

Higher Education, Private Philanthropy, and Music Patronage in the Mid-Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This report offers evidence of key actors' strategies to forge a new union between new music and higher education as means to solve the economic instability of performing arts organizations and artists in the mid-twentieth century. Their rationale and resulting programming established American higher education institutions as the main site of creative music-making. Additionally, their decisions implicated the style and genre of music in higher education. Specifically, Rockefeller Foundation trustees emphasized the importance of continuing high arts cultural patronage in the style of European aristocrats in the sixteenth through early nineteenth centuries; and officers of the Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation advocated for improving the quality of, and access to, music education of the same repertoire. Their impacts cemented higher education music departments and schools of music as sites of elite, white culture into the twenty-first century.

Institutions of higher education in the United States wear many hats. In addition to their traditional roles of teaching and research, they serve as “the engines of culture” amidst unpredictable financial support for the performing arts outside the academy.¹ Specifically, higher educational institutions are modern music patrons, whether directly as employers, producers, and presenters of musicians and music performances, or indirectly as service organizations providing educational programs.

One way of understanding the magnitude of these engines is to recognize the growth of tertiary music education throughout the twentieth century. In the 2017-18 academic year, there were more than 600 accredited tertiary schools granting degree and non-degree programs in music, with more than 103,000 enrolled music majors, 10,700 music faculty members – including both full and part-time, and 630 administrative staff members working in these programs.² While these specific numbers are not available for years prior to 1989, the same accrediting body reported total membership of 149 institutions in 1946; 290 institutional members in 1963-64; 521 members in 1983-84; and 616 in 2017-18. The greatest increase in membership during these approximate 20-year periods took place between the 1960s and the 1980s.³

In light of this phenomenal expansion of higher education music programs, this report offers a set of historical evidence linking philanthropic foundations to the solidification/development of Western classical repertoire as the dominant musical style. I focus on a series of assessments by Rockefeller Foundation officers, trustees, and consultants from the 1950s through the first half of the 1960s leading to a greater reliance on higher education institutions for music funding as their evaluation of financial stability for performing arts organizations became increasingly less promising. I draw attention to two main sets of actors and their actions. First, the compelling arguments of Ford Foundation’s W. McNeil Lowry that motivated other stakeholders to expand the role of higher education in the performing arts. And second, Rockefeller Foundation board’s interest to designate new music of the Western classical tradition as the continuing legacy of music history in higher education. These

key decisions forged a long-term union between higher education and Western classical music-making as instigated by private philanthropic foundations.

Economic Risks: Post-Louisville Assessments

In this part, I summarize analyses and recommendations by Rockefeller Foundation officers and consultants resulting from one of the largest music programs of the 1950s, the Louisville project. I highlight conflicting assessments regarding the financial stability of performing arts organizations, which led to an unclear and incoherent vision of contemporary music programming at the end of the 1950s.

Launched in 1953, the Louisville Philharmonic Society received a sum of \$400K over four years to commission symphonic works, as well as to perform and record them (the grant was extended for another year, with an additional sum of \$100K). This was the first major post-World War II grant in the field of music pursued and realized by the Rockefeller Foundation. In the first four years, there were 79 works commissioned, including Norman Dello Joio's *The Triumph of Saint Joan*, Elliott Carter's *Variations for Orchestra*, and William Schuman's *Judith*, to name a few.

Today, in retrospect, the project can be viewed as a success in many ways, for the compositions commissioned, performed, and recorded; for the community-building and bounding experiences in Louisville (retold with zeal and nostalgia in Owsley Brown and Jerome Hiler's *Making Music Modern* documentary); and for its attention drawn to a non-major metropolis. And yet, for all its glory, this project was not repeated or recreated in another town with another symphony orchestra by the Rockefeller Foundation.

In 1955, the officers began to evaluate the various impacts of the Louisville project. They sought advice from performing arts administrators (consultants), whose primary concern, combined with the concern of the officers, can be summarized as the following, found in the February 1956 report written by the

leading officer for music programming, John Marshall: “performance of contemporary work reduces the audience and increases the deficit.”⁴ The other key conclusion made by Marshall and the consultants was that most performing arts organizations failed to offer financial security (an annual salaried income) for its musicians.

