



200 Years of American Music



by Joesph Roddy * July 4, 1976

Last March, 6,000 institutions dedicated to musical education and scholarship received a letter informing them that they had been chosen to receive as a gift from the Rockefeller Foundation a collection of one hundred specially produced records “tracing the social and cultural history of the United States through its music.” American music in all its idioms and from all periods would be represented — gospel, liturgical, country and western, art music both avant-garde and traditional, and musical theater in all its variety. The collection, produced at an eventual cost of almost four million dollars, is the Foundation’s bicentennial gift to the American people; it is also one of the most complex projects the RF has ever undertaken.

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At ten minutes before two on a Saturday morning a few months back, Saint Joseph's Old Cathedral at the corner of Swan and Franklin Streets in Buffalo, New York, was filled with a B Flat Major chord raised to the trump of doom power. On that all-stops-drawn fortissimo, the night's music ended. While the last reverberant traces coursed through the transepts and vaultings around him, Richard Morris rose from the bench of the hundred-year-old E. & G.G. Hook & Hastings pipe organ lie had been playing, made his way down from the choir loft and up the side aisle, and headed for the library of the rectory a few steps away.

Morris passed no parishioners in their pews at that hour. Any who might have turned up, intent on late hour devotions, would have been locked out. But even if they had found a way in, they would have been distracted from worship by the night music Morris had been playing for two hours in the dimly lighted cathedral—for a few sculptured saints, the mortal remains of the diocesan bishops buried under the stone floor, and four condenser microphones.

The electronic listeners had been rigged in place for an on-location recording session by New World Records, a non-profit corporation that owed its recent birth to the Rockefeller Foundation. With the RF funding that sustains it, plus the energies of its small staff, the young company is busily producing a set of one hundred records, epitomizing the social and cultural history of the country through the ranging variety of its music.

Morris, a 33-year-old former Jesuit, had been engaged by New World to record organ pieces by five 19th century American composers. Because a desire for historical realism prudently applied characterizes much of the company's work, the recording had to be made in

Buffalo, where the Hook & Hastings in the cathedral was perhaps the finest surviving example in the country of pipe organs the composers themselves had heard. At about midnight that night, the "Fantasie fiber 'Ein' feste Burg" by John Knowles Paine had poured from the pipe organ. Though the work's name is singularly un-Yankee, and its denominational origins less-than-ideal for a Roman Catholic cathedral, it was the most liturgical American work Morris played there.

Before turning to the work by Paine, who had lived most of the time in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the organist had played "Variations on the Russian National Hymn" by the Bostonian W. Eugene Thayer (1838-1889). And a full two hours after those evocations of Martin Luther and the Romanoff dynasty had passed through Old Saint Joseph's, the organist finished up his night's work with "Variations on the Star Spangled Banner," by Dudley Buck from Hartford, Connecticut. It was the worked-over national anthem's last massive B Flat that had shaken the sturdiest marble pillars in Buffalo a few hours before dawn.

Thunder and Silence

When he came into the rectory library where two sound technicians were tending their tape decks and playback speakers, Morris complained that the pedal passages in Thayer's "Variations" had given him a charley horse. That produced sympathy laced with complete doubt from Andrew Raeburn, a King's College, Cambridge, man and one-time assistant at the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who is now the director of artists and repertory for New World Records in New York. Radium claimed to know where soothing highballs and good Chinese food could be found for Morris, even at that hour. But before he could show the way, Raeburn had his crew finish up a few last minutes of recording he needed. With the cathedral

even emptier than before, and also dark, Radium had the microphones opened again to tape the sound of its silence. That would be used on the finished record, he explained, to fill the pauses between Thayer's "Variations" and a Horatio Parker "Fugue," and after it the Paine "Fantasie" and the record's final band, a "Postlude" by George Ethridge Whiting of Boston. The other side of the record, the entire side, was to be filled with the "Grand Sonata in E Flat" by Dudley Buck.

And what of Buck's national anthem variations with the big ending, I asked? That would be stored away, Raeburn answered, for later use. New World Records has plans that go far beyond its hundred-record anthology.

