

Budgets



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I think of budgets as just another element, or parameter, of the project. The budget is how much money is available to create music for the project. There are many different approaches to how composers work with budgets, commissions and fees. I will share my experience and what I have found works best for our community.

To start with, how do you know how much to “budget” for a composer? There are some composers that charge “by the minute”, meaning they have a certain rate for the length of a piece. If a piece is ten minutes long, and the rate was set at \$200.00 per minute, that project would need a budget of \$2,000.00 for that composition. Other composers charge “by the hour”, meaning they have a certain rate that they charge per hour for working on the project. So if the budget for the piece was \$500.00, and their hourly rate was \$50.00, then the composer would have ten hours to make the composition, no matter how long the piece was. Others work with flat fees, meaning that no matter how long the piece is or how long it takes to make the music, there is just a flat fee.

As I have said before, I don’t think “charging by the minute” works well as a practice. There are too many diverse needs sonically from choreographers. Some five minute pieces can be much more time consuming than a 15-30 minute piece. Composing and producing a recording of a large ensemble of musicians for a two minute piece can require a lot of time and money, whereas a twenty minute ambient drone can take very little time to make and not require much of a budget at all. I think this is also true in a

similar way for “flat fees”. If the budget is super high, and the music won’t take very much time, I sometimes will have a talk with the collaborator and suggest that we set the budget lower. It depends on how well I know the collaborator and if they would be open for that conversation.

Over the years, I have learned what I can get done as a composer within an hour. It’s not an exact science, sometimes what I might make in that hour could be useless, but I can usually average out what is possible within a certain budget. Because I am working on several collaborations at any given time, I need to have some way to measure how long I can spend on a project. I think this is a good approach if you have had many years of experience. Just like any other aspect of being a good collaborator, I am always trying to get better at managing budgets.

I have found that the best approach for me is to find out what budget the collaborator has for a project, and then let them know what I think is possible with their music ideas. This is also not an exact science and involves a bit of risk. I try not to over-promise or under-promise, and sometimes I get it wrong. When I do, I still try my best to make a great piece of music for the collaborator. To help with this initial risk, it is helpful to pay a portion of the budget up front. It is common to ask for 30-50% of the budget as a deposit, and the remainder upon completion of the music. I have never had a collaboration end in the middle of a project, but I know folks that have, and the initial deposit made the separation from the project easier.

The best piece of insight I can give after many years of collaborating, is that a budget has nothing to do with respect. I know that folks have a great deal of respect for collaborators, so they try to build up the size of a budget. I don’t think there is anything wrong with that at all. What I mean to say, is that I personally do not see the budget as a sign of respect. I think that respect comes from kindness and open heartedness during a collaboration. I think it is important to say this because of comments I hear much too often, “I want to pay you what you are worth” or “I want to be fair”. Most of the time, the collaborator does not have a choice with how much the budget can be for a new piece of music. They have a set amount without a lot of wiggle room. There is nothing wrong with this, no matter how much money the budget is.

Being a good collaborator means being able to handle this part of the process with care and grace. If I don’t think I can do everything that a choreographer needs within the budget they have, it is my job to communicate that without any shaming or cruelty. It’s not a deficiency of the choreographer’s personality that the budget is low for a project. The budget is simply another aspect of the project to be factored into the plan for completion. I think of all of the pieces I would have missed if I had a set rate that was not flexible. Especially when starting out, all collaborators, if it is within their control, need to have flexibility and ease with their approach to budgets in our community. I am able to take a wider range of projects because of that flexibility. I am able to have a career because of how many more projects I can take because of that flexibility.

This brings us back to the first question, “How much should I budget for a composer?”. The simple answer is, whatever amount makes sense with your finances for the project. Over the last twenty years and after thousands of pieces, 75% of budgets range from \$0.00 to \$500.00, 20% are from \$500.00 to \$1,000.00 and 5% are \$1,000.00 to \$4,000.00. It would be impossible to determine my self-worth from that combination of percentages and amounts. Would it be easier to make a living as a composer if those dollar amounts were higher? Maybe, but I do think being realistic of what the budgets look like in our

community, and being adept at producing music within those ranges with flexibility and grace, is what has made a stable career.

Tracking a budget is an essential part of a successful collaboration. We will talk more about “how” this is done in the next section. As soon as the budget for a project has been discussed and established, I make a plan with the collaborator on when I’ll make the music. I try to speak about each step of the music making with the collaborator and how the budget will be used. As we make our way through the project, we both track how the budget is being used. This transparency helps keep the project running smoothly, as opposed to not discussing how the budget is being used. I am very clear about telling new collaborators that I do not go off and “use all the budget” experimenting and making whatever I want without any discussion. I want to normalize open and transparent discussions of the money and time spent on a project, again just as we do with every other part of the collaboration.

Lastly, let’s talk about when there isn’t money for a project. Most of my early collaborations were for no money at all. I knew that I wanted to be a composer, and that there would be a period of offering to work for free. During those first pieces, it was a huge opportunity for me to start learning about collaboration. I did not have anyone teaching me about the logistics of collaboration, or the artistic process of collaboration either. If anything, the voices around me said that “...an artist should not compromise their voice for any reason”. This was terrible guidance when it came to collaborating, and it took me many years to grow out of that idea. Collaborating is about learning through a process with another artist, while being secure in what I bring to the project. Folks new to collaboration can learn so much by jumping in and getting started. In this way, free projects bring a lot of value. Establish as many of the other expectations of time and needs and find a way to track those things and discuss them at every meeting. Many years later, I still find many great opportunities to collaborate with folks for free. If there is an artist I am inspired by, I will reach out to them and offer to make something for free to get a relationship started. It is a balance though, I need to make sure I am working on enough paid projects as well, and budget my time and attention so that I do not get overwhelmed.

There are some situations where I get asked to do a project that does not have a monetary budget, but there is something that the collaborator and I can barter for. I have made scores in exchange for feedback on new music, movement videos for new music, feedback on writing projects like this, marketing advice, social media help, improvised performance appearances and movement photos for album art. Bartering can help supplement when there isn’t enough money for a project request.

Music Practice

Have a discussion about budgets. Has anyone in the class ever worked with a composer? Was there a budget? If so, how much was the budget? The more we talk about the numbers, the more we can normalize budgets. If there wasn’t a budget, how did they handle the exchange of services? What surprised everyone about this conversation on budgets? How do the dancers in the class handle budgets when they get asked to choreograph a piece? How do they track their time along with the budget they are given for the choreography?