Regardless of these conclusions, the Rockefeller Foundation continued to fund performances and recordings of contemporary music in 1956 and 1957 outside from the Louisville project, though in a smaller magnitude.

In 1958, there was a glimpse of false economic hope for performing arts organizations as data of performing arts organizations regarding audience attendance, box office sales, recording sales, and programming on the radio made their way to the foundation. What the new numbers showed, for Marshall, was that there was “no dearth in interest” and “no dearth of talent” because in the immediate decade following World War II, the numbers of the aforementioned activities did go up. Marshall, this time, concluded, “The financial deficits of orchestras, opera companies, and other performing groups, are not the most serious. That they are invariably met in one way or another, and that the organizations survive as institutions, is in fact evidence of the loyal public support which music can evoke.” But this optimistic view was quickly overturned by the fall of 1961.

In 1961, the new leading Rockefeller Foundation officer for music programming, Robert W. July, re-evaluated and predicted more accurately the following:

1. “[T]here is the continuing indication that ascending national interest in music has not been matched by our willingness to pay for it, at least through the commercial box office channel.”
2. “Most of the thousand-odd orchestras offer only part-time employment, individual musicians' incomes are depressed, [...] and the annual deficit continues as the uniform characteristic of virtually all performing groups.”

These reports indicate that the 1950s was a period of experimental programming and data gathering. The period witnessed the fruits of the Louisville project, and a mixture of promising and alarming data on the economic stability of performing arts institutions. The uncertainties of financial stability would continue to plague the officers' decision-making.

Dwarfed by Comparison

In this section, I focus on a pivotal factor that influenced the funding objectives of the Rockefeller Foundation in the 1960s, that of a new player in foundation philanthropy, the Ford Foundation.

In 1957, the Ford Foundation began a series of projects funding composers to write music for choruses, bands, orchestras, and other performing groups in public schools. The Young Composer Project was one such project lasting from 1959 to 1962. In 1963, the Ford Foundation organized an even larger initiative called the Contemporary Music Project for Creativity in Music Education, which would also include seminars and workshops on contemporary music programs in schools (\$1.38 million). Throughout the 1960s, the Ford Foundation poured more money into the performing arts than any other private or public agency. One chart found in the Rockefeller Foundation report showed that between the years 1965 and 1971, the Ford Foundation spent \$109+ million in performing arts grants while the Rockefeller Foundation spent \$14+ million, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund \$3+million, and the Mellon Foundation \$2+ million. Clearly by a very long shot, the Ford Foundation eclipsed all other private philanthropic efforts.

Concurrently, from the late 1950s through the 1960s, the United States federal and state governments also began to flex their muscles in arts funding, as did major corporations.⁵ In light of the Ford Foundation's herculean efforts along with other emerging patrons, the Rockefeller Foundation officers, once again, re-assessed their objectives in music programming.

Between 1961 and 1962, a series of inter-office memos began to circulate among the officers pertaining to how Rockefeller Foundation's music programming ought to continue forward. It was clear that several officers believed the Rockefeller Foundation should either forgo further efforts to assist performing arts program, or to change their strategies entirely. One of the more prominent voices was Robert W. July. July argued that, in the face of growing interests from other philanthropic foundations, the Rockefeller Foundation should focus on "local arts council movement" because previously funded organizations (e.g. opera house, symphony orchestras, chamber music groups, amateur and otherwise) are already receiving financial assistance from other foundations, and he does not see any interesting developments. July's assessment of Rockefeller Foundation's contribution thus far was that the projects supported "certainly have had no major effect on the chronic problem of operatic and orchestral deficits," moreover, "there appears to be growing sentiment among musical organizations that some form of federal, state, or municipal subsidy is the only sensible solution." The tone of July's conclusions indicated not so much a dejected view of music patronage with the more traditional performing arts ensembles and institutions, but one of frustration with the lack of a winning economic model to employ.

