

The Federal Music Project: An American Voice in Depression-Era Music

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After World War I, the United States was musically transformed from an outsider in the European classical tradition into a country of musical vibrance and maturity. Especially during the 1920s, the formerly young musical nation saw classical music reaching new heights in the hearts and minds of the American people. In fact, it might be argued that “the World War was the most important single factor, up to that time, in converting America into a musical country.”¹ Because of the war, American students were less likely to study abroad in Europe and instead sought American teachers. At the same time, the American music scene became more “European;” conservatories, symphonies, and orchestral music flourished like never before.² The quality of music education in public schools rose significantly.³ Philadelphia, Cleveland, and Los Angeles began to develop new orchestras rivalling those that were already established in Boston, Chicago, and New York.⁴ During the 1920s, orchestral music became more prominent than any other form of classical music in the States. Toward the end of the decade, even chamber music, which had none of the spectacle of the symphony orchestra or opera but was music only “in its purest form,” became popular with audiences.⁵ Internationally,

¹ David Ewen, *Music Comes to America* (New York: Allen, Towne, & Heath, 1947), 135.

² *Ibid.*, 135–136.

³ Cornelius B. Canon, “The Federal Music Project of the Works Progress Administration: Music in a Democracy” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1963), 6.

⁴ Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 141.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

musicians were impressed by the “remarkable efforts,” “great progress,” and raised standards of musical life in America by 1930.⁶

These great advances, however, were deeply threatened by the Wall Street crash of 1929 and the consequent Great Depression. Unlike in Europe where music was government-subsidized, American arts were primarily sponsored by private patrons up until 1929. When the Depression hit, many of these arts patrons lost their fortunes.⁷ The nation that was developing an international reputation in the arts for the first time now faced a crisis of how to support them.

Despite the bleak economic circumstances that the Depression held for all Americans, especially musicians, this period from 1929 through the 1940s also fostered extraordinary musical growth and success. In response to the economic downturn, government sponsorship became prevalent in all major industries through Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. Roosevelt especially desired to support the arts because the “American Dream” offered “the promise not only of economic and social justice but also of cultural enrichment.”⁸ Each of these aims—economic justice, social justice, and cultural enrichment—was fulfilled in a unique and substantial way by the Federal Music Project (FMP), which sought to address the needs of the national music community. Unfortunately, the Federal Music Project is perhaps the least researched and least understood of the New Deal Federal One projects, receiving less scholarly attention today than the similar Federal Arts Project (FAP), Federal Theatre Project (FTP), and Federal Writers’ Project (FWP).⁹ Although this is the case, the Federal Music Project is significant to the discussion of twentieth-century American music due to its extensive economic, political, and social consequences. With a wide-reaching impact, the Federal Music Project elevated the role that music played in the lives of the American people, empowered the minorities who were in the American music industry, and encouraged all Americans from East to West to join forces as a unique voice in the world of music.

⁶ Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 209.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸ Audra Bellmore and Amy S. Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project: Embodying the Regional Spirit of Roosevelt’s New Deal,” *Notes* 69, no. 1 (2012): 23, [doi:10.1353/not.2012.0125](https://doi.org/10.1353/not.2012.0125).

⁹ Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 4.

The most immediate consequence of the FMP was in economic assistance to musicians across the nation. According to an estimation by the American Federation of Musicians, two-thirds of AFM members were unemployed by 1933.¹⁰ Even internationally acclaimed teachers in New York City lost up to ninety-nine percent of their pupils.¹¹ Publishers and instrument technicians alike suffered when the figure for annual piano sales dropped from 400,000 to 90,000.¹² As a result, major orchestras all over the country struggled financially; the Philadelphia orchestra took a ten percent salary decrease in 1932 and an additional nine percent decrease the very next year.¹³ Performers faced the added challenge that their jobs were actually being taken by technological substitutes.¹⁴ For example, live performances all over the country declined as recordings played by studios and radio stations replaced live bands.¹⁵ Although audio recording had already been existent in American musical life, “the depression merely helped the sound film, the radio, and the phonograph to become firmly entrenched in the American economy.”¹⁶ In fact, while other industries were struggling to make ends meet the first year after the crash (1930), the phonograph industry hit a five-year peak in sales.¹⁷ Unemployment due to technological replacement proved to be such a lasting issue that the American Federation of Musicians held a recording ban from 1942–1944 in order to promote live performances and to reevaluate protocol for royalties.¹⁸

Roosevelt founded the Works Progress Administration (WPA) by executive order in 1935 as a response to such widespread unemployment. The purpose of the WPA was to “recommend and carry on small useful projects” that would preserve the “self-respect,” “self-reliance,” “courage,” and “determination” of the working public.¹⁹ In particular, the Federal Project No. One (commonly referred to as Federal One) sought to support those in the fields of art, music, theatre, and writing.

