

The WPA Origins of the Philadelphia Free Library's "Edwin A. Fleisher Collection of Orchestra Music"

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The Great Depression of the 1930s was the culmination of a series of catastrophes for American musicians. Combined with the development of the phonograph, radio broadcasts, and the synchronized sound track on film, the need for large numbers of trained musicians diminished greatly with the economic collapse that gripped the nation for a decade.¹

National relief efforts for musicians started in 1934 with the Civil Works Administration (CWA), but that stop-gap emergency agency shut down in early 1935. Then the Works Projects Administration (WPA) was created as a longer-lasting replacement agency to put the unemployed back to work. Federal Project Number One of the WPA was developed to provide employment for people in the arts who had lost patronage due to the Depression. The Federal Music Project (FMP) created symphonic bands, symphony orchestras, ensembles, and dance bands in cities around the country, including Philadelphia. By any standard — letters, reviews, program selection, or audience growth — the performance units of the Federal Music Project in Philadelphia were successful operations. Their work was matched by the people who provided the music, the copyists.

Most major cities had WPA-funded music-copying organizations that provided FMP performing units with the scores they needed for concerts. Most copying operations served as auxiliaries to the performing groups, providing them with enough copies of musical scores so concerts could be held. A variety of duplication methods were used to create the large numbers of copies needed in different cities. Los Angeles used a blueprint copy maker and in Milwaukee copies were written directly on zinc plates with special ink.² These operations started between 1936 and 1937, when FMP performing groups realized they needed new music or they risked losing the audience due to boredom caused by repetition.

In Philadelphia, however, the copying project was vastly different. First, it was older than any of the other copying units. Officially, it began under the Local Works Division (LWD) of the CWA on November 26, 1934. Some aspects even predated public funding. Edwin A. Fleisher, a Philadelphia manufacturer, started an orchestra for boys in 1909 that was later chartered in Pennsylvania as "The Symphony Club," a philanthropic educational organization. Soon it included three youth orchestras. Fleisher decided early on that half of rehearsal time would be spent sight-reading new music. This required a constant supply of different scores so Fleisher traveled throughout

Europe purchasing music from European publishers with his own funds.³ By 1929, the collection was so large and weighed so much that the library of the Philadelphia clubhouse was in imminent danger of collapse. Fleisher was warned by the city fire marshall that the building was on the verge of being condemned.⁴ To preserve the collection it was donated to The Free Library of Philadelphia and housed in a separate room as The Edwin A. Fleisher Music Collection.

**Courtesy of The Fleisher Collection,
Free Library of Philadelphia:
Miscellaneous History folder, WPA files.**



Edwin A. Fleisher

In 1934, Arthur Cohn, a first violinist with the Civil Works Administration Local Works Division Orchestra that preceded the Philadelphia Civic Symphony of the WPA, was asked by Fleisher what he thought of the collection. "It stinks," Cohn replied. He told Fleisher that the collection lacked American music, a major shortcoming if it was to become significant. Fleisher responded that American music was not published. "That shouldn't stop you," said Cohn, who explained that arrangements could be made with composers for their scores to be loaned to an organization that would copy the music. The original would then be returned to the

composer. Fleisher invited the twenty-four-year-old Cohn to become director of the collection.⁵ The primary purpose of the Fleisher collection had been to get scores into the hands of student musicians. Under Cohn's, direction and with Fleisher's supervision it shifted to a goal of adding the score to the collection, particularly unpublished works of emerging American composers.⁶ Unlike the mechanical music copying units in other cities, where music was needed for rapid distribution to performing units, Fleisher collection copyists hand-copied every note and musical notation of the composer's original score onto 100 percent rag paper.

With the small amount of copying that was being done for Fleisher's youth orchestras, Franklin Price, Chief Librarian of The Free Library, saw an opportunity to greatly expand the importance of the Free Library. Price applied to Washington for money to copy unpublished music sent directly to the Library by composers. The first copying effort was a temporary program under the

CWA that lasted from November, 1934, until July, 1935.⁷ After the CWA ended operations Price requested that the copyists' project be continued under the WPA. Permission was granted in September, 1935, but funding was not guaranteed until December.⁸ When the government agreed to provide funding for project wages, Fleisher became the official sponsor and volunteered to pay the cost of the supplies.⁹ The principal expense would be the cost of paper scored for musical notation.

