



MUSICAL AMERICA

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by Sedgwick Clark

The Louisville Orchestra Story

Imagine this impossible dream. A small semi-professional Midwestern orchestra struggles to make ends meet in a stressful economic climate similar to ours right now. The town mayor is a booster of the arts and suggests that the orchestra needs a unique approach: Instead of challenging the big-city star ensembles in the warhorses and paying big fees to star soloists, this 50-member band will make its renown by commissioning new works and then recording them.

The orchestra was the Louisville Orchestra, its conductor was its founder, Robert Whitney, and the prescient mayor was Charles Farnsley. In 1953, with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation grant—its first to an arts organization—the orchestra was able to commission 46 compositions a year for three years. A further Rockefeller grant, in 1956, enabled the orchestra to commission more works for premiere performances and to begin recording them for its own First Edition label, selling the records by subscription. Among the composers were Hindemith, Honegger, Milhaud, Villa-Lobos, Copland, Thomson, Schuman, Harris, Piston, Cowell, Foss, Shapero, Schuller, Rorem, Bolcom, and Carter.

The records were sold throughout the world and broadcast by Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, disseminating the works of American composers far more than ever before. In 1959, a delegation of Soviet composers, including Shostakovich, Kabalevsky, and Khrennikov, insisted on visiting Louisville to see what this community had accomplished in the name of music.

Louisville's inspiring story is told in an equally inspiring documentary film entitled *Music Makes a City: A Louisville Orchestra Story*, which has its premiere in Louisville tomorrow, May 20. It was screened in New York last Thursday with the directors Owsley Brown III and Jerome Hiler present to talk about the six years it took to make the film. A DVD release is projected, but first the filmmakers hope to enter the documentary in film festivals. It also would seem a natural for PBS. Anyone interested in classical music should see this uplifting story of American ingenuity at its best.