¹⁰ Canon, “The Federal Music Project,” 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹² Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 210.

¹³ Ronald L. Davis, *The Modern Era, 1920–Present*, Vol. 3 of *A History of Music in American Life* (Malabar, FL: Robert E. Krieger, 1981), 9.

¹⁴ William H. Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, with Nancy K. Young (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 193.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Canon, “The Federal Music Project,” 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 193.

¹⁹ Canon, “The Federal Music Project,” 34–35.

Under the umbrella of the Federal One projects, which were headed by Harry Hopkins, Nikolai Sokoloff took up directorship for the Federal Music Project in 1935.²⁰ The FMP was soon instituted nationwide, with the largest units scattered throughout New England, the Midwest, and California, and with significant units in Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oklahoma.²¹ According to an official statement, the aims of the FMP were to educate the public about excellent music, to aid the community in its relief efforts, and to create a culture that valued the arts in everyday life. This was to be accomplished by employing and supporting musicians who would be providing services to the community. Of course, being a temporary project, all of this was directed toward an end of musician reemployment.²²

The project was largely successful in these goals. Within six months, the FMP employed the largest number of workers (15,000 musicians) compared to any of the other federally sponsored arts projects.²³ By 1937, one year after the FMP's creation, 1,835 of those employed musicians left the relief rolls to go "to private employment."²⁴ Many of these musicians went on to major symphony orchestras.²⁵

FMP workers were employed in a variety of settings. Financial concerns generally caused production of large-scale projects, such as operas, not to be a "practical venture" for the FMP.²⁶ The San Diego music project, however, found that the Depression actually offered "propitious conditions" for the undertaking—there were many highly trained people that were available and willing to work.²⁷ When the WPA took over the California State Emergency Relief Administration programs in 1935, it continued the federal opera company that existed in San Diego. The

²⁰ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 194–195.

²¹ "The Federal Music Project: The Second Preliminary Report Covering Its Scope and Activities during Its First Nine Months," Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, dir., Harry L. Hopkins, admin. (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, 1936), 6.

²² Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 204.

²³ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 195.

²⁴ Canon, "The Federal Music Project," 76.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 621–622.

²⁷ Peter Mehren, "San Diego's Opera Unit of the WPA Federal Music Project," *Journal of San Diego History* 18, no. 3 (1972), n.p., <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/1972/july/opera/>.

federally sponsored personnel included a sixty-member chorus, a double set of principals, and a fifty-member Federal Philharmonic Orchestra. Although the title characters were occasionally guests, the cast was comprised primarily of local musicians. The costumes for the production were made by the WPA sewing project. Altogether, a single opera could put more than one hundred employees to work. They initially considered it an “experiment” to create an opera only with employees from several of the Federal Work Projects, but the final production displayed a “strictly professional air.”²⁸ In that first season, complications with royalties and building regulations cancelled one premiere and delayed the other, but the first two performances of *Cavalleria rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni were so well attended that five more performances were added. For the opera, a total of 15,000 people were in attendance.²⁹ Immediately, production began for *Gondoliers* by Gilbert and Sullivan, with the “hope to eclipse the presentation of *Cavalleria rusticana*.”³⁰ *Gondoliers* and other San Diego company operas were especially successful as travelling shows. By using inexpensive sets and costumes, the company was able to produce these operas all over rural southern California.³¹ As a result, the popularity of opera in San Diego allowed manager William Dean to shift the local Federal Music Project’s focus to classical music. Even popular music groups in San Diego followed the trend to expand and heighten their repertoire for “cultural education.”³²

As could be expected, this type of economic environment was not especially conducive to experimental works. Because “musical innovation and economic insecurity ebb and flow in inverse ratio,” the Depression naturally encouraged tradition rather than innovation.³³ In order to deal with a 100,000-subscription decrease in 1932, the directors of the Philadelphia Orchestra ordered conductor Leopold Stokowski to fill programs exclusively with “acknowledged masterpieces” that the audiences knew and loved. Stokowski, who had just conducted Berg’s opera *Wozzeck* and had plans to perform Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex*, was not happy with their instruction that “performances of debatable music should be postponed until a more suitable time.”³⁴ Because the

²⁸ Mehren, “San Diego’s Opera Unit of the WPA Federal Music Project,” n.p.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Kyle Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 49.

