



Jerome Hiler | City's post-war spirit made beautiful music

BY JEROME HILER • SPECIAL TO THE COURIER-JOURNAL • MAY 20, 2010

'Music Makes a City' has so many aspects to it. In a way, it's a new form of film: a musical history documentary. But in the broadest sense, it's a portrait of a community and its relationship to the world. The post-war Louisville community will give any modern viewer something to think about.

As filmmakers, we immersed ourselves in the many personalities and players in our story. You can't help but fall in love, not just with individuals but with the spirit of Louisvillians as they met new challenges with a spirit so generous, it's startling. They had a willingness to try new things, though it meant overcoming their skepticisms. They were a basically optimistic people who pitched in wholeheartedly once a project was started.

The Project, in the case of our film, was the early danger-fraught years of the Louisville Orchestra. To use the analogy of a tree, conductor Robert Whitney planted the sapling -- though it was more like a sprouted seed and a sad specimen at that. Whitney worked tirelessly to build the orchestra into something Louisville could be proud of and then to lead it on through the incredible adventures that the fates had in store.

The orchestra was introduced to those fates through the good offices of Mayor Charles Farnsley. He took the musically gifted but financially faltering orchestra and thrust it into the limelight on the world stage.

"Why did the mayor want to do such a thing?" you might ask. His Honor would have loved to answer that question himself. Mayor Farnsley saw the development of the arts and education as a way to make Louisville a city that attracted industry and investment. On that score, his instincts were right as events would show.

Whitney, Farnsley and Louisvillians might be considered the main characters of our story, but then there's the music. Farnsley convinced the orchestra board that it was wasting its money paying high-priced soloists to come to town for a few nights, and then go off leaving a faded memory behind. The mayor thought that the money should be going toward commissions of new music which would replenish the stock from which the repertory was drawn. The Louisville Orchestra soon became the unchallenged leader in bringing about new compositions by composers around the world. The mayor also saw to it that the new music was recorded on the orchestra's own label: First Edition Records.

Our film is virtually propelled by this music. Our entire sound track is taken from First Edition Records. In fact, the very reason we decided to make a film of this story, rather than a book, was to bring the music to the ears of our viewers.



There are more facets to our film which I leave to the readers to discover at their leisure. A film is always a concoction of many diverse streams, but a distinct feeling results. I feel that feeling in this case is love of community. I hope to inspire that love to be present today. I have seen it myself in my encounter with Louisville.

Enjoy your history. It's spirit is still going.

Jerome Hiler, of San Francisco, is co-director of "Music Makes a City."