So Little is Known

Raeburn had spelled out those long-term plans, and some far more pressing immediate ones, when we'd met for the first time in his office just off Fifth Avenue in midtown New York. "So little is known of American music," he had said, and the edge of his dissatisfaction seemed sharpened nicely by his accent, which is irremediably British. Raeburn thinks the ignorance is about to pass: he expects to have made American music far better known by the time he is finished with the anthology. The headiest of art music and the plainest of folk music will be included, as well as assortments of religious hymns, jazz in all its mutations, popular songs from the Revolutionary War to the present, Broadway theater scores, dance hall favorites, and tribal chants.

Choosing the material is not Raeburn's job. A fourteen-member editorial committee retained by New World is charged, first to decide on the music the anthology must contain and after that to recommend either that the work be recorded by New World (because no suitable recorded performance is available on any other record company

label) or to recommend that New World negotiate for the rights to a suitable recording of the work which another company has retired to its archives. Raeburn expects that about half the records will be drawn from the archives of other labels, and the other half will be recordings made by the best performers available to New World Records.

Entertainment?

In sets of ten records, ten times between now and the fall of 1978, the anthology will be sent free of charge to all the country's major music schools, music libraries, educational FM and public broadcasting stations, and to USIS centers throughout the world. The 'recipients have been chosen because they will provide the widest possible access to those for whom the records will be significantly useful.

Raeburn went on to explain that no one around New York was opposed to the further marketing of the set, or sections of it, through the big book and record clubs, and that sales at regular record stores are foreseeable too. But the young company has not moved decisively in that direction yet. "Each forty or fifty minute record is a coherent entertainment," Raeburn said and then stopped to look slightly apprehensive about producing 'entertainments.' "But if the set is educational by definition, 90 percent of the people who should be listening closely to it will want to avoid it. So this is not going to be your Basic History of American Music."

The Case of Aaron Copland

He took a moment's pause for thought before pitching ahead into what he knew was going to be a knotty account of complications. "It's an odd paradox," he said, "but in this set of one hundred records we must present the best of American music through music that is less well known. Otherwise we will be

duplicating the records that have made at least some American music very well known. It's slightly cockeyed to be doing it the way we're doing it, but to do it any other way would be to contribute nothing."

Raeburn then undertook to illustrate the problem the anthology faces by citing the case of Aaron Copland, who is by all accounts the best known living American composer, and its most recorded one. This month Copland has over two columns of listings in the record buyers' bible, the Schwann catalog. His "Appalachian Spring," "Rodeo," and "Billy the Kid" ballet scores are better known than about half the Beethoven symphonies, and are about as central to any collection of American music as the novels of Ernest Hemingway are to the nation's literature. But each of the three Copland works is available to record buyers in from five to ten different recordings, with at least one of each conducted by the composer. None of the three will be in the anthology, Raeburn said, simply because any home or library record collection is more than likely to have all of them. Raeburn fully agreed with the editorial committee's decision that the New World set should not duplicate the accessible, much less, as in the Copland case, the abundant.

Then will there be no Copland in the set, I asked? Raeburn assured me that the composer would be represented with three important works, in recordings made years back, that now have both historical and musical significance. The Copland representation will be entirely archival, as will about half the music in the entire hundred record set.

The First Set

Richard Morris's pipe-organ performances will fill both sides of a disc that New World has titled *Fugues, Fantasia, and Variations*. It is one of

the ten records in the first set that has already been sent out. The other nine records are *The Birth of Liberty* which includes, among other Revolutionary War music, sets of lyrics sung by the Metropolitan Opera Company baritone Sherrill Milnes and the New York City Opera mezzo-soprano Olivia Stapp; *The Pride of America*, filled with seventeen marches played the Goldman Band; a record entitled, simply, *Charles Tomlinson Griffes*, which includes performances the Boston Symphony Orchestra and its chamber group in instrumental works, as well as Phyllis Brj Julson and Sherrill Milnes in songs by the country best known turn-of-the-century composer; *Maple Leaf Rag*, which includes “Mineola Rag,” “Arizona Stomp,” “Little Rock Getaway,” “Japanese Breakdown” and “Dill Pickles” played by the long-gone likes of the Light Crust Doughboys, the Swift Jewel Cowboys, and Oscar & Doc Harper; *Shuffle Along*, which is an off-stage recording by members of that musical’s original cast, including Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake; *Bebop*, which provides at least a dozen examples of the cool detours mainline jazz took from its ordinary route in the late 1940’s; *Sound Forms for Piano*, which is a demonstration of musical forms that strike the ear uncertainly because four reputable composers wrote for pianos whose strings they had first tinkered with in odd and varied ways; *Songs of Earth, Water, Fire and Sky*, American Indian music taped on tribal reservations in New York, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona and California; and *When I Have Sung My Songs*, which is—with one exception—an assemblage of familiar ones popularized after the turn of this century in performances by Alma Gluck, Johanna Gadschi, Emma Eames, Emilio de Garza, John McCormack, David Bispham, Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Mary Garden, Eleanor Steber, Rose Bampton, Povla Frijs, and Kirsten Flagstad. The one unfamiliar song,

