

The Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music

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Another philanthropy created by a member of the Rockefeller family that provided funding for musical activities was the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music.

Martha Baird Rockefeller (MBR) was the second wife and widow of John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In her youth she studied the piano at the New England Conservatory and took lessons with Arthur Schnabel. Prior to her first marriage she was a successful classical pianist and gave concerts across the U.S. and throughout Europe. She was encouraged by her second husband to explore areas of her interest to target for philanthropic giving and the two of them discussed her desire to provide aid to musicians and musical productions.

Martha Baird Rockefeller created the Martha Baird Rockefeller Aid to Music in 1957 (the same year the Ford Foundation began making gifts to the arts) and incorporated the foundation as the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music in 1962. She supported the Fund through annual contributions of \$600,000 until her death in 1971. Her will provided for an unrestricted bequest to the fund of \$5,000,000 and the trustees of the Fund elected to continue the program at the same level until funds were exhausted. The Fund was dissolved in 1982.

Prior to and after the Fund's incorporation, MBR also privately donated large sums to leading New York performing arts institutions, including the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and her alma mater, the New England Conservatory. By the late 1960s her donations to the

Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Center Opera Company allowed for seventeen operas and thirteen operas, respectively, to be produced. Her 1969 gift to the Metropolitan Opera helped fund a new production of Bellini's *Norma* and her donations to the NY City Center Opera Company had been directed toward all-new productions.

For the most part the MBR Fund for Music supported young solo artists, either through direct individual grants or indirectly through contributions to recording projects or to performance organizations that offered advanced training and employment to young musicians. The Fund's staff and Board of Trustees selected whom to aid based on an individual musician's application and subsequent auditions. They chose to award grants to organizations by determining if their mission or proposed project fulfilled the purposes of the MBR Fund, which they listed as the following:

1. To assist young artists with training and performing experience, and with management services,
2. To assist composers through performances and recordings of their works, and in preparing large scores for performance,
3. To assist professional concert and opera organizations to expand their repertory and extend their services to new audiences, or to improve their quality of performances, their operating efficiency, and their terms of employment for artists, and
4. To assist other organizations in engaging in or supporting musical research and scholarship, preservation of reference materials, special training, and other services to musicians or their professional associations.¹

The MBR Fund gave very few grants to composers—four by my count—but did help fund quite a few performances of contemporary music, in addition to reading sessions and laboratories for new music.

These activities would, of course, aid composers greatly, simply in a more indirect manner. Included among the concerts or readings that the MBR Fund helped aid were Gunther Schuller's "Twentieth Century Innovations" series in New York City, concerts by the Group for Contemporary Music at Columbia University, Composers' Showcase concerts in New York

City, Composers Forum, Inc. concerts in New York City, Contrasts in Contemporary Music concerts in New York City, concerts by the League of Composers—ISCM, and to reading and laboratory sessions hosted by the Philadelphia Composers' Forum.

Whenever possible, the Fund gave large enough grants to ensure that these concerts would be broadcast. Additionally, in 1971 the Fund gave a grant to National Public Radio so that they could air a series of Composer's Forum concerts. They also underwrote reading sessions of new music at the Bennington Composers' Conference, at the University of Alabama and at the Brevard Music Center, Inc. (in North Carolina); the latter two aimed at giving attention to composers in southeastern states.

The Fund also supported American composers by allocating grants-in-aid expressly for score copying, under the condition that a performance of said score was guaranteed by a conductor, group, or performer. Most of that assistance went to, and then through the American Music Center in New York City. The fund also gave a \$10,000 grant to Composers Recordings, Inc., that helped underwrite the recording of Elliott Carter's Piano Concerto, performed by Jacob Lateiner with the BSO and recorded by RCA Victor. The composition was the result of a Ford Foundation grant to Lateiner, under their Creative Artists Program. The MBR Fund also awarded a grant-in-aid to the Contemporary Chamber Ensemble that allowed them to record three discs in a series for Nonesuch Records; to George Crumb for a recording of his *Songs, Drones, Refrains of Death* (1973); and to other small recording projects.²