Creation of the Free Library copying project in Philadelphia provided another opportunity for musicians. Many contacted Cohn or Price for employment and most had copying experience. Some were arrangers for traveling dance bands, others were teachers who lost pupils when their parents could no longer afford private lessons during the Depression. Several applicants had copied music for companies that went out of business. At one point during the Depression students had even copied music for their teachers in exchange for lessons.¹⁰ Two copyists were also composers who heard their music played by the Civic Symphony. Luigi Carnevale, a Philadelphia native, heard many of his compositions at Civic concerts including "Capriccio Orientale," "Villanella," "Easter Festival," and "At Sunset."¹¹ Harry Adjip's suite "To Naalah" premiered in February, 1942.¹² The project demonstrated its value when Isadore Freed, a New York composer, lost the score for his "Pastorales." The Fleisher collection quickly provided the composer with a mechanical copy.¹³

The Fleisher collection was exceptional because most music collections only contained the conductor's score, which included all the parts for the individual instruments. If studying the score was the only purpose, the conductor's score was fine, but musicians needed to have the parts separated. The Fleisher Collection included separated parts because the Symphony Club and later the FMP performing units borrowed scores for their concerts. It included enough separate parts so the largest orchestra could perform a given work. For example, for a string section the copying formula was 12-11-6-6-5. Twelve copies were made for first violin stands, eleven for second violins, six for violas, six for cellos, and five for double bass violins.¹⁴ Each music stand served two instrumentalists. Thus the string section alone contained enough music for eighty musicians. This required an enormous amount of copying and the Philadelphia copying project became the largest in the country.

During the year of CWA support the program was small, with sixteen copyists who only finished twenty scores. It began to grow in 1936, the first full year under the WPA, when the group expanded to thirty-six and production jumped to 124 works, requiring 24,310 pages of hand-copied music. A year later, when the project added 147 scores to the collection, 32,575 sheets were copied.¹⁵ The greatest number of copyists worked in 1939 and produced 200 scores, but the greatest output came two years later when sixty-seven copyists added 205 works to the collection.¹⁶ Over nine years of WPA operations

Courtesy of The Fleisher Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia.
Miscellaneous History folder, WPA files.



Federal Music Project Copyists' Room, Free Library of Philadelphia. The man in the right foreground is probably Arthur Cohn, first curator of The Fleisher Collection.

1,395 orchestral scores were added to the Fleisher collection, a total of 225,957 handwritten pages.¹⁷

Many American composers were invited to send original scores to Philadelphia and most took advantage of the offer to preserve their work. Aaron Copland's "Billy the Kid" ballet score was copied for the Fleisher collection.¹⁸ Virgil Thomson's works preserved by the Philadelphia copyists included scores for "The River" and "The Plow That Broke the Plains." These were film documentaries about flood control and drought in the mid-west created for the Farm Security Administration by Pare Lorentz, a former movie critic.¹⁹ Philadelphia composers in the collection included Dr. Arthur Cohn, administrator of the copyists, Otto Mueller, who enjoyed numerous premieres with the Civic Symphony, and George F. Boyle.²⁰

After an extensive library of music from the United States and Europe was developed, Fleisher decided to expand the collection to include composers from Canada and Latin America. To pursue this, he personally commissioned Nicholas Slonimsky, a conductor and author, to travel extensively in Central

and South America, interviewing composers and borrowing their works for collection copying.²¹ This expansion of the collection began in 1941 and continued for the life of the project, which ended in 1943. Although copying Latin American music went beyond the usual emphasis on American music by the FMP, the invitation marked a cultural extension of the Good Neighbor policy that President Roosevelt and Secretary of State Cordell Hull worked on for five years. The invitation by the Philadelphia copyists was deeply appreciated throughout the Americas and was noted by Leo S. Rowe, Director General of the Pan American Union: "The assistance which has been rendered through your WPA copying project is of very real service in making the music of Latin America better known in the United States and thereby contributing to the promotion of closer cultural relations between this country and the republics of Latin America."²²