³⁴ Davis, *The Modern Era*, 9–10.

Depression called for “an end to self-indulgence and a turn to larger social issues,”³⁵ composers themselves “began to question the relevance of their earlier, ultra-modern aesthetic beliefs.”³⁶

In the midst of economic instability, however, the FMP allowed the country to sustain its reputation in the world of art music. Compared to the other Federal One projects, the FMP had a rather conservative board of directors. In the opinion of FMP director Sokoloff, jazz and swing were worth as much as the daily “funny papers” in comparison to serious classical music, especially that in the romantic symphonic tradition.³⁷ Because the advisory board for the distribution of FMP funds was comprised almost entirely of classical musicians like-minded to Sokoloff, the FMP allocated “a considerable portion of its energies and budget to more elitist areas of music.”³⁸ Although jazz, swing, and other vernacular types of music were in high demand during this time, Sokoloff had the option, as a government-funded music program, of not being confined to public tastes.³⁹

One specific branch of the FMP, the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory, was created to economically assist and encourage American composers. Including branches in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the concerts featured the works of a living American composer with free admission to the public. Afterwards, the composer would explain the work and answer questions at a public forum. This opportunity had several beneficial results. First, the composer was supported financially in an environment that otherwise would not have nurtured the creation of new music. Second, the composer could play a direct role in public education about classical music. Most importantly, the composer was allowed the extremely valuable experiences of hearing his/her works performed and of receiving critiques. Over the course of the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory from 1936–1938, one hundred American composers premiered close to one thousand works.⁴⁰

Composer Ruth Crawford Seeger’s involvement with the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory in 1938 gave her the inspiration she needed in order

³⁵ Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century*, 49.

³⁶ David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of American Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 521.

³⁷ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 12–13.

³⁸ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 195.

³⁹ Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 205.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 205–207.

to “reestablish her faltering professional identity.”⁴¹ When the Depression hit, Seeger felt the need to shift her career from promoting modern techniques, such as dissonant counterpoint, to composing with publicly accessible materials, such as political texts and folk music.⁴² This period of musical uncertainty also coincided with a psychological crisis in her life.⁴³ The support that Seeger received from the FMP and the interactions that she had through the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory allowed the struggling composer to envision “the fusion between simplicity and her old techniques.”⁴⁴

Johanna Beyer was another composer particularly involved in and influenced by the program. In addition to receiving federal aid through the FMP to teach piano, she was able to compose and debut various piano, choral, and chamber works through the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory.⁴⁵ Three of her five choral pieces were composed specifically to enter in FMP-sponsored composition contests.⁴⁶ Beyer was actually one of the first women to be chosen for a Composers’ Forum-Laboratory concert, at which she premiered her *Three Songs for Soprano and Clarinet*.⁴⁷ Although members of the public forum afterwards criticized her “strange and ineffective tonal combinations,”⁴⁸ likely due to her close association with Henry Cowell and his avant-garde techniques, the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory and the FMP were able to assist Beyer doubly by bringing her out of both poverty and obscurity.

Director Sokoloff’s emphasis on high art music within the FMP was, whether intentionally or unintentionally, resisting a host of ideologies: the “attempt at democracy and inclusivity in art and music,” “the progressive nature of the Roosevelt administration,” and “the belief that

⁴¹ Melissa J. De Graaf, “The Reception of an Ultramodernist: Ruth Crawford in the Composers Forum,” in *Ruth Crawford Seeger’s Worlds: Innovation and Tradition in Twentieth-Century American Music*, ed. Ray Allen and Ellie M. Hisama (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 94.

⁴² Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of American Music*, 521.