“General William Booth Enters Into Heaven,” the composer Charles Ives’s setting of the Vachel Lindsay poem, is sung by Radiana Pazmor.

Real or Good?

The performance of the Ives song by a relatively unknown soprano with many known peers and even more superiors illustrates a problem that New World Records has come up against without ever solving in a way that satisfies every member of its editorial committee. Dramatically, the performance by Pazmor is certainly forceful. But on a record with Gluck, Flagstad, Eames and Anderson, a vocally more distinguished performer for the Ives may have been warranted. The question, one of degree, edged over into the substantial one of historical authenticity in the case of the singing done by Manes for *The Birth of Liberty* album. In his liner notes for the record, Richard Crawford, a professor of music at the University of Michigan and a member of the New World Records editorial committee writes, “No attempt has been made to recapture the untutored roughness with which much of this music was surely performed in its time. Rather, the goal has been to record polished performances by skilled modern American singers and players.”

That was New World’s goal finally but not, at first, Crawford’s. In editorial meetings, Crawford was one of the historical hard-liners, contending that the untutored roughness of the performances around Concord and Bunker Hill in the late 18th century should be reflected in New World’s anthologized recordings. In his view ‘Willies’s voice was far too tutored and smooth for the street songs; he would have preferred a folk singer, ideally an altogether uncelebrated one. The hard-liners also opposed the casting of Mikes because the opera singer was ‘theatrical,’ a pejorative when Crawford brandished it. “And theatrical is what

that music is not,” Crawford insisted to Raeburn when the artist-and-repertory director insisted on having Milnes, or someone else just as qualified, do the singing. After the record was made as Raeburn wanted it, the casting was lamented less than it had been resisted earlier, but Crawford and his supporters never agreed that the choice had been exactly right.

Now Hear This

An honest dispute as to whether historical realism or artistic validity should be normative bid fair to continue endlessly, until the company’s energetic president, Herman Krawitz, joined in it. Krawitz is a man born with the belief that all disputes resolve themselves as soon as the disputants have the wit to see the wisdom of his view. In the argument with the realists Krawitz entered with the claim that good casting can indeed be unfair to the past, an insight that may have sustained him through all the years he was assistant manager of the Metropolitan Opera. Then, to counter his critics’ history-based complaints with a little history of his own, Krawitz pointed out that before Sherrill Milnes became theatrical, tutored, and smooth, he had lacked all those qualities. Milnes too had been a kind of Madison Avenue street singer, making beer, cigarette, and breakfast food commercials long before he was signed on at the Met to sing Verdi, and later Mozart. His marketing experience, Krawitz indicated, made it unlikely that the baritone would leap into the mocking “American Vicar of Bray” ballad as if it were “Fin ch’ban’ dal vino” from Don Giovanni. And even beyond that, Krawitz noted, the Rockefeller Foundation’s trustees had made it clear to him that they hoped to find the anthology filled with performances by the most illustrious names in the ranks of American performing artists.

“The real question,” Crawford told Krawitz, “is, how can you make the best use of our expertise?” Krawitz

had a long, energetic, and flattering answer whose central point seemed to be that Crawford was asking the wrong question. To Krawitz the right question to be asked at every turn was simply, “How can the records be made better?” Both Crawford and Krawitz await the verdict of the listeners, who may now be making their judgments about the entire hundred record set on the basis of the first ten.