Slonimsky's visit encouraged numerous composers to send their music to Philadelphia. By February, 1942, ninety percent of the copyists' time was spent completing the Latin American works. Fifty-one musical scores had been sent by Brazilian composers, eighty-six from Argentinians, Peruvians sent fifty-three, and seventeen came from Guatemalans. Mexican composers almost flooded the storage space of the library by sending 165 compositions to add to the collection.²³ By June, 1942, over 500 Latin American works had been sent to Philadelphia and were waiting to be added to the collection, including very rare scores from the Yucatan peninsula.²⁴ In September, 1941, the project, hitherto an independent WPA operation, came under the supervision of the city's Federal Music Project.²⁵

Unfortunately, the Latin American collection contained too much music and it arrived too late in the program to be completely copied. Scores that were not copied were microfilmed or photostated and the original manuscript was returned to the composer.²⁶ The Philadelphia copyists were swamped with new material. As funding diminished it interfered with the copyists just as it caused the music units to shrink in size. By 1942, the WPA was phased out due to the financial needs of World War II. In April, Cohn frequently reported to Franklin Price that the copyists unit was losing personnel to the war effort. If more copyists were lost the scores from South and Central American could not be finished. That same month the project received notice that its work did not meet requirements in support of the war effort, and that funding would be discontinued on May 15, 1942.²⁷ Repeated contacts with Nelson Rockefeller, Coordinator of Inter-American Activities, did not secure support for an extension. Even when it was pointed out that government failure to fulfill its promise to 200 Latin American composers constituted an international breach of faith that would "undoubtedly cause dissatisfaction and complaint," Rockefeller did not respond.²⁸

A similar appeal to Florence Kerr, Assistant Commissioner of the WPA, was more successful. It secured a temporary extension for the Philadelphia copyists. Grounds for continuing the work included the ability of the project to make use of unemployed musicians as performance units closed, the employment of people over fifty who could not work in war industries, and the contribution of the work to inter-American relations. Special funding continued until the end of December, 1943.²⁹ Despite this last extension numerous scores were not copied and had to be returned to the composers.

The work of the WPA Music Copying Project created a musical collection held by The Free Library of Philadelphia that is unrivaled in the world. Philadelphia copyists had ensured that the work of composers throughout the Western Hemisphere would be available for future orchestras by emphasizing the collection of unpublished musical scores and including separate instrument copies for a large orchestra. Unpublished scores are frequently loaned to orchestras throughout the country because Arthur Cohn prevailed upon Edwin Fleisher to open the collection to use by units of the Philadelphia FMP. While the project was in operation music was loaned to symphony orchestras in Philadelphia, New York, Rochester, Boston, and Chicago.³⁰ Since then, music has been loaned to music festivals at the Jordan College of Music and Arnheim, Holland, and to many American orchestras during the Bicentennial. Works have also been borrowed by both the RCA and Vox record companies when they could not find copies of concertos for recording.³¹

The Fleisher Collection of orchestra scores is the only operation of the Philadelphia FMP to continue after the project terminated. It remains the largest single collection in the world and continues to add new works to the collection, which remains in the Free Library of Philadelphia.³² Diminished financial support and space restrictions have limited additions to the collection, but composers may contribute copies of their works.³³ Music from all periods are considered with the stipulation that they must be for orchestra, band, or a solo instrument with orchestral accompaniment. Although the public is free to visit the collection, scores do not circulate freely but are limited to loans of works that are unavailable from any commercial source, and only with the permission of the copyright owner or the composer. Also the request must come from a musical organization, which assumes full responsibility for all fees.³⁴ Frederick James Kent, retired curator of the collection, recently indicated that the scores are available for copying if they can not be obtained through music companies.