Instead, July wanted to support local arts council movements. He envisioned funding to promote community performing arts organizations, and their programming of music, to, what he called "the encouragement of the arts in America" through "tailor-made solution" that is unique to each local situation. July's proposal would be second to that of another officer's, thereby rendering his voice mute.

Playing Musical Shadchan

In this part, I focus on the influential role of W. McNeil Lowry on foundation giving.

Despite, or perhaps in view of, the competitive nature of philanthropic funding, the Rockefeller Foundation officers championed a key analysis of performing arts on campus by a head Ford Foundation officer. In 1962, W. McNeil Lowry, the head of the arts and humanities division at Ford Foundation famously gave a speech (which was later published) on the growing trend of performing artists as instructors, and students in pursuit of performing arts careers, on university campuses instead of the traditional conservatories and independent art schools. This program, later titled “The Campus and the Composer,” was an initiative that the Rockefeller Foundation officers had not originally explored as a sustainable and repeatable program during the 1950s.

Though exceeded in dollars by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation listened, and its officers learned from their chief rival, W. McNeil Lowry (director, then vice president, of arts and humanities). One of the most note-worthy speeches, later published essay in *Educational Theatre Journal*, by Lowry was his 1962 “The University and the Creative Arts.” The focus of the speech addressed how performing arts studies (practical, non-theoretical) can be improved in the university.

Lowry presented a brief and informative history of performing arts education as one that had expanded from private institutions and independent professional schools to state-supported universities with lower tuitions. Lowry cited the growth of the arts departments, from employing professional teachers to adding professional artists: “first as an ‘artist in residence’ and then as a regular member of the faculty.” The consequence was that professional standards had been sacrificed. Sacrificed, because the principles of the university were mixed with those of the conservatory; from the perspective of the musicologist, this is what Paul Henry Lang termed as “pseudo-scholarship”; and from the perspective of the professional artist, the quality of performances suffered. Additionally, Lowry accurately predicted that “the trend is irreversible,” therefore, he proposed that the situation be rectified through what he called a “distortion”: to “distort” the university’s curriculum so to solicit “students with the most fanatical drives” and “to give to the artist-professor responsibility for testing both the drives and the talents.” The best way to create

this distortion was to encourage “cooperation between university and professional institutions in the arts, provided the university will regard the arts as important and give financial support to the cooperative mechanisms that must be established.” The key ingredient here was “financial support” from the university, which Lowry reiterated in the same speech/essay “the fact is that so far as artistic training is concerned the universities have the money.”

It is with this speech/essay that I assert the Rockefeller Foundation found a fresh focus for new music programming. By spring 1963, the Rockefeller Foundation had redirected contemporary music programs to be higher education bound. The voices within the Rockefeller Foundation were unanimous; each and all believed that the universities were well-funded, filled with vibrant artists and their creations, and the permanent future homes for artists and locus for music-making and sharing.

There was an astounding number of supporters from within the Rockefeller Foundation. The main proponent was Chadbourne Gilpatric, then associate director for the humanities and social sciences. In his 1963 keynote speech “The Arts in the 20th Century Community,” Gilpatric marked “The urban-based public university as a home for quality professional work in the arts.” He cited the “annual income” and “operating expenditures” of Harvard University and the University of California system as extremely wealthy resources. Gilpatric also advocated for universities to employ artists in faculty positions, and to provide “conditions conducive for creative work” in all art fields. Lastly, Gilpatric emphasized how colleges and universities serve as a connection between the general public and academic community.⁶

Redefining Culture

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, the assessments of Rockefeller Foundation officers and trustees about the financial stability of performing arts institution with respect to new music programming leaned increasingly towards a less risky and more conservative concept of contemporary music

philanthropy. By 1963, the trustees articulated to the officers that the Rockefeller Foundation should be patrons of “important cultural achievements,” just as the “the history of Renaissance art testifies to the need of this practice.” In the same memo, the trustees emphasized “creativity” rather than performance or criticism. Specifically, “creativity” as defined by new works that would contribute to the Western classical canon as opposed to assisting performing arts institutions with their year-to-year financial difficulties.