Birth Pangs

Neither of the friendly disputants was present when the concept of a recording project was born, with the arrival in 1965 of Norman Lloyd, Dean of the Oberlin Conservatory as director of the arts program of the Rockefeller Foundation. Lloyd had been a dance hand pianist and a composition pupil of Aaron Copland’s before he wrote ballet scores for Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and Jose Liman. Later he became educational director of the Juilliard School of Music. Along the way, what went on in the hearts and minds of American composers began to strike a responsive chord in his. Early in his stay at the Foundation he had provided a grant in aid enabling the critic and recording expert Gene Bruck to talk with, or poll, close to 700 composers in the United States. Bruck came upon only two who felt that their music was adequately represented on records.

When I talked with Lloyd at his small apartment across from Lincoln Center he told me what Bruck’s work had confirmed for him. “The most important thing to an American composer today,” Lloyd said, “is not the publication of a new score, or even its performance. What’s most important is an available recording of it in good supply at the stores. Then people who want to hear the music can easily buy a record of it.

“People like Elliott Carter and William Schuman have had many things recorded,” he pointed out, “but, like books, if they don’t sell in the first

six months they are deleted from the catalog and anyone trying to buy them now finds most of them unavailable. Once the original small pressings have been sold out, that is the end of them. Few libraries have bought records because librarians still tend to think libraries are only for books and they find records or tapes pretty hard to handle. So over the years librarians have concentrated on hooks and now they have the collected works of all the most important American writers, even writers of the 20’s. But that would not be true for even the most outstanding American composers. You just can’t find the works of Louis Gruenberg or John Alden Carpenter who were important American composers in the 20’s. Or, finding them would be very difficult.” (Each, it turned out, is listed in the latest Schwann catalog with one work, but on a record each shares with two other American composers.)

“Shortly after I went to the Foundation,” Lloyd went on, “I began thinking of what could be done for that problem in music. I wanted to find a way to make recordings of American music accessible to people and I found myself using the analogy of scholarly paperback books. They were available, first just a few, then by the thousands. As I came to see it, people did not know what they were missing in American music because they didn’t have any access to it. I thought of all the marvelous performances of things I’d heard that only a few hundred people had heard with me. They should have been recorded then. They weren’t. They are lost. Or they exist only in the memories of those few hundred people. I guess this project started that way.”

Lieberson’s Law

As he began systematically to look into recording possibilities, Lloyd’s name came to be spoken only with the deepest reverence. American composers, just about all of them, had been enjoying

the expectation that because of him the Rockefeller Foundation would set out to revoke the Goddard Lieberson Law. Its formulator, the urbane head of Columbia Records, was himself a composer with one work listed in the Schwann—a non-Columbia record shared with three other American composers. Lieberson's Law, an iron one, holds that to be recorded an American composer must first be recognized, but to be recognized an American composer must first be recorded. But the high expectations of unknown composers that their recognition was approaching were somewhat diminished after the Foundation enlisted the composer William Schuman and the music commentator Robert Sherman to draw up a plan. Their recommendations, which favored composers with long and distinguished careers, might have led to the creation of Lieberson's Law if it had not already been thought of.

Shortly before the proposal aimed at narrowing the project's focus reached its readers at the Rockefeller Foundation, Norman Lloyd retired from the RF for health reasons. He was succeeded by Howard Klein, a former recordings editor of *The New York Times* who had been brought to the Foundation by Lloyd to press ahead with the recording project. Klein abandoned the concept of recording contemporary art music and proposed a concentration on the full historical scope of American music in all its forms, from Revolutionary War ballads to rock concerts; a concept that fitted in nicely with the country's bicentennial concerns.

The shift in scope has not troubled Norman Lloyd. "It was in the 60's that Americans were beginning to understand that they were confused about themselves," Lloyd recalled. "I have this feeling—maybe it is slightly metaphysical—that we are crying out for knowledge of ourselves and of our background. For maybe ten years we

have been self-searching in a way we never did before. This self-searching is about everything. We will never get to know where we are unless we can get to see where we have been. And we have got to see where we have been in our music too. That's why I think the purpose the recording project has now is more important than its original one."

Re-enter New American Works

Herman Krawitz thinks the purpose has hardly changed. "Let me explain how this is still the best thing happening for American composers. Long before we finally put out the last ten records of the anthology, maybe even before we send out the third set, or the fourth, but long before we have finished with the entire set of a hundred, we are going to be putting out our one-hundred-first record, and maybe even our one-hundred-tenth if we're lucky. They will be records of contemporary music that no other large company in the country can afford to touch. We are going to use all new revenue from fundraising and any excess from sales of the anthologies just to finance recordings of new American works, or of taped performances in various archives, that might never get heard, or never heard again, unless this company does its job. We're here to record works other companies won't handle. They look for a market return. We look only for an artistic return. This is a non-profit corporation, don't forget. But don't forget either that it will constantly be in need of donations to further its purposes."

