICES

There is more to the submission process than writing a piece and sending it to a publishing house. It is extremely gratifying to see your composition go through the entire process, get accepted, and be put into print for the entire world to see, but it takes a significant amount of time, and an even larger amount of diligence and resilience. There will most likely be times where it seems like no one wants to take a chance on your music. Keep composing and keep submitting. If nothing else, you will be giving life to music that you believe in. There is always room for music like that.

Robert Clayson serves as Lecturer of Music for Troy University. He earned his bachelor’s degree in Music Education from Troy University in 2015 and his master’s degree in Percussion Performance from Indiana University in 2017. Clayson received first place in the PAS Marching Festival Individual Collegiate Keyboard Competition, he received first place in the 2017 Indiana Day of Percussion Collegiate Solo Marimba Competition, and he is an active member of several regional orchestras across the Southeastern United States. His publications are available through C-Alan Publications, Excelcia Music Publishing, Row-Loff Productions, Studio 4 Music, Tapspace Publications, and Wildlight Publications.