Flexibility in grant giving was one of the Fund's noteworthy characteristics. "If a singer needed coaching in new opera roles, if an instrumentalist needed traveling expenses to keep certain engagements, if a performer deserved a debut, even if a young artist required a tailcoat or a gown for a concert appearance, an application for help was carefully weighed and often

granted,” New York Times journalist Howard Taubman described in a 1969 article on the Fund. The Fund was able to be so flexible because MBR insisted to her board and advisory panels that they have no advanced restrictions, stipulations or predetermined qualifications.³

Instead, the MBR Fund for Music staff and then trustees evaluated each request they received, “with appropriate consideration for their relationship to the Fund’s objectives, their artistic and administrative merit, and their anticipated benefit to the applicant or the interests to be served.” When considering a grant to an organization, the staff consulted with representatives of the requesting body regarding their artistic philosophies and administrative procedures. To aid them in their selection process, the staff also consulted with musicians and administrators “about career problems and personal situations affecting professional advancement.” The MBR Fund staff was then able to consult with their grantees on these professional matters, further aiding them with their careers.⁴

MBR also made a conscious decision to not endow the Fund while she was still alive, but to instead make annual contributions to it. This allowed the budget to remain flexible. According to the 1969-1973 Fund report, “... the staff was instructed to come to her for extra help when unexpected opportunities or needs arose. On more than one occasion, when for some reason a need could not be met by the Fund, Mrs. Rockefeller quietly solved the problem with a personal gift.”⁵

In the 1965 internal review of the prior three years of grant programs (1962-1965), the MBR Fund trustees decided to address their, up to this point minimal, aid to contemporary music. Led by director Donald Engle, former business manager of the Philadelphia Orchestra, the trustees recognized the need to become more informed about the state of contemporary music

and the funding available to composers in order to determine how the MBR Fund could provide more aid to composers.

Director Engle announced that, by that point in time, the Fund had “sufficient experience in administering individual aid,” such that they could “begin to bring composers into the program on a limited basis.” He was very clear that there were at least “two characteristics among inquiries from or about composers which would have any appeal to the Staff ... their circumstances would not receive consideration under other programs, and performance is a direct concern. Both are sound criteria for a Fund aid to composers, and should be at the core of any steps the Fund takes in this area.”

To figure out just what circumstances would *not* receive consideration under other programs, during the October 14, 1965 review meeting, the trustees went over the “economics of composition” and composers’ “sources of support.”⁶ They noted in the meeting minutes that “very few composers of serious music, even among the more distinguished, do or can earn a reasonable living from their output.” The board identified the four ways in which composers *could* earn money or subsistence for their creative work: direct grants, artistic retreats or colonies, awards and fellowships, and performances of their music. (At the fund they considered commissioning as separate from the above funding sources. Rather, they described commissioning as an indirect form of aid, though it could “also be regarded as payments for a product to be furnished to order.”) Contrary to Engle’s prior held belief, his recent involvement with ASCAP proved “how little a composer of serious music can expect” through performance rights and royalties. In sum, instead of relying on their talent, most composers active in 1965 were required to supplement their income through teaching, as performers or conductors, in

administrative positions, or by composing music for the commercial, advertising, or entertainment industries.

Based on the types of support already existing operations, such as the Ditson Fund and the Ford, Fromm, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and Rockefeller Foundations (RF) provided, the Trustees of the Fund decided to begin to give grants that would provide composers more time to compose (through direct grants for living and professional expenses); that would aid in the preparation of scores and parts for performances; and by grants that would assist with other performance costs. They also planned to occasionally award a grant to a talented performance artist to allow them to commission a composer. “One would hope that a combination of younger artists and emerging composers might be brought together, for the Fund would then be accomplishing two objectives.” This program, Engle noted, would be an adapted version of the Ford Foundation Concert Artists Program.⁷ One of the reasons Engle cited for including commissions, not just direct grants, in their aid, was that “commissions have a psychological value ... for composers, like artists, enjoy a sense of professionalism when they are paid for their services. Commissions also provide the stimulus of a time limit on work to be done.”

Engle also included an advisory note to the staff of the MBR Fund: “Staff experience is important here,” Engle cautioned,

... for dealing with composers will mean coping with more diverse objectives and less tangible qualifications on which to justify assistance. Nevertheless, it should be possible to open the door a bit to cases in which a helping hand, not to be found elsewhere, would aid a creative talent in a step it could probably not otherwise accomplish. This is really just applying the Fund’s philosophy to another area.⁸

The MBR Fund Trustees did not publically announce this change in their scope of grant giving. Rather, they planned to quietly “experiment” in this area for a year or two, and then evaluate how it had gone thus far.

