

Tequesta:

The Federal Music Project In Miami 1935-1939

By MARILYN S. STOLEE*

In his annual message to Congress, January 4, 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt said:

Work must be found for able-bodied but destitute workers. The Federal Government must and shall quit the business of relief We must preserve not only the bodies of the Unemployed from destitution, but also their self-respect, their self-reliance, and courage and determination.

This speech set the stage for great changes in federal relief policies and programs which were to occur.

The Roosevelt administration's earlier efforts in relief programs had met with only partial success. The all-time peak of relief was reached in early 1935 when about twenty million people, seventeen percent of the population, received relief. On April 8, 1935 Congress approved the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act with an appropriation of \$4.88 billion.

On May 6 the President created the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.) with Harry Hopkins as administrator. Mr. Hopkins had worked in Washington since April, 1933, as administrator of the Federal Emergency Relief Act (F.E.R.A.) and Civil Works Administration (C.W.A.). His firm belief in work relief had come to dominate federal policy. He felt that direct relief, the "dole," small amounts of cash, food, or rent payments, was degrading to recipients and did nothing to increase people's purchasing powers. He believed that the worker must have something approaching real work if he were to be physically and psychologically ready for re-employment in private industry when the emergency ended. The purpose of work relief was to maintain the morale, skills, and physical

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condition of employables, defined as fit for employment, but unable to find jobs. By providing meaningful work with a security wage the government also hoped to prime the pump of the sluggish economy.

Work relief in the earlier programs had meant unskilled manual labor on public construction projects. However, there had been an increasing emphasis on diversification of work so as to allow workers to perform activities related to their ordinary occupations. Throughout the summer of 1935 the W.P.A. staff planned "small, useful projects" that would remove employable persons from relief rolls. There was a special effort to devise work programs for white-collar workers including artists, musicians, actors, and writers.

Late in the summer of 1935 Hopkins announced the formation of Federal Project Number One within the W.P.A.'s Division of Professional and Service Projects. It included projects in the fields of writing, art, music, and theater. The programs were to be operated from Washington as federally sponsored projects. However, they were designed as a co-operative federal-state-local structure. The actual administration of relief remained in state and local hands under federal rules and regulations. Local agencies certified relief eligibility and referred persons to suitable programs. Each of the arts projects had a national director, a regional staff, a state director, and a local administrator.

Even before 1929 unemployment among musicians had become chronic. One reason was technological. The phonograph and radio reduced the demand for "live" music. In 1928 the sound track for moving pictures appeared and caused the dismissal of pit orchestra personnel and organists. As the depression widened, hotels reduced or discharged their dinner-hour orchestras and established symphonies cut their personnel. Private music teachers, as well as performers, had an increasingly difficult time. The inclusion of music courses in the public schools narrowed the clientele for private lessons; and as families were forced to economize, music lessons were cancelled. The American Federation of Musicians estimated that during the years from 1929 to 1934 approximately seventy percent of formerly employed musicians were out of work; and that a large portion of the remainder was not realizing a decent living from the profession.

The W.P.A. created the Federal Music Project to employ, to retrain, and to rehabilitate unemployed musicians. The concert division established performing units which presented public performances. There were symphony orchestras, bands, chamber music ensembles, opera, and choral units. The education division planned research activities, experiments in musical therapy, teaching and training of persons unable to pay for music

study, courses for project teachers and leadership for community music activities.

Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, who had been the conductor of the Cleveland Symphony for fifteen years, became the Music Project's national director. His reputation assured the respect, support and cooperation of professional musicians as he organized the program. His stress upon technical competence insured a high level of artistry.

The Florida Federal Music Project was organized in the fall of 1935. Dr. Clarence C. Nice of Jacksonville was appointed the State Director. The state was divided into five areas with headquarters at Tampa, Jacksonville, Miami, Orlando, and Pensacola. There were performing groups and educational activities in each city.

