

The San Antonio Federal Orchestra of 1936-1943: A Forgotten Link in the Musical Heritage of South Texas

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San Antonio is one of Texas's most distinctive cities. Mark Twain famously referred to it as one of only four unique cities in America -- the others being Boston, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Since its founding in 1718 by Spanish missionaries, successive waves of German, Irish, and Mexican immigrants have settled here. Today it is known as the home of the Alamo, the home of the Spurs, and -- of course -- the birthplace of the breakfast taco. Decisive steps towards its current urban identity took place in the 1930s. A disastrous flood in 1921 deeply damaged the downtown business district. In the wake of that natural disaster, city leaders renewed emphasis on public infrastructure. The 1930s and early 40s saw the construction of San Antonio's signature urban feature, the downtown Riverwalk, whose larger purpose was flood control. Labor and funding for the Riverwalk project was provided by the federal government's Works Progress Administration. The WPA and other federal works projects of the era helped San Antonio roll out a long list of construction projects that permanently changed the look and feel of the urban core. Also built around this time were Alamo Stadium, the Arneson River Theater, and the entire La Villita historic district. Upgrades to the San Antonio Zoo, the Sunken Garden Theatre, the airport, and the historic missions also took place. Limestone rock for these projects was quarried nearby, carved from the hills and rocky plateau sweeping northward from the expanding city. One of these quarries became the site of what is now Trinity University, which settled in its current location on the grounds of a former rock quarry in 1952.

All of these projects remain largely in place today. Less visible by far are any traces of the thousands of people who worked for the WPA's other projects during this period, including county records researchers, arts and crafts artists, typists, teachers, nurses, furniture repairmen, and library workers. A report from 1940 summarizes the WPA's jobs relief numbers. In the greater San Antonio area an average of 4,500 men and women were employed by the WPA each year.¹ We are here today to talk about one of those projects, the

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San Antonio Federal Orchestra, which was established in 1936 as part of the Texas Music Project.

Texans seem to never tire of talking about the Battle of the Alamo and its interpretation. Texas history is an absorbing interest for many people in the state. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to realize how *unstudied* San Antonio's cultural history is. Supported by a Mellon Foundation Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship at Trinity University, our project began as an effort to more fully understand the factors that led to the creation of the San Antonio Symphony in 1939. The San Antonio Symphony is the city's second oldest performing arts organization. It recently celebrated its 75th anniversary. The story of its founding has been told so often over the years that it has settled into place as a type of creation myth. We might paraphrase this myth as follows. In the beginning the classical music life of San Antonio was without form and void, and darkness was upon the city. Then, in 1939, an Italian conductor named Max Reiter stepped off a train in downtown San Antonio. And there was light. Within months city leaders had formed the San Antonio Symphony and appointed Max Reiter the first music director. Ten years later the new orchestra was performing American premieres of new works by Richard Strauss and drawing national attention for its vigor and for its impressive commitment to opera. Virgil Thomson, in a 1950 review titled "Texas's Major Orchestras," praised the still new orchestra for "the liveness and loveliness of its playing." The San Antonio Symphony, he said, "is a maverick; there is nothing else quite like it."²

Max Reiter would lead the orchestra until his death in 1950. Backed by prominent supporters in the Jewish community, and by the downtown business leaders, he built an excellent ensemble that rivaled symphonies in Dallas and Houston. His achievements were impressive. Yet in San Antonio today one rarely hears mention of the two *earlier* incarnations of the San Antonio Symphony, dating back to 1905, and, earlier still, the orchestras assembled by the region's German singing societies for their post-Civil War Sangerfests. Studies of the city's early music history are few in number, and not generally known outside university circles.³ In the popular imagination it's as if symphonic music in San Antonio was born in 1939 when Max Reiter arrived.

Too simple? Too clean a tale? Perhaps. Our Mellon research project in the summer of 2015 allowed us to explore around the story's edges, to see if we could identify additional factors that led city leaders to settle on Reiter so quickly in 1939. In a city with five US military bases, November of 1939 at first glance might seem a very inauspicious time to

¹ "WPA 1940," reprinted in *The Explorer* 19 (2013), Texana/Genealogy Dept., San Antonio Public Library, 29.

² Virgil Thomson, "Texas's Major Orchestras" (*New York Herald Tribune*, March 26, 1950), reprinted in Tim Page, ed., *Thomson: Music Chronicles 1940-54*, Library of America (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2014), 731.