Another tacit part of the “Fund’s philosophy” that certainly was not going to be made public, was their attitude toward experimental contemporary music. Though Engle wrote in these meeting minutes that no composer should “be excluded from consideration on the basis of his stylistic persuasion,” he indicated to his fellow trustees that “the Fund’s primary interest would be to encourage composition within conventional instrumentation requiring performers, rather than experimentation in machine-derived sounds or the musical adventures of the *avant-garde*.” This edict makes perfect sense, given the MBR Fund’s primary focus on instrumentalists, but implicitly represents one of the ways MBR’s tastes influenced the foundation.

As described, the Fund did give a good amount of assistance to the contemporary music performance scene in America. If the positive attitude in the docket memorandum for a possible grant to NYU for a contemporary concert series can serve as evidence, at least some MBR Fund administrators felt good about this activity.

The Fund’s support of new music concerts has been an enlightened practice, in the Staff’s opinion. There is an atmosphere of ferment which arises when composers have a serious hearing before an interested public, however limited, and by their colleagues, and are stimulated by the works of others. Such an atmosphere can be a fertilizing influence of no mean proportions for creative people, and for this reason alone a new series, responsibly and competently handled, is welcome.⁹

Projects such as these were supported by MBR, but often met with her conservative skepticism about contemporary music.

For example, take the letter MBR wrote to Robert Bates regarding their upcoming meeting toward the end of 1967. On the topic of “Contemporary Music,” MBR instructed the Fund to “declare a moratorium on support to any new series by performing groups in this field—at least until the overall picture may be reviewed and studied.” At that time, the MBR Fund contributed to nine contemporary music organizations, plus the “special” grant to the Carter-BSO recording project. That involvement, to MBR, was fine: “All of this seems to me evidence

of an open-minded policy by the Fund over a period of some years, and one that on the whole I would not want to discontinue.”

Yet she still had reservations, but those reservations were based on her thought that in certain instances of their aid to contemporary music ventures the MBR Fund

... may have had narrow—or possibly not so narrow—escapes from being associated with elements of sensationalism and exhibitionism that just might have crept into or attached themselves to certain programs. I have no proof, only a sense of alarm, felt more than once from what I have heard on radio, seen on television, or have read. I feel that some ‘research’ may be indicated on this score.¹⁰

Her attitudes were echoed by some members of the board.

The Board of Trustees of the MBR Fund was selected by MBR and consisted of herself, Robert C. Bates, Dana S. Creel, Donald L. Engle, Douglas S. Moore (a composer who taught at Columbia University), Carlos D. Moseley (general manager of the NY Philharmonic), and Helen M. Thompson (president of the American Symphony Orchestra League). Between 1962 and 1973 the Board added the composer Robert Ward and considered adding the composer Carlisle Floyd to their board as well. All three men had been fairly popular operatic composers into the 1950s. Though still well respected, by the 1960s these men and their music were regarded as outdated and conservative.¹¹ None of them were associated with chamber or orchestral music, and certainly not with the “contemporary music” of the 1950s or 1960s.

RF officer Gerald Freund, met with Engle in 1964 so that they could discuss how the two philanthropies might work together in fulfilling the grant requests one received that might be better fulfilled through the aims of the other. In his diary Freund listed the board members of the MBR fund as he remembered it: “His board is made up of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.; Dana Creel and a second person for the RBF [Rockefeller Brother’s Fund]; Helen Thompson; and Douglas Moore. It does not sound like the most forward-looking group.”¹²

In MBR Fund documents, Douglas Moore's more conventional tastes are particularly evident. When reviewing the docket on the Columbia Group for Contemporary Music, according to Engle, "Dr. Moore felt that the organization was too ambitious, and that Messrs. Wuorinen and Sollberger regarded only difficult music as worth playing—a path that, in his view, was *not* the best for music to take!"¹³ He also expressed a similar viewpoint when the Fund reviewed the grant to the Bennington Composer's Conference in 1967: "Dr. Moore expressed concern that the teaching staff last summer were of the *avant garde* faction ..."¹⁴