⁴³ De Graaf, “The Reception of an Ultramodernist,” 94.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴⁵ Amy C. Beal, *Johanna Beyer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 17.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁸ De Graaf, *The New York Composers’ Forum Concerts, 1935–1940* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 98.

America was a ‘melting pot’ of cultures.”⁴⁹ The elite ideal of “art for art’s sake” that was espoused by Sokoloff and his board was met with criticism by populist New Deal supporters.⁵⁰ Joseph Weber, president of the American Federation of Musicians, complained that under Sokoloff’s direction the FMP was more about “the advancing of the culture of music” than assisting unemployed workers, and he personally wrote to Sokoloff that “the standard should not be set too high.”⁵¹

Despite Sokoloff’s intentions, many programs in the FMP were influenced toward a populist style, which was an inevitable result of the economic circumstances and a recent growth in nationalism. Populism was a progressive political ideology that was devoted to useful purposes rather than artistic ones. It stressed democracy, simplicity, and utility. Even through the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory events, many composers were influenced towards a populist style.⁵² This may be because the forums acted as feedback tools for composers, while they also served as educational tools for the public. For example, many pieces of Johanna Beyer’s are notable examples of *Gebrauchsmusik* (music for use), which was associated with the populist style. Two of her works for SATB chorus were composed for a FMP choral contest and hold the simplistic titles “The Composers Forum-Laboratory” and “The Federal Music Project.”⁵³ The text for the latter, written by Beyer herself, praises the FMP itself for promising “a future, oh, so bright” to all Americans.⁵⁴ Similar populist works by Virgil Thomson, Elie Siegmeister, and William Schuman were premiered at the Forums.⁵⁵ Within the FMP, populism abounded in the form of songs, murals, theatre, and even political cantatas.⁵⁶ Charles Seeger noted in a 1937 Forum that “the trend is to get closer to the audience...so that the audience can build [the music] without pulling it down.”⁵⁷

⁴⁹ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵¹ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 17.

⁵² Gann, *American Music in the Twentieth Century*, 50.

⁵³ Beal, *Johanna Beyer*, 51.

⁵⁴ Johanna Beyer, “The Federal Music Project” for SATB Chorus, ed. Margaret Fisher and Lou Harrison (Lebanon, NH: Frog Peak Music, 1996), 8.

⁵⁵ Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 109–111.

⁵⁶ Annegret Fauser, *Sounds of War: Music in the United States during World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 239.

⁵⁷ De Graaf, “The Reception of an Ultramodernist,” 102.

Indeed, the United States saw a trend toward a nationalistic style. Considering that the country had just come out of World War I, the United States wanted to unearth its “usable” heritage. Musically, this included researching the works of colonial and Revolutionary composers. The FMP became involved in this process by sponsoring music copyists to create scores out of colonial partbooks.⁵⁸ In general, the FMP promoted “distinctly American themes.”⁵⁹ Howard Hanson noted that the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory audiences were obsessed with each participating composer’s take on the concept of “Americanness” in music.⁶⁰ Hanson, who was himself an American composer, served on advisory boards for the FMP and was an influential proponent of “American music.”⁶¹ As an unfortunate result, this period of nationalism, combined with the great influx of immigration, hindered opportunities for non-native composers in the American East.⁶²

In the American West, however, FMP workers adopted a strong interest in popular and folk music styles, particularly in New Mexico, Kentucky, Texas, Arizona, and California. The “creative explosions” of 1920s popular music had incredible repercussions when musicians strove to capture the “original, energetic American identity that characterized the best of the new vernacular musics.”⁶³ Ethnomusicology as a discipline was born as FMP state workers interviewed locals in remote villages and transcribed the songs that they heard: various types of “spirituals, work songs, [and] songs of the rivers and hills.”⁶⁴ For example, two song collections from the New Mexico division of the FMP include *Spanish American Folk Songs of New Mexico* and *Spanish American Singing Games of New Mexico*.⁶⁵ About the Oklahoma FMP, Sokoloff commented that the state had done “uncommonly interesting work in transcription and classification of indigenous music.”⁶⁶ By 1937, more than 2,500 manuscripts of folksongs had been collected nationwide. The song-collectors moved with a “sense of urgency;” they believed that with the rapid increase in technology, communication, and travel, indigenous songs were in danger of extinction. Interestingly, while many of these

⁵⁸ Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 142.

