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THE UNITED STATES INFORMATION AGENCY: SPONSORING AMERICA'S MUSICAL DIVERSITY



Principal Investigator: Danielle Fosler-Lussier, School of Music

Throughout the 1950s and '60s, the United States Information Agency sent packets containing music recordings, scores, and lectures about music to its information centers and binational centers around the world. These centers drew crowds with "concerts of recorded music" and scheduled weekly listening hours at which recordings would be played on request.

Surprisingly, the music played was not simply well-known classical or modern jazz. Rather, the packets contained a diversity of styles including classical, jazz, choral, folk, pop, show tunes, and church music. Much of the music was composed by African-Americans, Latinos, women, and immigrants. Famous composers were represented, as were composers now forgotten.

These packets represented what the State Department and USIA wanted other countries to know about American music and culture. What accounts for their diversity?

In this book project, based in part on newly declassified documents from the National Archives, Danielle Fosler-Lussier argues that the USIA's music program was supported by an extensive program of voluntary citizen activity led largely by women.

Because Congress mandated that the USIA use private resources where possible, officials outsourced work to voluntary organizations such as the American Symphony Orchestra League, People-to-People Music Committee, and the UNESCO-sponsored National Music Council. These groups included composers, performers and educators who saw their role as advancing the cause of music. They took advantage of the USIA's resources — often in roundabout and ingenious ways — to make American music accessible both in the United States and abroad.

The women who ran these organizations understood the government's need to portray the diversity of American culture in a positive light, and they cultivated music by a diverse collection of composers to meet this need. These state and private efforts combined to create a sense of musical nationhood during the Cold War.

The performances and recordings helped the United States assert its place within the global order, claiming prestige and articulating a national identity. Unlike countries that presented only particular elements of their cultures, the United States chose to emphasize its diversity and the variety of citizen participation. In turn, U.S. government funding supported musicians of varying backgrounds within the United States, allowing the image presented abroad to become true at home.

Fosler-Lussier's book will be accompanied by a web database, tentatively called "America's Music Collection," which will offer scholars and musicians access to the USIA's chosen music, including excerpts from scores and complete audio recordings. With colleagues and students in the School of Music, she is leading a project to perform and record many of these works.

A grant from the Mershon Center funded much of Fosler-Lussier's research at locations such as the National Archives, New York Public Library, and Library of Congress. Based on that research, she received a College of Arts and Sciences Larger Grant to help fund costs for the web database, recordings, and further research travel.



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