NOTES

1. William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts; The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1969), 585.
2. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 644-645.
3. "The World's Most Remarkable Collection of Orchestral Music; The Edwin A. Fleisher Music Collection in The Free Library of Philadelphia," credited to *Etude Magazine*, volume not available (April 1948?), n. p. , clipping from background information folder, WPA files, The Edwin A. Fleisher Collection, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Future citations are shortened to The Fleischer Collection.
4. Author interview with Dr. Arthur Cohn, December 11, 1992.
5. *Ibid.* An original proviso of the deed was that Fleisher retained the privilege of withdrawing from the collection any orchestration required for use by the Symphony Club for a limited period. In 1936, Cohn convinced Fleisher to expand this loan policy to Philadelphia FMP performing units, providing them with access to the large collection of scores.
6. Arthur Cohn, "Report of Music Copying Project, Philadelphia PA," March 30, 1938 and "Narrative for a Grant proposal," undated, The Edwin A Fleisher Collection.
7. Arthur Cohn to Franklin H. Price, July 17, 1939, Copying Project History File, The Fleisher Collection.
8. R. M. Truitt to F. H. Price, December 23, 1935, Miscellaneous History Folder, The Fleisher Collection.
9. Franklin H. Price to Harry Hopkins, September 11, 1935, The Fleisher Collection.
10. "Application letters from copyists wanting jobs" folder, The Fleisher Collection.
11. Luigi Carnevale application, undated, *ibid.*
12. Harry Adjip application, undated, *ibid.*
13. Pennsylvania Narrative Report for November 1941, Federal Music Project, Box 2441, RG 69, Records of the Works Progress Administration Federal Music Project, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Shortened hereafter to WPA FMP.
14. Arthur Cohn, Report of Music Copying Project, March 30, 1938, The Fleisher Collection.
15. Arthur Cohn to Mr. Price, June 24, 1938, Miscellaneous History folder, The Fleisher Collection.
16. Arthur Cohn to Franklin Price, March 25, 1942, "Personnel and General Accomplishments" report, Statistical Analysis of Coping Projects folder, The Fleisher Collection.
17. Arthur Cohn to Edwin A. Fleisher and The Free Library of Philadelphia, "PROJECT INVENTORY as of JUNE 1, 1942" [capitals in the original], Project Inventory Records folder; The Fleisher Collection. The Milwaukee unit claimed to have copied more than 2000 musical scores, but it used a mechanical copying method. See McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts*, 644.
18. Aaron Copland to Mr. Price , November 10, 1942, The Fleisher Collection.
19. Virgil Thompson to W. H. Price, June 19, 1941, *ibid.*
20. From the draft of an article written by Edwin A. Fleisher, undated, location of published article unknown, Reports of Copying Project file, The Fleisher Collection.
21. "Narrative for a Grant Proposal," undated, The Fleisher Collection.
22. L. S. Rowe to F. H. Price, May 29, 1941, "Copying Project History File," *ibid.*
23. Pennsylvania Narrative Report for February 1942, Box 2339, RG 69, Records of the WPA FMP.
24. Pennsylvania Narrative Report for June 1942, *ibid.*
25. Pennsylvania Narrative Report for September 1941, *ibid.*
26. Anonymous, "Background for grant proposal," Miscellaneous History Folder, Copy Project of Fleisher Collection, WPA Files, The Fleisher Collection.
27. Margaret C. Gordon to Franklin H. Price, April 20, 1942, Copying Project History File, The Fleisher Collection.
28. Edwin Fleisher to Nelson A. Rockefeller, May 14, 1942, "Impact of closing WPA copying project" file, *ibid.*
29. Florence Kerr to Richard Irvin, May 23, 1942, Pennsylvania Work Projects Administrator, May 23, 1942, "Copying Project History File," *ibid.* Fleisher, Price, and Cohn travelled to New York City to make their successful personal appeal to Mrs. Kerr.
30. Arthur Cohn to Mr. Price, June 24, 1938, Miscellaneous History folder, The Fleisher Collection.

31. "Narrative for Grant Proposal," undated, Miscellaneous History folder, The Fleisher Collection.

32. By 1975 the total number of scores had reached 13,000, of which approximately 300 were from Latin American composers. The disparity between this number and the 500 brought to Philadelphia during the Copyists Project is due to the inability to hand copy all the work. The scores that were not finished were microfilmed or photocopied, but have not been counted in the totals for the collection. See Harry L. Kownatsky, catalog project director, *The Edwin A. Fleisher*

Collection of Orchestrated Music in the Free Library of Philadelphia, a cumulative catalog, 1929-1977 (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1979), XI.

33. Author's conversation with Frederick James Kent, Curator, Fleisher Collection, The Free Library of Philadelphia, June 10, 1994

34. Anonymous (possibly Theodore A. Seder, who replaced Arthur Cohn as the curator in 1943), unpublished presentation to the College Music Association in Newark, Delaware, December 27, 1956, Miscellaneous History folder, WPA files, The Fleisher Collection.