

Harmonium Testimonial
by Kevin Clark, 2002 Grand Prize Winner
Harmonium Choral Society's NJ High School Choral Composition Contest

I was just a high school student who liked music when I won the Harmonium Choral Composition Contest. Afterwards I was a composer. At the time I had peers in every branch of music except composition; I felt like I was writing in a vacuum. In performance I knew my skill level, and even though I wasn't an excellent performer, I could be confident in my competence. In composition, though, I had no idea if I could hold my own. I had no way to measure myself. The confidence I gained by winning first prize in the Harmonium contest was invaluable in getting me to where I am today.

I've graduated from Peabody Conservatory and the Johns Hopkins University in a double degree program, and now hold a BA in Philosophy and a BM in composition. I was elected to both Phi Beta Kappa and Pi Kappa Lambda. My chamber opera, *Some Ado*, was produced by the Peabody Opera, then I directed a film version with grant funding from Johns Hopkins. I've had performances in eight states, and created a composition outreach program at Peabody that has grown into a course taken for credit by students in the department. Harmonium was an invaluable springboard to all of these accomplishments.

Winning the prize is much more than simply receiving a check. As a contest winner I got professional-level experience coaching a choir on singing my music, and received professional-level advice on my composing. My time with the choir in rehearsal, hearing what Dr. Matlack had to work on with the choir, and what came easily, showed me the anatomy of my writing with extreme clarity and force. I still remember one measure that needed to have its stress moved from the downbeat to the second note, and I've never written a phrase that awkward since. A composition teacher can tell you what's awkward, hard, or problematic about your piece, but standing in a rehearsal and watching serious musicians struggle with your score is infinitely more educational, and infinitely more humbling. Because I had an experience like that under my belt when I walked into conservatory, I was able to work much faster, much better, and with much more confidence in rehearsal than would otherwise have been possible.

As a composer, everyone you meet asks you what your music sounds like, but there's no way to describe it fully in words. Playing a recording is the only way to be clear. The Harmonium prize carries with it a professional recording, and that recording carried me far. I played my prize-winning piece for composition teachers, choir directors, and fellow students. That recording is still a crucial part of the demo CD I send to competitions, graduate schools, festivals, and established composers.

The most important thing I gained from Harmonium was a deep investment in choral music. I've gone on to write a setting of the Latin Mass, translations of Homeric Hymns, Rilke poems, the famous poem Kublai Khan, W.B. Yeats, John Donne, and Psalm 137. Choirs at Peabody, in Philadelphia and New York have sung my music, and I've won awards for choral music from Singing City and The National Federation of Music Clubs. Too few young composers invest themselves in choral music, and that's tragic, especially at a time when there are choirs all around us really thirsting for good new music.

From Harmonium I learned confidence, I gained professional experience, and a lasting commitment to choral music. I hope one day to be able to repay Harmonium and the choral community with my music. Experiences like this challenge me to write better.