



Peter Gough. *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West.* Music in American Life Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 304 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03904-1.

Reviewed by Philip Bohlman (University of Chicago)

Published on H-Music (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Lars Fischer

A Moment in History when Singing and Listening to Diversity Made Americans More Alike Than Different

In the midwestern world of my youth during the 1950s and 1960s, I encountered the accomplishments of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) every day. The public works in my Wisconsin farming community were largely built by workers employed by New Deal programs that were implemented by the US government during the 1930s and early 1940s. Post offices, schools, and parks were built, as well as a sprawling tree nursery at the edge of town, in which saplings grew, eventually to reforest large parts of the state. Public artworks were created, with new murals and paintings. The music programs that first appeared with funding from the WPA's Federal Music Program (FMP) still flourished during my youth, with educational programs in the schools and on statewide public radio. The public arts programs provided a response to the Cold War, but more important, they provided ways for my generation to witness cultural diversity close to home: the songs of neighbors who spoke other languages and attended different religious services. The arts programming of the WPA was a source of immense regional and national pride in the twentieth-century accomplishments of the United States and the position it had forged for itself after a generation of economic depression and World War II. Many, in my small town and across the United States in cities and remote rural regions alike, took comfort in the recognition that US-government funding of the arts—the most substantial in American history at the moment of the most widespread poverty—could change the course of their lives and the American history of which they together

were a part. Paradoxically, it was a heady moment, a transformative moment.

If I begin this review soon after the historical moment with which Peter Gough concludes his richly detailed and passionate history of the FMP in the American West, it is to strengthen his compelling argument that the WPA programs really made a profound difference in American history during the 1930s and 1940s. It is well known that labor programs (for example, the Civilian Conservation Corps) provided work for the jobless, while initiating projects that transformed the American landscape. The Great Depression had plunged Americans into poverty and hunger, and the WPA provided a way out—and not for a select few, but rather for the many and the diverse. WPA programs reconfigured the places and constellations in which Americans worked together. Gough makes this point succinctly and powerfully in the concluding paragraph of his book: “It was the New Deal emphasis on *inclusion* ... [that] bridged many previous barriers and included black as well as white; men as well as women; poor and not; conservative, liberal, and radical; symphonic orchestras and orquestas tipicas; African American spirituals; folksong; satirical political revues; and the range of musical expression” (p. 196).[1] With archival materials from both federal and state programs, Gough traces the ways in which the FMP began at the highest levels of government with the law known as Federal One, passed at the time Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933. It then spread across the United States, eventually entering state pro-

grams in the American West in 1937, where, according to Gough, its music programs epitomized the very confluence of regionalism, populism, and pluralism that defined the WPA's impact on American history. Gough follows the history of the FMP in the West to a final, glorious Labor Day concert in late summer 1941, when ensembles and choruses from California performed works ranging from Igor Stravinsky's arrangement of the "Star Spangled Banner" to Hispanic patriotic songs played by a WPA *orquesta tipica*, and "the audience in attendance could clearly hear America singing. And more so than at any previous time in the nation's history, the varied carols could be heard" (p. 196).

The narrative of Gough's superb and engaging history of Federal One in the American West grows from a counterpoint between larger-than-life personalities and a diverse cast of everyday Americans. The chief protagonists among the leading personalities largely represented an elite *dramatis personae* that included the primary architect of the New Deal, Roosevelt, and even more critically his wife, Eleanor, as well as the director of Federal One music programs, Nikolai Sokoloff, and his deputy director, Charles Seeger. If none of the chief protagonists had roots among the common people—as a Russian immigrant, albeit an accomplished violinist in a long genealogy of orchestral musicians, Sokoloff would have had the most legitimate claim to popular and populist connections, which he, however, largely rejected—Gough follows each through a conversion experience of sorts as they opened up the music programs of Federal One to the experiences of all Americans.

A tone of populist heroism has long inflected the stories of Depression-era elites building arts programs among the common people. Music historians relish the claims about Aaron Copland and Marc Blitzstein composing for WPA ensembles; I am surely not the only one who will enjoy a moment of affirmation by Stravinsky's cameo appearance as a populist hero in the final pages of this book. As in many studies of the WPA, or for that matter, working-class American history in general, the non-elite voices in the counterpoint contribute to Gough's narratives as statistics, as troops rallying to the cause, indeed, as the laboring masses whose voices are heard, often in passive voice, in the "Ballad for Americans" (chapter 6) or "The Folk of the Nation" (chapter 7). Like many other chroniclers of the WPA—and I include myself among these, as the opening paragraph of this review bears witness—Gough turns to the tally of accomplishments providing the historical record we prefer to flaunt. When we learn, for example, that "by

1937, teachers and musicians in the FMP had preserved more than 2,500 manuscripts of folksongs and melodies" (p. 168), the singers themselves remain largely anonymous. The few musicians who appear under their names in this book are those who were "discovered" by the elites (for example, the Lomaxes and the Seegers) and subsequently enjoyed recording careers. The real evidence for this anonymity of the common people who contributed to FMP programs remains the fact that, seventy-five to eighty years later, it is almost impossible to find publications or recordings from the thousands of pages and hours of music created for those programs.

In Gough's treatment of the FMP programs in the West, the Depression becomes an era of agency, symbolized in the book by a triangulation of isms: regionalism, populism, pluralism. Whereas the boundaries between these forms of agency are blurred, the narrative arc still follows a teleological path leading to the final years of the program on the eve of American entry into World War II. The use of regionalism as his starting point provides Gough with a critical corrective. Responding to the overwhelming attention afforded WPA programs elsewhere, especially the transformation of the South to the region symbolizing American folk music and culture, Gough traces the delayed implementation of FMP programs in the states of the West (chapters 2, 3, and 4). Distinguishing the regionalism of the West was the presence of diversity, historically because of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American populations, but during the Depression also due to the extensive migration westward of impoverished ethnic groups and African Americans from the East. Symbolizing this diversity was the *orquesta tipica*, which Gough treats as a transformative force in the musical and cultural life of the region, the true realization of its Hispanic heritage and history. Together, the triad of regionalism, populism, and pluralism, recognized so effectively by the FMP programs in the West and convincingly documented by Gough, changed the course of American history and historiography.

The confluence of musical and historical scholarship in *Sounds of the New Deal* is in many ways exemplary. Music serves as far more than the objective evidence for history, indeed, even more than narrative substance. In Gough's treatment of music as history he locates sound as a force of agency and change. Regionalism was transformed into populism and pluralism because music changed lives at a time of poverty, unemployment, and national uncertainty. As a historian writing about music, Gough clearly makes a strong case for music as a historiographic medium. In doing so, he exemplifies a tradition

of writing music history from the bottom-up, taking the labor of music and the agency of musicians as a point of departure for understanding the transformation of society and the enactment of history. In that tradition of writing music history, vernacular music of every genre and all people provide a much broader field from which to draw historical materials. Each chapter of this book allows the reader to confront music as historical material in ways both common and uncommon. Gough writes about folk song when many would consider it anachronistic; he

reinstates the past in the present, embracing the politics of populism with its positive and negative attributes; he turns to a moment of history when singing and listening to diversity made Americans more alike than different.

Note

[1]. *Orquestas típicas* were small orchestras popular in Latin America that generally comprised violins, flutes, clarinets, mandolins, and guitars but varied regionally in composition and repertoire.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-music>

Citation: Philip Bohlman. Review of Gough, Peter, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West*. H-Music, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49647>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.