In November, 1935 Lamar Stringfield, director of Region Five of the Federal Music Project, came to Miami to plan the formation of a municipal symphony orchestra. He met with representatives of the city commission, Miami Chamber of Commerce, and Women's Federation of Music Clubs. He announced that there were twenty-three musicians on local W.P.A. relief rolls who would serve as a nucleus for the orchestra. Plans were made to supplement these with other musicians so that the orchestra would have fifty-five members who would present their first concert in December.

Music Project employees were obtained by auditions. Anyone certified as eligible for relief to the W.P.A. by the local employment agency, who claimed to be a musician, was given an audition by a board of musicians. At this time the board consisted of two professors from the University of Miami, Arnold Volpe and Walter Grossman, and a representative of the Miami Federation of Musicians Union. In addition to relief personnel, ten percent of the project members could be non-relief people. These were usually the conductor, first-chair performers, teacher supervisors, and musicians not otherwise available. A constant problem for the orchestras was balance of instruments. For instance, if there were no French horn player available, one had to be obtained whether he was on relief or not.

The first concert by the new Federal Music Project Orchestra was given on December 15, 1935 in the Miami High School Auditorium. Lamar Stringfield returned as guest conductor. The Miami Symphony Society sponsored the concert. Admission costs were fifty cents or one dollar for adults and twenty-five cents for children. The program was evenly divided between classical music and modern American compositions. Henry Cavendish in the *Miami Herald* reviewed the concert very favorably

and quoted Alexander Orr, Jr., city commissioner and Chairman of the Miami Symphonic Society,

This concert is presented with the hope and belief that a continuation of such activity will be supported as a desired asset to social and cultural life here . . . with the works progress administration offering immediate assistance to definitely and permanently established music as an integral part of entertainment to Miamians and their guests. . . . Miami can well become an outstanding music center.

The federal musicians made two other public appearances in December. They performed at Jackson Memorial Hospital and they gave a concert on Christmas Eve at the Bayfront Park bandshell.

On Sunday, February 2, 1936, the Miami Concert Orchestra (throughout the life of the project the names Miami Concert Orchestra, Miami Federal Symphony, and Miami Symphony were used interchangeably) presented its first concert in a series at Bayfront Park at four-thirty in the afternoon. Walter Grossman, a member of the faculty at the University of Miami, was the conductor. These concerts were free and they were well publicized in the daily newspapers; the program was printed in an article which told about guest soloists and special music. For example, the concert on April 26, 1936 was in conjunction with Southern Memorial Day services conducted by the Southern Cross Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. The program featured a special symphonic arrangement of "Dixie." These Sunday concerts continued through May.

April was a very busy month for the W.P.A. musicians in Miami. Dr. Nice conducted two Easter concerts on Miami Beach on a specially built platform at Fourteenth Street. For the occasion the Miami Federal Symphony was augmented by musicians from Jacksonville, Tampa and Orlando. A two hundred voice civic chorus sang Easter music. Other highlights of the month included playing for President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he arrived at Port Everglades after a fishing trip in the Bahamas; at a reception for the Pan American Day celebration; for the opening of the Federal Art Galleries; and for the national convention of the Federation of Women's Clubs at the Miami Biltmore.

In June a new series of Friday evening concerts in Bayfront Park, called Community Music Nights, was announced under the joint auspices of the Miami Recreation Department and the Federal Music Project. The program was in three parts: (1) a half hour of orchestra music, standard classics; (2) community singing led by the Civic Chorus; and (3) orchestra music featuring lighter music. These concerts were well publicized and

well attended. The orchestra featured American composers and an occasional original composition, as well as special occasion music (July Fourth), special guests (Gold Star Mothers), and special performers (Clarence C. Nice, Jr., son of the state director). In an editorial the *Miami Herald* commented on Federal Music Project activities:

Miami is the fortunate possessor of one federal symphony orchestra. . . . For nearly a year this orchestra has been furnishing Miami with weekly free concerts at Bayfront Park. . . . The crowds have steadily increased. . . . Efforts are made to inculcate the love and appreciation of the finest in music, an essential in the spreading of culture and education.