⁵⁹ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 196.

⁶⁰ De Graaf, *The New York Composers’ Forum Concerts*, 164.

⁶¹ Davis, *The Modern Era*, 105.

⁶² Beal, *Johanna Beyer*, 20–21.

⁶³ Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of American Music*, 471.

⁶⁴ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 25.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁶ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 185.

tunes had been orally transmitted from generations past, the FMP researchers also documented the creation of new folk-style “work songs” sung by WPA workers of their own generation.⁶⁷

During the Depression, the purpose of investigating and researching folk music became tied with politics, so that occupational folk music was changed into a political thing of the American Left.⁶⁸ Due to its down-to-earth, vernacular nature, folk music helped to “[blur] the borders between occupational identities and social, political, and ideological identities” which were dividing the nation.⁶⁹ In other words, President and Mrs. Roosevelt believed that folksong was the type of thing that could “give Americans the feeling that they all belonged.”⁷⁰ Folk music and musics of “alterity” were especially significant because “the agency of the sense of place in American music may well be one of the most persistent processes constituting the Americanization of music.”⁷¹ Groups that had not had a voice in prior generations of American music gladly stepped forward to share their unique musical culture with the rest of the nation. Through folksong and democratic ideals, especially in the West, the FMP had considerable success in supporting the “fringes” of American music: women, African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, and other underrepresented groups.⁷²

From the beginning to the end of the project, women were active members of the FMP, as previously noted in the cases of Johanna Beyer and Ruth Crawford Seeger, and as in the case of others like Ruth Haller Ottoway and Frances McFarland. Although women did not quite receive an equal status to men in the Composers’ Forum-Laboratory, the FMP did provide women a means to “claim their rightful place in musical modernism” during the Depression.⁷³ The state programs in New Mexico, Kentucky, California, Connecticut, and Mississippi were each directed by women.⁷⁴ In New Mexico, director Helen Chandler Ryan chose to shift the focus of her state’s program from classical music performance to public music education. At that time, New Mexico was a relatively new state with a sparse population and a limited education

⁶⁷ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 168.

⁶⁸ Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of American Music*, 288–290.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷⁰ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 167.

⁷¹ Nicholls, *The Cambridge History of American Music*, 294.

⁷² Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 196.

⁷³ De Graaf, *The New York Composers’ Forum Concerts*, 106.

⁷⁴ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 35.

system. As a result, Ryan felt that education in the low-income districts of New Mexico was much needed and “would be one of the finest achievements possible under the Federal Music Project.”⁷⁵ The FMP offered lessons to all, both children and adults, even if they were not able to pay for them. Since instruments were not as readily available in the West, students would collect bottles, glasses, food containers, and other various materials to fashion their own music-makers.⁷⁶ The project focused on turning performing musicians into teachers, and in less than a year it had thirty-six solo instruction or group units. In 1939, Ryan held a three-day WPA Federal Music Project Work Conference that held teaching seminars for piano, guitar, violin, voice, and band. Teachers from all over the state attended the conference.⁷⁷ Due to Ryan’s leadership in New Mexico, women accounted for fifty-percent of the educational personnel.⁷⁸

African Americans as a cultural minority had a significant impact on the direction of the FMP in the West and beyond. Of all African Americans who held professional employment during this time, those that had jobs as musicians accounted for an incredible ten percent.⁷⁹ Although the FMP did provide opportunities that otherwise would have been unavailable for musicians and listeners alike, unfortunately a general inequality in pay existed.⁸⁰ Through the FMP, African Americans led various educational endeavors. Performances of antebellum spirituals were appreciated by multi-racial audiences all over the nation, which demonstrated along with the new populist spirit “a social acceptance open to...the civil rights movement.”⁸¹ One *People’s World* author praised the travelling choral groups as “perhaps the most wonderful example of liberated talent that the [Federal Music] Project has brought to light.”⁸²

Two significant works that were produced in western divisions of the FMP were based on the texts of the African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906). It has been suggested that Dunbar’s rhythmic poetry stands as an ancestor to today’s rap and hip-hop

⁷⁵ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 25–26.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷⁹ Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation*, 77.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁸¹ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 116–117.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.