³ Useful studies of the city's classical music history, specifically with respect to its orchestras, include Larry Wolz, "Roots of Classical Music in Texas: The German Contribution," in Lawrence Clayton and Joe W. Specht, ed., *The Roots of Texas Music* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003); Lota Spell, *Music in Texas: A Survey of One Aspect of Cultural Progress* (Austin, TX, 1936); and Marcia Holliman, *The Development of the San Antonio Symphony, 1939-66* (MM Thesis, Trinity University, 1966). See also Carl Leafstedt, "San Antonio," in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

launch a new symphony organization. Surely there was more to the story, we thought. And there was. Archival holdings for the San Antonio Symphony are kept in the public library downtown in its historical collections and Texana room. There, looking at Max Reiter's personal scrapbooks one afternoon, we came across a passing reference on an early concert program to a "federal orchestra" in San Antonio at the same time. Our paper today is the result of that chance finding. We had stumbled upon an orchestra lost to history, and which – we checked – did not even generate a single hit on a quick Google search.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal work relief projects were vitally important to a generation of Americans struggling to regain their footing during the Great Depression. Millions of Americans were receiving checks from the government by 1934 in exchange for physical labor and work of all types. The Federal *Music* Project was created in 1935 as part of the larger Federal Project Number One under the New Deal's WPA. Historian Kenneth Bindas, of Kent State University, has written a book-length study of the Federal Music Project's impact on American society. \$27.3 million dollars was allocated by Roosevelt in September 1935 for -- in Bindas's words -- the "risky task of employing the nation's artists and inherently rediscovering and defining American culture."⁴ Legislation divided these funds into four main areas: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Theater Project, and the Federal Music Project.

Here in San Antonio, the Federal Music Project resulted in three new ensembles starting in 1936. To our knowledge none of these ensembles has received close scholarly attention.⁵ The Federal Music Project is known to have felt a sense of responsibility to not just the white population, but also the many minority populations across the country.⁶ In 1936, Mexican American musicians were hired to play in a new Orchestra *Tipica*, led by Dan Silva. Figure 1 shows the Orchestra *Tipica* on stage in Municipal Auditorium. The tipica orchestra gave performances in public parks, schools, museums, hotels, and anywhere they could find a sponsor. They performed music primarily written by Spanish and Mexican composers. Bindas notes that the orchestra was always in demand on traditional Mexican holidays. They helped celebrate the Texas centennial in 1936. These tipica orchestras were popular around the American Southwest, Bindas explains. Nowhere were they more popular than in Texas, and San Antonio's was the most popular of all. An African American jazz band was also created (Figure 2). Both these ensembles played regularly around San Antonio for many years.

The third newly created musical ensemble in San Antonio was the Federal Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra existed for seven years, from 1936-43, giving concerts across the city and throughout the region. Its musicians were paid between \$45 and \$75 a month for their services. Walter Dunham, a well-known organist, pianist, and musician in San Antonio, conducted the orchestra, for much of its existence.

For the purposes of this presentation, and its written format, an overview will be sufficient to document the nature of the Federal Symphony Orchestra's activities.

⁴ Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to This Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), x.

⁵ Historian Peter Gough devotes several pages to the Texas Music Project in San Antonio and around Texas as part of his larger examination of the Federal Music Project's impact on cities and populations in the American West. Peter Gough, *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁶ Bindas, *All of This Music*, 71.

Figure 1. San Antonio's Orchestra Tipica, ca. 1940, a unit of the Federal Music Project. Shown here in Municipal Auditorium (?). Photographer unknown. (The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections, John M. Steinfeldt Family Papers.)



Figure 2. San Antonio's jazz band, ca. 1940, a unit of the Federal Music Project. Shown here in Municipal Auditorium (?). Photographer unknown. (The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections, John M. Steinfeldt Family Papers.)



Figure 3. San Antonio Federal Orchestra, May 1941, rehearsing at the Sunken Garden Theatre. Walter Dunham, cond. By this time the ensemble was popularly known as the “WPA orchestra.” Photographer unknown. (L-2745-G, San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, UTSA Special Collections -- Institute of Texan Cultures.)



Figure 4. San Antonio Federal Orchestra, ca. 1940, Walter Dunham, cond. Municipal Auditorium (?). Photographer unknown. (The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections, John M. Steinfeldt Family Papers.)



In February 1937 it played for a flood benefit concert held at the Elks Club. It played at schools across the city and region. It played in the ballroom of the St. Anthony Hotel, and at the San Pedro Playhouse. On August 6, 1938, it played an afternoon concert at the American Legion Hospital outside Kerrville, Texas, and an evening concert that same day at the Westminster Encampment in Kerrville. It gave a program on “nationalism in music” as guests of the Sinfonia Society of Incarnate Word College in the college auditorium on December 1, 1938. In November 1939 it played a morning concert on the roof garden of the Plaza Hotel downtown as part of a special event for a local organization known as the Delphian Council. On March 22, 1940, it accompanied a 200-voice choir drawn from nine San Antonio churches for a Good Friday Service held at Municipal Auditorium. It played at PTA meetings, and, in November of 1940, at an open house for “Book Week and Education Week” at Burbank High School. In March 1941 it played for a Lenten Musicale at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church, where Dunham was organist and music director, in an educational program that included “explanations of instruments used.”