During this first, busy year, the music education division was very active. In May, 1936 more than seven hundred people were receiving some form of free musical instruction in Miami. Students included members of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a class of blind adults, orphaned and delinquent children in institutions, children of W.P.A. workers, and other dependent groups. Only group teaching was permitted. This free instruction was actually thought to benefit rather than compete with regular teachers as it widened their professional opportunities by stimulating interest in music which otherwise might never have been developed. Throughout the years of the Music Project, Miami newspapers carried announcements of classes and recitals.

In addition to music instruction, the federal musicians presented music appreciation programs in the Dade County Schools. Mr. A. B. Wilson, W.P.A. District Supervisor, said that the purpose "was to instill a desire for good music and thus make it possible for the coming generations to contribute something of worth to the musical world in contrast with the jazz offerings of the present age."

There were some attempts at music therapy in Miami. There was work at the Miramar School for Crippled Children. There were concerts "to soothe patients" at the Dade County Tuberculosis Hospital and at Jackson Memorial Hospital. After a series of Monday afternoon recitals at Jackson Hospital, the group of seven to ten musicians decided not to play any more classical music. The patients preferred light, popular music. One afternoon an elderly patient beat time with his foot to a "show tune"; he became so enthusiastic that he jumped up, danced around, and laughingly called for a partner!

The presentation of grand opera in Bayfront Park in Miami was certainly the most interesting and pretentious project of the Federal Music Project. As part of the Miami Project, a civic chorus had been organized

early in 1936. The W.P.A. sponsored the chorus, but membership was available to any interested person. Over one hundred singers rehearsed the opera "Aida" throughout the summer months. Professional operatic performers from New York City, who had volunteered their talents to the Federal Music Project, came to Miami to sing the lead roles in this and other operas.

More than five hundred people worked on this first production—many W.P.A. personnel were involved. Construction workers built the stage; artists and theater people created the scenery; and women of the sewing project made costumes. Members of the Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Kendall served as extras in the production—playing roles as soldiers, slaves, and citizens. The United States Treasury Department cooperated by contributing money for materials and supplies and collecting the receipts. The City of Miami contributed five hundred dollars. After meeting expenses all proceeds were for additional free musical entertainments.

After three months of preparation, on Wednesday, August 12, an overflow crowd of six thousand persons attended the performance of "Aida." There were seats for forty-five hundred; so fifteen hundred paid for standing room. Newspaper accounts did not say what this price was; regular prices were reserved seats at one dollar and general admission ten cents. For later productions the charge was twenty-five cents general admission, ten cents for students.

The performance was cut short by heavy rains and rescheduled for Saturday, August 15. More than five thousand people viewed this "open-air production"; although thunder rolled an accompaniment to the musical score and there was a brief shower. Frank J. Kelly, acting city manager, sent a telegram to President Roosevelt expressing thanks for W.P.A. musical units. "The press and public have been enthusiastic in their praise and we wish to express in this official message our very great appreciation for this generous and valuable contribution to the cultural life of Miami."

The "Winter Opera Series" opened in Miami on November 27, 1936 with the production of "Rigoletto." The Miami Recreation Department was the co-sponsor. W.P.A. musicians from Tampa joined Miamians in a ninety voice chorus and a sixty piece symphony orchestra. Again the weather interfered, but despite the wintry breeze that swept across Bayfront Park, twenty-five hundred persons attended the opera. The Miami City Commission requested a repeat performance on December 4. Thirty-five hundred people attended and the *Miami Herald* review said that the "audience was receptive throughout."

On December 16, "The Pirates of Penzance" was presented—the first

of a projected series of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. In early February performers from Key West and St. Petersburg assisted the Miami Company in presenting "H.M.S. Pinafore." There were reserved seats and mail order requests came from all over South Florida. Also that month, "Rigoletto" and "Aida" were repeated.