tradition. In setting these texts to music in 1937, composer Howard Biggs incorporated the unique dialect and cultural “resonance” of Dunbar’s poetry. The resulting project *An Evening with Dunbar*, a collaborative effort with the Washington state Theatre Project, set “an entirely new pattern for theatre.” The performances of *An Evening with Dunbar* were sold-out and the schedule was extended.⁸³ William Grant Still’s famous *Afro-American Symphony* is another work that was based on the poetry of Dunbar. Premiered in Philadelphia, the symphony became an influential cultural and musical bridge between the East and the West. The symphony was written to symbolize feelings of “Longing,” “Sorrow,” “Humor,” and “Aspiration” in African-American history, and one way that Still did this was through an integration of classical forms with popular music styles.⁸⁴ For example, both this symphony and *An Evening with Dunbar* are two of the first classical works to include the banjo, which is highly evocative of African-American instrumentation.⁸⁵ As the most popular symphony of the western state Music Projects, the *Afro-American Symphony* was performed all over southern California and in several other states by FMP orchestras, conducted occasionally by the composer himself.⁸⁶ As the symphony spread throughout the West, critics noted that the vernacular music of cultural minorities was being “raised to an emotional dignity...that commands respect.”⁸⁷ This work became the first widely-performed American symphony to be composed by an African-American composer, and it stands today as one of the great masterpieces of the American literature.

The spread of Jewish music in California and Oregon was also promoted by the FMP, and at the same time, Jewish community groups were highly involved in FMP activities. Jewish composer Ernest Bloch found great success in performances of his Hebraic work *Sacred Service* with FMP orchestras. One program in southern California staged the story of Esther, accompanied by song and dance, in the original Hebrew and Yiddish languages. In Portland, an FMP community ensemble was credited with aiding a Jewish community center in their “great social work” by frequently giving widely-attended performances.⁸⁸ During the 1930s, many western cities became dense with European refugees, and one Los Angeles Jewish community center held weekly

⁸³ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 117–120.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 119–121.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 92–93.

“Americanization seminars” in which the city’s Music Project teachers taught the national anthem and other American folksongs.⁸⁹ In contrast with the European climate surrounding World War II, the FMP in the American West created interest in Jewish culture by bringing together people of varied cultural and religious backgrounds through music.⁹⁰

Latin-American music, which had not received any scholarly attention in America until the New Deal, played a primary role in the activities of the New Mexico FMP.⁹¹ Unlike the concerts of the East coast which often featured experimental music, concerts of the New Mexico FMP primarily featured regional Spanish tunes and other types of folk music.⁹² For example, one arranger known as A. Armendariz transcribed Hispanic folk tunes and expanded them into choral and orchestral works.⁹³ Pedro Valles organized a children’s *tipica* orchestra to play traditional regional numbers, and this group traveled both within New Mexico and outside of the state.⁹⁴ Many of the directors and musicians who participated in the project were themselves of Spanish heritage.⁹⁵ In addition to Hispanic music, New Mexico was highly invested in the research of Creole, cowboy, and African-American music. New Mexico stood at this time as perhaps one of the most musically diverse states, with influences from Spain, Mexico, Europe, and American Natives. The state director, Helen Chandler Ryan, thought it “quite fitting” that the government would be involved with preservation of the rare and obscure regional music that had already been part of the area’s culture for generations.⁹⁶

This collaboration and integration from people groups all over the country led to a unique musical style that was distinctly American. Looking ahead to WWII, this fact holds great importance. FMP programs emphasized the production of music in the American idiom for the American people. In actuality, the “stylistic simplification, nationalist retrenchment, and the politicization of musical composition” that are connected with the WWII era are only “a continuation and culmination of trends that already dominated American music in the

⁸⁹ Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal*, 93.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

⁹¹ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 30.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 29-31.