From Chicago to Boston ...

Only months after its start, New World was having a bracing effect on the music community around it. In Chicago, the setting for soloists, chorus, and symphony orchestra of Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," by the

80-year-old composer Roger Sessions, had its recent U.S. premiere conducted by George Solti. Its importance derived from its composer's eminence, which is a close match in the United States for Aaron Copland's and Elliott Carter's. But because few recordings of art music recover their production costs in commercial sales (and the costs would be exceptionally high for the Sessions work because of the huge forces needed to perform it) no commercial company undertook to make the recording—and this of a work that deserves permanence on discs as much as any serious work of William Faulkner's deserves permanence in type.

The lapse seemed to be exactly the sort New World was established to fill, and Krawitz and the management of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra met to see if they could come to an agreement. The obstacles turned out to be the crowded schedule of the conductor and, when the conductor was available, the unavailability of the hall in Chicago in which the orchestra plays when it makes recordings. The four performances of the Sessions work in Chicago's Orchestra hail might well have been the last in the country for awhile if New World had not persisted in its resolve.

Once they lost in Chicago, Krawitz and Raeburn proposed to the musical director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Seiji Ozawa, that if he found a place for the Sessions work in his programs for the following season, New World would find a way to record it. Their proposal was accepted. After the work has had another five performances by the Boston Symphony next season, a recording of it will be made by New World. And the new Sessions work will find its place in the anthology.

And On To Santa Fe

The commercial record companies have always been successful at urging U.S. orchestras and performers to find

places in their programs for works the companies thought they could sell: in fact they have tended to look upon live performances mainly as rehearsals for recording sessions. That practice has been a necessary part of their effort to turn a profit with art music, but at no time has it been a business practice that sharply encouraged the programming of new music by American composers.

From now on composers may be far better served by the effect the new non-profit record company will have on concert programs. Late this summer Virgil Thomson's opera "The Mother of Us All," with a libretto by Gertrude Stein, will be produced by the Santa Fe Opera Company and recorded by New World.

Each organization can see itself improving the product of the other. The opera company had scheduled the production before New World became interested in recording it. But New World's offer of a recording contract turned on the casting of the opera's main roles. At New World the primary concern was the quality of the voices. At Santa Fe the opera's producers went beyond their interest in the voices to the appearance of the singers. When the needs of both groups were satisfied, the contracts were signed. As a result, a record company in New York will cause an opera production in Santa Fe to be musically improved for local audiences, then preserved to be heard far beyond the theater in which it is being produced.

Search and Record

Chamber music programs will be affected by New World Records too. The programs that string quartets perform are never beyond change until the players come onstage with the scores in their hands, but in the months ahead the Guarneri Quartet will probably add to its almost entirely European repertoire a piece by the American composer

Arthur Whiting. Performances of the work will be rehearsals for the recording that New World wishes to make of it. Why? Simply because New World's editorial committee regards the unpublished quartet as a very strong one, undeservedly overlooked by chamber groups.

The record company may also assemble an ad hoc quartet comprised of a violinist, a violist, and two flute players to perform the Quartet Romantic and the Quartet Euphometrie by the American composer Henry Cowell. And it is casting about for solo and support forces to perform an extremely difficult piano concerto by Donald Martino. It is looking for the college or conservatory with a large chorus, skilled enough to give a professional-level performance of Salvatore Martirano's "Mass," first heard at Urbana, Illinois, in 1950. New World's researchers have scoured the archives of music publishing companies—so far, without success—in search of the pit orchestra score for Gershwin's Broadway show, "Let 'Em Eat Cake," the sequel to "Of Thee I Sing." If further searches are no more fruitful, the directors of the record company will have to find the orchestrator they feel can duplicate the job Gershwin commissioned in 1933. They are set on recording the show, but they want their Gershwin to be played as Gershwin heard it. It is, after all, another of the works any historian years from now will find helpful in tracing the country's music through its culture, or its culture through its music.

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