For reasons which were never announced, but were probably due to government economy measures, there was no more opera that winter. On July 23, 1937, as a "complimentary gesture," the W.P.A. presented "Aida" for the fortieth triennial conclave of the Knights Templars being held in Miami. The opera was chosen because much of the symbolism of Masonic lore traced back to Egypt.

The next opera to be presented was "Il Trovatore." It was scheduled for November 26; then it was postponed until December 3 because of the illness of a leading performer. After two more postponements due to unseasonably cold weather the presentation was in Edison High School. Many productions had been plagued by unfavorable weather so Music Project officials announced that opera would be presented permanently at Edison. However, there was just one more presentation—"Cavalleria Rusticana" and "I Pagliacci," on December 11.

In reviewing this production Henry Cavendish in the *Miami Herald* said:

The importance of this year's operatic efforts . . . lies in the fact that they augur well for the future. There is abundant evidence of a healthy and meritorious opera movement in Miami, giving every indication of finer things to come.

Later in the month a *Miami Herald* editorial urged support of opera:

The performances of opera already presented attest to the high standards of the artistic merit of the company. . . . Through government aid and the cooperation of the city, Miami has added opera to its seasonal attractions. . . . Miami's cultural stature warrants the opera company. . . .

Throughout 1937, in addition to opera productions, the Miami Symphony Orchestra had continued to present Friday evening concerts in Bayfront Park. Walter Grossman was the conductor, and the programs followed the pattern established in the first year—classical music, lighter music, and community singing. Newspaper accounts of these concerts referred to "symphony in God's open air." At the end of the year Dr. Nice announced that the four federal symphonies in Florida, Miami, Jacksonville, Tampa, and St. Petersburg, would be merged permanently into the Florida Federal Symphony Orchestra. It was more economical

to have one organization that could tour the state, and there were people in music circles who wanted a first-class symphony orchestra in Florida which was now possible with W.P.A. sponsorship.

Mr. John Bitter, who at a later time was Dean of the School of Music at the University of Miami and conductor of the University of Miami Symphony Orchestra, was appointed director of the Florida Symphony when it was formed early in 1938 and he conducted through 1939. He had been music director of the Little Symphony in Jacksonville. The organization of the Florida Symphony took place in Jacksonville which became the headquarters. It was an all professional orchestra consisting of approximately sixty musicians who auditioned for membership. In order to have the best talent, as well as complete instrumentation, non-relief people joined the orchestra.

In an interview Mr. Bitter recalled the tours which the Florida Federal Symphony made. W.P.A. money was for salaries and a minimum of operating expense; therefore, Mr. Bitter raised funds from cities and organizations who sponsored concerts. He himself drove the tour bus, and he often had to change tires. The Symphony performed in Miami just once; the distance was too great and the W.P.A. wished to avoid competition with the University of Miami Symphony. Community sponsors advanced funds and sold tickets. The Junior Service League presented the Symphony in St. Augustine; the Eustis Music Club sponsored concerts in Eustis; and the Ocala Choral Society and the Primary Parent-Teachers Association co-sponsored in Ocala. In smaller cities the concerts were held in the high school auditorium and occasionally Mr. Bitter had to use a smaller orchestra due to inadequate space.

The then Florida Senator Claude Pepper commented on the Florida Federal Symphony Orchestra for a publicity handout prepared by Music Project headquarters:

The Work Projects Administration, through the Florida Federal Symphony Orchestra under the able direction of John Bitter, has made a great symphony orchestra out of Florida's own unemployed musicians. This organization is a living example of what an intelligent and sympathetic program may do with those who have had the misfortune to be among the unemployed. . . .

Mr. Bitter said,

In retrospect, I feel that a perfectly remarkable job was done. For the first time music was brought to people who had never heard it before. Little groups, amateur and professional, were

germinated. High school orchestras were started with the help of W.P.A. teachers. The organization was never free of political strife, but we don't remember this now.