Engle's 1968 memorandum to the Board of Trustees is more neutral on the topic of contemporary music. In this document he concedes that contemporary music was an area in their current musical life that was

... in a state of extreme flux. Within the past twenty years or so, music has been undergoing a revolution in styles, involving major departures from the familiar idioms of the past. This revolution hasn't swept up all composers, of course, but the creative output of many of the younger ones has involved a wide range of experiments in search of new sounds and means of expression. A whole new musical language is being developed in several places with electronic means, both in collaboration with, and independent of, traditional instruments.

Some might argue that Engle's realization of these facts were a bit belated. Despite his trepidation, he believed that the grants the MBR Fund had made toward copying and reproducing scores of contemporary music had been important and useful to composers, because conductors, managers, and critics had expressed growing concern about the need for new repertoire throughout our general musical scene to Engle, just as they frequently did to RF officers. Engle did avow that the MBR Fund hoped "to continue to play a modest role" in this area.¹⁵

Another way the MBR Fund continued to play a role in the contemporary music scene was by underwriting a cooperative direct-mail questionnaire and subsequent bulletin that consolidated and publicized contemporary music performances slated for a full season. The hope

behind this 1969 project was that, despite audience numbers, people *were*, in fact, interested in contemporary music, they just need to be reached and adequately advertised to. The docket memorandum stated the MBR Fund's rationale as follows:

Whenever members of the Staff have occasion to discuss the health of art and business with representatives of contemporary music groups, the subject of audience attendance is usually touched upon. It is not a professional secret that concerts of contemporary music are, on the whole, poorly attended. It is possible to assume that this state of affairs quite accurately reflects a lack of public interest in such music, or a simple failure of contemporary composers to communicate in such a way as to stir the interest of more than a handful of devotees.

But it is at least as logical, and certainly more cheery, to assume that interest does exist, and it is hard to avoid the thought that this interest might be more easily and frequently aroused by means of more vigorous promotional and advertising efforts. Specifically, it might constitute some help to at least place in the hands of interested parties specific program information for a number of established contemporary concert series at the beginning of a season, so that potential audience members can have at their fingertips the dates, locations, and at least some program listings in such a way as might avoid conflicts, and far enough advance to facilitate planning.¹⁶

According to this docket, this would be what is known in "the trade as 'creative direct mail.' It does not represent an effort to interest new audience groups or expand the audience base; it is not, in fact, a direct sales piece at all. Its aim is limited and specific: to secure a more active response from a group whose interest is already demonstrated."

Beyond an effort to build audiences, this project aimed to help these groups recognize the importance of and beef up their advertising and promotional programs that were, at the time, quite minimal, and without much of a budget. In a somewhat holier-than-thou tone, the MBR Fund docket insisted that, "the project is a way of focusing the directors' attention on this subject, of forcing them to update and put in some order their own lists, and perhaps of suggesting other possible areas of cooperation among them. At the very least, it should be a step toward clarifying the nature of the audience problem, and of determining whether or not increased attention to the promotional aspects of the business might be fruitful."¹⁷ By sponsoring

this sort of project, the MBR Fund fulfilled Engle and the MBR's hopes that the Fund would provide aid to contemporary music in a form that was not already offered by other arts philanthropies.

Besides this promotional aid to contemporary music groups, the Fund did not give any grants to composers between 1969 and 1973. In fact, over those four years the Fund adjusted their aid across the board. They gave fewer grants to individuals, none to composers, and what grants they gave were larger. They also gave fewer grants to vocalists. According to the report, the reason for this particular shift

... was the growing conviction of the Fund's Trustees and Staff that encouragement of less than truly outstanding talent in this highly competitive field benefits neither the cause of music nor the individuals seeking to arrive at realistic career decisions. It has seemed more constructive to increase assistance to orgs which seek to expand opportunities and improve the working conditions of young artists.

A second factor of some significance is the tightening of the European market for young American singers, especially in the German-speaking opera houses which provided so much employment during the 1950s and '60s. Simultaneously, there have been gains in both quantity and quality on the American operatic scene ...¹⁸

Therefore, the changes at the Fund reacted to and reflected changes happening in the American music scene and prospects for American musicians both home and abroad.

