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Kenneth J. Bindas. *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996. xiv + 164 pp. $24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-909-8.

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WPA Music Spreads Culture to a Depressed Nation

The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935 created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided jobs and income for those suffering during the Great Depression. This was one of President Franklin Roosevelt's most popular programs. There were four WPA projects that employed many in the creative sector who were out of work: the Federal Arts Project (FAP), the Federal Writers Project (FWP), the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), and the Federal Music Project (FMP). Kenneth J. Bindas's *All of this Music Belongs to the Nation* is the first major study documenting the activities of the FMP.

From 1935 to 1938, under the direction of Nikolai Sokoloff, the FMP employed more people than any of the other art-related WPA projects. According to Bindas the FMP had five major goals: 1) to provide employment for musicians; 2) to set high standards for these musicians; 3) to create an intelligent musical public; 4) to stimulate community interest; and 5) to demonstrate that constructive work was being done to combat the Depression (p. 1). The Depression was very hard on musicians. Those who previously had worked in theatres were replaced by technological advances such as "canned music." While the WPA offered many of them a chance to play music and have a steady income, conflict in the WPA's goals was often a source of turmoil. The director and administrators were concerned with the image the music produced by the FMP presented. Popular forms of music such as Jazz, Swing, Folk, or Country were usually not played by FMP musicians. The goal was to expose the American public to cultivated music, not "uncultured noise." (The criticisms leveled at popular music forms of that day sound very similar to those leveled against Rock n' Roll during the 1950s.) Of course, there were a few exceptions, but even these were kept at a low profile. For example, the FMP participated in Virginia's State Folk Festival, but did not advertise its involvement (p. 37).

Because a goal of the FMP was to provide Americans with a chance to appreciate purely American music, most of the FMP's concerts contained pieces written by American composers, including local composers from the cities where the FMP concerts were held as well as well-known composers. This gave a tremendous amount of exposure to American composers who otherwise would never have had their pieces performed. FMP musicians traveled all over the country, playing wherever they could, in churches, concert halls, public schools, and even town squares. Their reception was usually quite positive and the FMP effectively boosted the morale of the communities where its concerts were given. One enthusiastic commentator of that time boasted that juvenile delinquency dropped almost 90 percent after an FMP band played (p. 22).

The FMP was aggressive in promoting itself to Americans and always emphasized that its activities were patriotic. The WPA was frequently targeted by the the House Committee on Un-American Activities for Communist and radical infiltration, but the FMP stood strong against such attacks. The FMP even went so far as to produce an opera, "Gettysburg," based on historic events in the Civil War. However, this ambitious undertaking was ill-fated and only had a few performances because of its overall lack of quality (p. 59). "Gettysburg" was meant to illustrate that the FMP was not infiltrated by Communists or others who might be Un-American or unpatriotic. "The Romance of the Robot" was one of the more interesting operas composed for the FMP. It satirized a society too dependent on technological advances to meet human needs. In this opera, robots eventually ruled humanity. Like "Gettysburg," this project was very ambitious and expensive to produce, but it was performed only once. It proved too "modern" and "avant-garde" for audiences (p. 50).

In the four short years of the FMP's existence, 7,332 compositions by 2,258 American composers were featured by FMP orchestras (p. 63). The FMP gave 224,698

performances before an estimated 148,159,699 American citizens, and it gave African Americans, women, Hispanics, and other minorities a chance to play music and be employed. During this period, many composers like Aaron Copland ("Billy the Kid") and Virgil Thomson ("The Plow That Broke the Plains") were rediscovered by American audiences by having their music performed by FMP ensembles. In 1939, however, inner turmoil, "war fever abroad," "red-baiting," and major monetary cutbacks caused the demise of the FMP as a Federal sponsored project (pp. 105-8).

Bindas has done a fine job with his research, and his bibliography and notes are extensive. He has effectively utilized a wide variety of sources including archival papers, government publications, magazine articles from the time, and relevant books. Bindas supplements his text with photographs, playbills, charts, and graphs. *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation* is a well-written account of a largely unexplored area of America's history and culture. This fine book belongs in academic libraries that have strong music and historical collections or special collections dealing with the Depression and in public libraries with strong historical collections. Individuals with an interest in America's musical history will profit from this fine study.

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