1930s.” This means that the systems of music bureaucracy which were in place from the New Deal “could be transformed almost wholesale into music programs for the new military” when the United States joined WWII.⁹⁷ For example, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which produced media, films, and music toward a cooperative patriotic effort in WWII, had “obvious roots in the WPA’s cultural activism.”⁹⁸ Charles Seeger, who had been a collector of Latin-American folksongs and a leading ethnomusicologist for the FMP, used his expertise to aid “good neighbor” peace efforts within the Pan-American Union.⁹⁹ The roots of institutionalized music therapy as it was used in WWII also stemmed from the FMP. In 1935, Harriet Ayer Seymour was supported by the FMP to conduct music therapy in hospitals and women’s prisons. The institutional use of music to relieve all sorts of ills, including “mental tension, anemia, and paralysis,” was an innovative idea for its time.¹⁰⁰ During the wartime, classical music was able to “serve a far broader spectrum of purposes because of the strong aesthetic, social, and emotional values ascribed to it” through FMP educational programs.¹⁰¹ These advancements in music education and performance during the Depression era helped to cement the reputation of the United States as a sophisticated society in the eyes of European nations. Without the New Deal as a precedent, “many cultural and other aspects of the American war effort would have been much slower to get off the ground.” Ultimately, these wartime programs gave civilian musicians and educators the privilege of becoming “soldiers, too.”¹⁰²

The Federal Music Project officially ended at the national level in 1939 when the WPA was defunded.¹⁰³ Over half of the professional orchestras that were functioning at the end of the 1930s had been founded after the Wall Street crash.¹⁰⁴ Although many schools and groups had to shut down at that time, many of the state projects had very effective lower-level organization and were able to continue until the onset of World War II.¹⁰⁵ Overall, the FMP was received with public support and satisfaction,

⁹⁷ Fauser, *Sounds of War*, 8.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 127–128.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 75–76.

¹⁰³ Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 208.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁰⁵ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 36.

and it ended with a surprising absence of scandal.¹⁰⁶ For contrast, unlike a controversy with the New Mexico Federal Writers Project, which “bastardized” and “romanticized” texts, the Music Project of the same state was “characterized by a conspicuous lack of ethnic or racial prejudice in its programs.”¹⁰⁷ Likewise, while the Federal Writers Project and the Federal Theatre Project were both controversial and later criticized by the House of Un-American Activities Committee (1938) for “leftist activities,” the equally populist FMP “was careful to sidestep such controversies by routinely performing music written by well-known American composers and composers from the cities where concerts were held.”¹⁰⁸

As evidenced by the examples provided in this article, the FMP not only remedied the unfortunate economic circumstances of the Great Depression, but it provided a system that was necessary for the American musical scene to continue flourishing and growing. The FMP was an extremely successful New Deal program that paid relatively high wages to its workers.¹⁰⁹ It succeeded in developing the public’s appreciation of classical music, and during its existence, the FMP involved over ninety-million people in educational projects.¹¹⁰ At the height of the FMP’s activity in 1936, the number of symphony orchestras in the United States had quadrupled.¹¹¹ By 1939, almost two-thirds of the public listened to “serious music” through the radio, including broadcasts of concerts, opera, and chamber music.¹¹² One Arkansas woman testified, “We can deprive ourselves of necessities, but a winter season without hearing the opera broadcast every Saturday afternoon is unthinkable.”¹¹³ Through the government’s support, combined with enthusiastic generosity from the public, no music school, symphony orchestra, or opera house of reputable quality had to shut its doors for good during the Depression.¹¹⁴

More importantly, the FMP encouraged relief-workers not just by giving them charity but by giving them opportunities to shape the music of their country. In the East, the development of an American voice in the

¹⁰⁶ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 196.

¹⁰⁷ Bellmore and Jackson, “The New Mexico Federal Music Project,” 32.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹¹¹ Young, *Music of the Great Depression*, 196.

¹¹² Ewen, *Music Comes to America*, 191.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

European classical tradition was supported by the Composers' Forum-Laboratory, the impact of which yet "beg[s] to be fully explored."¹¹⁵ In the West, the FMP became a large force in the dissemination of Jewish, Hispanic, and other folk music as well as in the development of ethnomusicology as a discipline. Through the FMP, social groups like women and African Americans found their voice in modern music. From 1935 to 1939, the FMP sponsored an estimated 224,698 performances, including 6,772 compositions by American composers.¹¹⁶ The FMP raised the level of classical musical literacy in America and stimulated a love for both high and popular art forms. It set the tone for the coming war effort in both bureaucratic structures and a public sense of ownership of American music. Although its original purpose was for the temporary financial support of teachers, performers, and composers, the Federal Music Project soon earned its permanent place in American history, giving all American people a music to call their own.

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¹¹⁵ De Graaf, *The New York Composers' Forum Concerts*, 190.

¹¹⁶ Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation*, 108.

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