1938 was not an active year for the Miami Federal Music Project. The City of Miami hired Caesar La Monaca's band for the free concerts in Bayfront Park. State officials asked that civic and music groups contribute funds to supplement federal music activities, but this plan never developed. Letters to the editor in Miami newspapers gave some insight into this situation. Writers indicated that Miamians could support only one orchestra, and that this should be the University of Miami Symphony.

On November 30, 1938 it was announced that a new Miami federal concert orchestra had been formed, "to replace the organization disbanded here last December." With a nucleus of fifteen musicians it was expected to be enlarged to thirty-five members. It was not planned to present Bayfront concerts as improving economic conditions had left few talented musicians available. Rather, they planned concerts in institutions and hospitals and in small city parks in cooperation with city recreation departments.

Thus, on January 13 and 19, 1939, the Miami Federal Orchestra gave its first concert in Lummus Park and in Little River Park. This series was under joint sponsorship with the City of Miami Recreation Department. A twenty-piece orchestra directed by William G. Utermohlen performed on a simple stage built on the back of a truck. Mr. E. E. Seiler, director of the Recreation Department at that time, recalled that he planned this stage to bring recreation and entertainment to the neighborhood. This concept of decentralizing city services has become very popular in recent years; but Mr. Seiler developed this method to utilize the talent which W.P.A. made available to the Recreation Department.

The orchestra also presented Friday evening concerts in Flamingo Park on Miami Beach with the cooperation of the Miami Beach Recreation Department. The Dade County Commissioners sponsored a series of eight Sunday afternoon concerts in Matheson Hammock Park in the spring. The City of Miami furnished chairs and its portable stage. Over five hundred people attended each concert; special bus routes provided transportation for those people who needed it. In August, the orchestra, under the direction of Mr. George Wolf, began playing in Bayfront Park again.

The public was not aware of any changes in local concerts or teaching activities, but on July 1, 1939 Congress passed an appropriation bill which changed the structure of W.P.A. and its arts projects. The Federal Music

Project's name was changed to the Florida Music Project and the sponsor was the State Planning Board from July 1939 to July 1940. The University of Florida sponsored it from July 1940 until July 1942; the State Defense Council sponsored light concert and dance band units to aid the war effort by playing for various bases, hospitals, and service clubs.

Newspaper coverage of the Federal Music Project was extensive. W.P.A. publicity men from the Federal Writers Project wrote complete press releases. In addition, music page reporters reviewed concerts and publicized activities. Newspaper editorials supported and encouraged the Federal Music Project as well as all the arts projects. Editorials praised the fact that art and culture were improved in Miami not only for the benefit of Miamians, but for the improved image this gave the city. Of the Miami Federal Symphony the *Herald* wrote: "For nearly a year this orchestra has been furnishing Miami with weekly free concerts. . . . Efforts are made thereby to inculcate the love and appreciation of the finest in music, an essential in the spreading of culture and education." In writing about opera the *Miami News* said:

The impression around Miami has been that culture is a microscopic quantity in this Sodom of the slot machine. The reception accorded 'Aida' considered along with the successful symphony and concert season is indication that this impression will have to be revised.

In trying to evaluate this Federal Music Project thirty-five years later, one must remember Project goals to employ, to retrain, and to rehabilitate unemployed musicians. There was always a basic antithesis between a professional program and a relief program. The demands of high artistic achievement could not always be accommodated. People who recall these music programs all say that musicians were helped. Local band leader Caesar La Monaca said that musicians could not have done unskilled labor without damaging their hands. He was able to have a Boys Drum Corps of three hundred sixty boys because W.P.A. provided fourteen teachers to help with the training of this group. Reporter Henry Cavendish remembered many musicians who were able to eat and to maintain their dignity through the Federal Music Project. As well as maintaining skills and morale and providing a livelihood, the Project brought pleasure to hundreds of people who attended concerts and took lessons.