

Settling the Scores



Pictured above: As part of the Works Program Administration (WPA) initiated by President Roosevelt in 1935, dozens of copyists were hired to extract instrumental parts from orchestral scores.

Inset: The family of Edwin A. Fleisher (1877–1958) made its fortune in the Philadelphia yarn industry.



Only the largest orchestras can afford a library of orchestral parts and scores. Philadelphia's Fleisher Collection can help the rest. With more than 21,000 titles, it is the largest lending library of orchestral music in the world.

*by Joe Barron
photos courtesy of the Fleisher Collection*

To Kile Smith's friends, it seems like the perfect day job. He works in a library, surrounded by ever-growing stacks of the great, and not so great orchestral works of history. What better place for a composer? He can pluck inspiration off the shelf whenever he pleases. Or so the reasoning goes. In truth,



Sam Dennison, curator of the Fleisher Collection from 1975-88, knew Eugene Ormandy, then music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra, well. Although the Orchestra has its own library, it continues to use the Fleisher Collection for scores it does not own.



In the computer age, hand-copying of scores is a thing of the past. In this photo, the cord of the electric eraser can be seen dangling from the ceiling next to Sam Dennison. The eraser, as long as a pencil, would spin very fast in order to erase markings on the manuscript.

though Smith loves what he does, the tasks of acquiring, organizing, and lending all that music keep him far too busy to sit and peruse the work of his heroes.

"I don't get to look at music," he says. "I have no time to look at music."

Smith is the curator of the Edwin A. Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music at the Free Library of Philadelphia, and he and his small staff at the main branch on Logan Circle fulfill requests for musical scores and parts from performers from Hong Kong to Lansdowne, Pa. "We sent Rachmaninoff to Moscow," he says, "if you can believe that."

Russian musicians might have libraries closer to home, but they know they can find what they are looking for at the Fleisher. News of the collection has spread as itinerant performers who stop by on their sojourns in Philadelphia carry word of it around the world. Since its modest start in 1909 as part of the Symphony Club of Philadelphia, the collection has

grown into the largest lending library of orchestral music in the world. "Nobody does what we do," Smith says.

Last fall, WRTI started to mine the neglected, but remarkable, veins of the orchestral repertoire by airing recordings of music from the collection in a new monthly show, *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection*, on the first Saturday of each month at 5:00 pm. Smith is the host, alongside Jack Moore, who calls the collaboration, "a natural."

"Kile is always looking to spread the word about the collection," Moore says, "so when I suggested it in conversation last year, he jumped at the chance." The recordings featured on the program were made with music borrowed from the Fleisher collection, according to Smith. The first work he chose to program is the *Overture to Macbeth* by the 19th-century Philadelphian William Henry Fry. For some reason, there has been a small run on this hitherto obscure piece.

"For 150 years it's never been played, and now three people want to play it," he says.

While by no means are all of the requests Smith receives for obscure works — the Fleisher stocks many alternative editions of Beethoven and Berlioz — the most heavily borrowed piece in the collection is a festival overture on the "Star-Spangled Banner" by a Connecticut Yankee named Dudley Buck, a man best known, if he is known at all, as the organ instructor of composer Charles Ives. "It's a real hoot of a piece," Smith says.

The collection's founder and namesake, Edwin Adler Fleisher, owed his family's fortune to the yarn industry. Born in 1877, he spent his life in Philadelphia and owned a factory in the neighborhood of Grays Ferry. Fleisher was an amateur violinist, and in 1909 he combined his love of music with an altruistic bent by founding the Symphony Club of Philadelphia. His intent was to provide promising young musicians with free training in orchestral performance. Fleisher often played viola alongside the students, and he did not discriminate on the basis of race or gender. Blacks and whites, boys and girls all performed together. "It was pretty far ahead of its time," Smith says of the Symphony Club. Because the musicians' training involved sight-reading of unfamiliar works, Fleisher began to collect musical scores by the hundreds, and thus the collection was born. He retired from the yarn business in 1925 to devote himself to the Symphony Club full time.

In 1929 he donated his collection of scores and parts to the Free Library (the main building on Logan Circle had opened its doors in 1927), and when he died in 1959, Smith says, he left the collection an endowment of \$100,000.



Harry Kowratsky (standing) started work at the Fleisher Collection in 1935 as part of the WPA. He was curator from 1968-75. Romulus Franceschini (seated) was assistant curator for many years until 1987. William Arthur ("Art") Daniels, seen in the background, was a music copyist, as well as a jazz saxophonist.



Kile Smith, co-host with Jack Moore of WRTI's *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* and a composer himself, has been curator of the Fleisher Collection since 1993.

While never dipping into the principal, Smith says he spends perhaps \$20,000 a year to acquire new scores. He could spend three times that much, he says, but he has been cutting back to save money for the collection's computer cataloging project, which he estimates will take about four years to complete.

The scores and orchestral parts are shelved in boxes in simple numerical order within four large groups: pieces for full orchestra, and concertos for violin, piano, and miscellaneous other instruments. The later a work arrives, the higher a number it receives, which makes the collection, in effect, a time capsule of the music that was most current or most performed at any given period in its history.

The collection's No. 1, for example — one of Fleisher's first acquisitions, if not the first — is the "Leonore" Symphony by Brahms' older contemporary Joachim Raff (1822-1882), who was still known in 1909, although his work rarely if ever shows up on orchestral programs today.

The most recent acquisition, *Acousticon for Orchestra* by Marcel Farago, a retired cellist with the Philadelphia Orchestra, is No. 8,302 in the group of full orchestra titles. The whole collection actually contains more than 21,000 titles.

While the numerical arrangement saves the staff the trouble of having to constantly make room on the shelves to keep similar pieces together, "it makes it impossible to be a browsing collection," Smith says.

Well, almost impossible. Smith likes to tell the story about the time conductor Charles Dutoit stopped by and just happened to spot something by

Debussy he'd been seeking for years. Smith, who has worked at the Fleisher Collection since 1981, savors those little "Eureka!" moments that seem to punctuate the life of an archivist.

Perhaps his greatest triumph came before his promotion to curator nine years ago. As assistant curator, given the task of sifting through shelf-loads of uncataloged music, he came across a pencil score written by the American composer George Antheil for a film shown during the 1939 New York World's Fair. Smith had never heard of the piece. With growing excitement, he looked up Antheil in the *Grove Dictionary of Music*, where he found this entry in the listing of the composer's works: "Music to a World's Fair Film for the Communication Building, 1939, lost."

"I slammed the desk," Smith recalls, "and I said, 'Not anymore!'"

The latest edition of *Grove* does not list the work as lost. While waiting for his next big discovery, if it ever happens, Smith goes on mailing and shipping music around the globe. The phone used to ring a lot, but with greater reliance on faxes and e-mails, the office has grown much quieter, if no less busy.

"You never get tired of it," he says. "Every day there's something new." ♡

Joe Barron is a staff writer for Montgomery Newspapers in Fort Washington, Pa.

Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music
Benjamin Franklin Parkway, at 19th and Vine Streets
Philadelphia. Tel 215-686-5313. www.library.phila.gov