Federal Music Project (FMP)

In the government’s attempt to kick-start the economy while providing work for so many unemployed Americans, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created in 1935, enacted under President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal. The WPA consisted of the Federal Art Project, the Federal Music Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Writers’ Projects. Through these various projects, the government hoped to put musicians, poets, authors, and actors to work while also providing programs for community enrichment during the tough times.

Roosevelt realized the importance of the arts in American culture, stating that the “American Dream… was the promise not only of economic and social justice but also of cultural enrichment.” In July 1935 a New Deal program known as Federal One was created, which included five arts projects, including the FMP. This project was the first where federal money was used on culture.

The Depression had compounded a downturn in the fortunes of the American musicians. At the same time musicians were also being negatively affected by advances in technology. Sound recordings were beginning to replace live musicians at functions and events and the radio now delivered music of many kinds right into the family living room at no cost.

The Federal Music Project (FMP) was a branch of the WPA formed with the purpose of providing work for unemployed musicians, vocalists, and music educators, who had been hit particularly hard during the era’s dismal economy. The project promoted the notion that like other laborers, artists deserved employment and government support to further their craft.

Dr. Nikolai Sokoloff, former conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, was appointed director of the FMP. In addition to the appointment of five administrative staff, Dr. Sokoloff appointed five regional directors and approximately 23 state directors. It was not necessary to establish new organizations in each state because large music programs had already operated under the CWA and the Emergency Relief Administration (ERA).

The FMP provided federal funding for music and provided jobs for musicians who were out of work and on relief rolls. The prime objective of the Federal Music Project and the subsequent WPA Music Program (1939-1943) was "designed to give employment to professional musicians registered on the relief rolls.” The project employed musicians as instrumentalists, singers, concert performers, and teachers of music. The FMP helped to establish and financially support symphony orchestras, small orchestral ensembles, string quartets, chamber ensembles, dance orchestras, bands, theatre orchestras, music teaching, music copying, maintenance of music libraries, piano tuning, vocal ensembles, vocal soloists, operatic and opera ensembles, and vocal quartets. Numerous well-known symphonies in existence today began as a FMP activity.

The general purpose of the FMP was “to establish high standards of musicianship, to rehabilitate musicians by assisting them to become self-supporting, to retrain musicians and to educate the public in the appreciation of musical opportunities.” However, in addition to providing work for unemployed musicians, the FMP educated the public about music appreciation through the production of thousands of free concerts. The Project aimed to inspire music appreciation by enabling access to live
performances. “There is a growing pressure of public opinion for giving music a larger place in the community life,” said Dr. Sokoloff. “Since the WPA set up this project to retrain and rehabilitate unemployed professional musicians, aggregate audiences exceeding 93,000,000 persons have heard these musicians in more than 133,00 programs and performances.”

The FMP created something for people to do during the hardships. These musical concerts were either a very low cost, or they were free, allowing many who could otherwise not afford such luxury to attend. Between January 1–September 15, 1936, WPA orchestras held concerts before audiences totaling 32 million people nationwide. At its peak, the FMP employed nearly 16,000 musicians, enabled over 5,000 performances by orchestras, chamber groups, and choral military, and reached over 3 million audience members per week.

The FMP is also credited with introducing music instruction in the classroom. FMP musicians gave free lessons in music education to adults, including the underprivileged, and it created a musical program for children. Between 1934-1937, the FMP gave lessons in the greater New York area to nearly 7,689,406 people. Weekly attendance was more than 60,000.

Additionally, the FMP sought to gather an anthology of traditional American music and folk songs, a practice now referred to as ethnomusicology, in order to preserve the nation’s rich and varied cultural heritage. Musicologists seized this unique opportunity to travel to very rural areas of the United States, seeking out folk songs and ballads that were recorded for permanent addition into the Archive for American Folk Song in the Library of Congress. The FMP collaborated with the WPA Writers’ Project to collect and research these folk songs and dances of ethnic cultures around the nation. Most all of the music gathered during that time was through the efforts of a few men and women folklorists. These musicologists and writers traveled all over the nation, especially throughout the Southeast and South Central, in search of songs that had never been recorded previously. FMP workers traversed the country with their portable equipment, recording prison work songs, folk ballads, spirituals and other music from diverse ethnic traditions. Some of the Federal Art Project artists did illustrations for the materials published and some of this research was conducted with help from local universities. Much of the materials from this research can also now be found in the Library of Congress.

Even though the project was thought to be this picturesque, ideal, and perfect plan, there were still many challenging facets that occurred during its time. One of the more general obstacles the Federal Music Project had to go through was the types of culture going into the project. Dr. Sokoloff was predisposed to European classical music, and made that the focus of the FMP. There was a much lower priority placed on vernacular or American folk music. These Eurocentric tastes were in contrast to the "common man" ideology of the New Deal. Despite this national focus on classical music, regional and local implementations of the FMP revealed the diverse musical genres in early 20th century America. Live performances of African American and Hispanic music drew attention, as did efforts in several states to document musical traditions from ethnic minorities, spirituals, work songs and other folk music.
In 1939, the Federal Music Project’s budget was cut. This wasn’t the only decline in finances of New Deal programs; many other projects like the Federal Music Project saw their funding reduced. Congressional support deteriorated in the late 1930s, and the budget bill passed in June 1939 reflected the reduced support. Sokolof had resigned the previous month amid debate over his preference toward classical music. Also in 1939 the Federal Music Project was renamed. Its new name was the WPA Music Program. This didn’t last long though. A year later the Federal Music Project/WPA Music Program was terminated. State music projects came to an end with the ending of the WPA on June 30, 1943.

The FMP made possible the creation of hundreds of new orchestras, singers, dancers, vocal groups, and vocal producers, and helped support a wider appreciation for music nationwide. Additionally, the FMP created many new orchestral pieces of music. This included the philharmonic works of Aaron Copland who emerged to create one of the most distinct American styles in music history.