In the same year, 1963, Kenneth W. Thompson, Rockefeller Foundation vice president, firmly stated (in opposition to July’s arts council proposal) that “it is all the more imperative that our arts program here be concerned primarily with creative work of unusual value, and with the conditions which nurture it.” He declared that the Rockefeller Foundation “simply cannot be primarily concerned with the utility or quantitative effect of creative art.” He continued, “Our resources in money and staff are too limited to permit us to influence the structuring of the field of musical performance, even on an exploratory or ‘model’ basis.”

Thompson echoed the trustees’ fascination with works of cultural value, of cultural achievements—objects that will eventually be recognized alongside Haydn string quartets and Beethoven symphonies, rather than with the quotidian dilemma of which institution and how an institution presents these works. Because the higher education institutions would be the new presenter of contemporary music, they would bear the burden of management strategies. One of the most significant impacts of these discussions was the founding of the program named “Composers and the Campus,” which accounted for more than two million dollars from the Rockefeller Foundation to seven liberal arts colleges and universities for the establishment of new music centers.

Conclusions

This report offers evidence of key actors' strategies to forge a new union between new music and higher education as means to solve the economic instability of performing artists and organizations. Their rationale and resulting programming established American higher education institutions as the main site of creative music-making. Additionally, their decisions implicated the style and genre of music in higher education. Rockefeller Foundation trustees emphasized the importance of continuing high arts cultural patronage like that of the European aristocrats in the sixteenth through early nineteenth centuries; and officers of the Rockefeller Foundation and Ford Foundation advocated for improving the quality of, and access to, music education of the same repertoire. Consequently, music scholarship and curriculum of the Western classical tradition has dominated over non-Western ones in higher education institutions since the 1960s.

Today, these key players' biases still loom large in music departments across the country. Many music theory textbooks of the past decades were written by white, male composers employed by universities. Their methodologies laid the groundwork for one part of the "core" curriculum in undergraduate curricula. Alongside theorists and composers, musicologists whose research focus on European high arts culture dominate the other part of the "core" curriculum. It is possible to receive an undergraduate and graduate degree in music without learning anything else but Western high arts culture.

If we are moving towards a more antiracist society and space of learning, then I wonder not only how we can diversify the core curriculum, but also how we can practice an equitable philanthropic culture to support an inclusive music making environment in the twenty-first century.

¹ The phrase “engines of culture” comes from Lawrence Biemiller, “Arts Patrons for the 21st Century,” *Chronicles of Higher Education*, May 6, 2013, accessed online May 11, 2013. Biemiller characterizes the academy as *the* institution of arts patronage. He quotes the dean of Western Michigan’s College of Fine Arts, Margaret Merrion, with the following statement: “Higher education is going to be the new Medici, nurturing new work and being the repository of what’s already created.”

² “Music: Data Summaries, 2017-2018,” *Higher Education Arts Data Services*, Reston, VA, 2018.

³ “Historical Perspective: The National Association of Schools of Music, 1924-1999,” National Association of Schools of Music, Reston, VA, 1999.

⁴ Letters from consultants and inter-office memos regarding meetings with consultants between August 1955 and January 1956. The names include Eugene Ormandy of the Philadelphia Orchestra; Oliver Daniels of Associated Music Publishers; Thor Johnson of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; Robert Ward of Juilliard; and Alfred Wallenstein of the Los Angeles Orchestra.

⁵ In John Marshall’s April 1958 report “Adventuring in the Arts: Music,” there is acknowledgement that the State Department is supporting ANTA (American National Theatre and Academy) symphony orchestras, ballet companies, jazz bands, and dramatic groups abroad. Additionally, there is acknowledgement of state legislature’s funding activities, such as North Carolina’s new state museum.

⁶ “The Arts in the 20th Century Community,” keynote speech for the conference on The Community and the Arts, to explore ideas for the development of the arts in Missouri, held at the University of Missouri, November 17 and 18, 1963. Rockefeller Foundation Records, RG 3.2, Series 925, Box 1, Folder 2, Rockefeller Archive Center.