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Report of the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music 1962-1969. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 4, Family Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Series 2, Box 171, Folder 1726, Music—Martha Baird Rockefeller (MBR) Fund, 1961-1971.

² Report of the Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music 1962-1969. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 4, Family Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Series 2, Box 171, Folder 1726, Music—MBR Fund, 1961-1971; Report of the MBR Fund for Music, 1969-1973. JDR 3rd Fund 11.3, Box 296, Folder 2192.

³ Howard Taubman. "Martha Rockefeller Music Fund: Story of Quiet Help." *The New York Times*, May 12, 1969. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 4, Family Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Series 2, Box 171, Folder 1726, Music—MBR Fund, 1961-1971.

⁴ Report of the MBR Fund for Music, 1962-1969. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 4, Family Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Series 2, Box 171, Folder 1726, Music—MBR Fund, 1961-1971.

⁵ Report of the MBR Fund for Music, 1969-1973. JDR 3rd Fund 11.3, Box 296, Folder 2192.

⁶ The Trustees reviewed the list of active artistic colonies who supported composers and the private foundations that offered composers some form of support (the Fromm Music Foundation, the Koussevitzky Foundation, the Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation).

⁷ The Ford Foundation Concert Artists Program had three iterations—1959 (R-1217, PA 59-153), 1962 (R-2560, PA 62-3330), and 1971 (R-2022).

⁸ Review of Grant Program, 1962-1965. October 14, 1965. Folder 339—MBR—Music Fund—Meetings, 1962-1965, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 18, Rockefeller Family, Series 1, Subseries 10, Box 16 and 17, MBR Music Fund.

⁹ Docket Memorandum. The Martha Baird Rockefeller Fund for Music, Inc. New York University. December 14, 1967. RF RG III 8, Series 1, Sub-Series 10—Fund for Music, Box 17, Folder 340.

¹⁰ MBR to Mr. Robert C. Bates. December 13, 1967, MEMORANDUM, Subject : Agenda for Fund for Music Meeting, December 14, Box 17, Folder 340: Meetings 1966-1969, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 18, Rockefeller Family, Series 1, Subseries 10, Box 16 and 17, MBR Music Fund.

¹¹ Moore was born in 1893 and is now most known for his opera *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (1956) and whose style is likened to that of Copland and Virgil Thomson. Ward (b. 1917) studied with Copland and Hanson and won the Pulitzer Prize in music for his opera *The Crucible*, based on Arthur Miller's play. Floyd's big "hit" was *Susannah*, which was performed at the New York City Opera at City Center in 1956.

¹² G Freund Diaries—1964 (January-June) (June). RF, RG 12.2—diaries, officer diaries, Gerald Freund, Box 159. Met with Donald Engle, Director of the MBR Fund for Music (along with MB), June 3, 1964.

¹³ Review of Grant Program, 1962-1965, October 14, 1965, Folder 339—MBR—Music Fund—Meetings, 1962-1965, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 18, Rockefeller Family, Series 1, Subseries 10, Box 16 and 17, MBR Music Fund.

¹⁴ Meeting of March 2, 1967, Box 17, Folder 340: Meetings 1966-1969, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 18, Rockefeller Family, Series 1, Subseries 10, Box 16 and 17, MBR Music Fund.

¹⁵ From Donald Engle to the Board of Trustees, Memorandum, Subject: Review of Grant Program, October 24, 1968, p. 14, Box 17, Folder 340: Meetings 1966-1969, Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), RG 18, Rockefeller Family, Series 1, Subseries 10, Box 16 and 17, MBR Music Fund.

¹⁶ Docket Memorandum, The MBR Fund for Music, Inc. Contemporary Music Brochure, June 12, 1969, RF, RG III 8, Series 1, Sub-Series 10—Fund for Music, Box 17, Folder 340.

¹⁷ Docket Memorandum, The MBR Fund for Music, Inc. Contemporary Music Brochure, June 12, 1969, RF, RG III 8, Series 1, Sub-Series 10—Fund for Music. Box 17, Folder 340.

¹⁸ Report of the MBR Fund for Music, 1969-1973, JDR 3rd Fund 11.3, Box 296, Folder 2192, p. 9.