During this time the orchestra played regular orchestral concerts in the evenings at Municipal Auditorium in downtown San Antonio. It added a summer series of outdoor summer concerts in 1938, all played at the Sunken Garden Theatre in Brackenridge Park (Figure 3). All these events and concerts were announced in the local newspapers.⁷ A concert on the evening of October 30, 1938, for example, featured Mozart’s 41st Symphony, the *Marriage of Figaro* Overture, and the First Carmen Suite and L’Arlésienne Suite, the latter two works programmed to honor the centennial of George Bizet’s birth. Soloists were often local men and women who were in the early stages of developing concert careers; because all funding was federal, and designed to improve the circumstances of qualified professional musicians and American citizens, international concert artists were avoided as a matter of course.

A particularly important feature of its programming was its attention to children. From inception the national Federal Music Project openly emphasized education of the American public about music, particularly classical music, and its importance in the community. Adapting this purpose to children in San Antonio was a logical outgrowth of national guidelines. The numbers were huge. From a report published in 1940, we know that the WPA orchestra reached “between 13,000 and 14,000 school children” in a span of five months from January to May of 1940.⁸ Monthly narrative reports from Texas WPA District 10, which covers San Antonio, were more specific. In April 1940 the WPA orchestra played for seven schools in San Antonio, for – the exact count given in the report – 5635 school children. The enthusiastic report continues,

We have, no doubt, under estimated the value of these school concerts. Invariably on the first visit to one of these schools, 90% of the children hear a symphony orchestra for the first time, and 99% start out with the idea that they are going to be bored for forty-five minutes, but after having listened, are more than willing to say they thoroughly enjoy it. If these concerts can be continued, and three or four

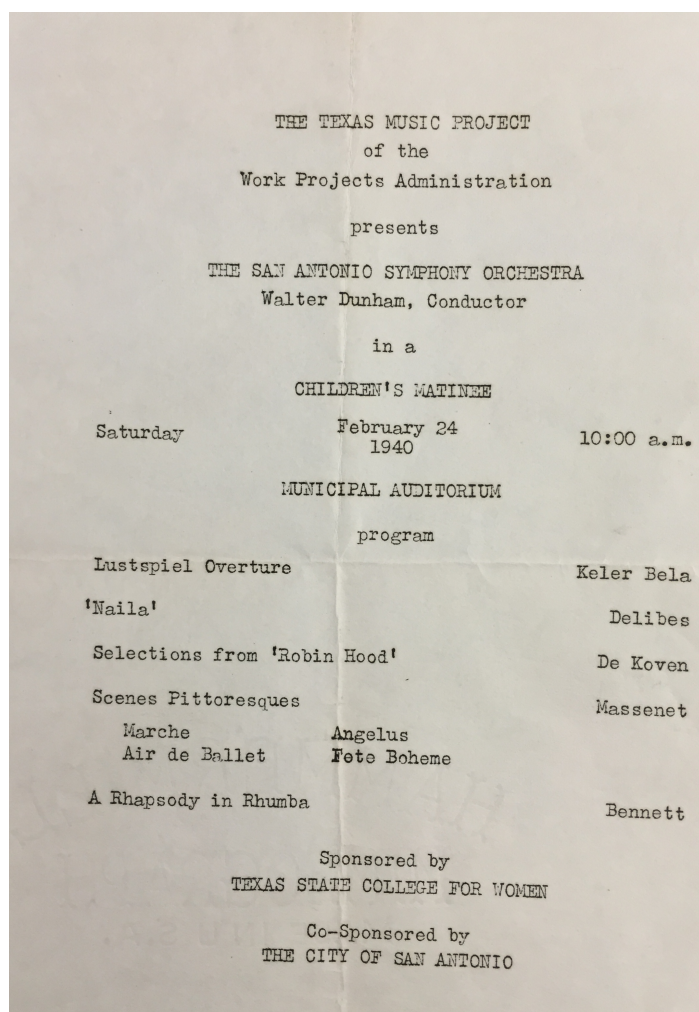
⁷ Both the *San Antonio Express* and the *San Antonio Light* routinely provided coverage of the orchestra’s events, quite often including full information about the music programmed at concerts. These two sources preserve an important record of the orchestra’s activities.

⁸ “WPA 1940,” 34.

thousand children reached each month, with a few minutes of good music, an audience is being created for the musicians of the future, which we think is important.⁹

Audience interest grew as the federal orchestra established itself. By 1938 the orchestra was playing regularly in Municipal Auditorium, the largest venue in the city; audiences for the outdoor concerts in Sunken Garden Theatre were routinely estimated at 1,000 or more people. A concert program from a children's matinee is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Federal Symphony Orchestra, Children's Matinee concert, Municipal Auditorium, Feb. 24, 1940. (The University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries, Special Collections, John M. Steinfeldt Family Papers.)



⁹ Monthly Narrative Report, April 1940, Federal Works Agency Work Projects Administration, Texas District No. 10. WPA San Antonio records, Briscoe American History Center, The University of Texas at Austin, item 4M109.

While the orchestra made an effort to feature American composers and arrangers on its programs, the bulk of its programming was still the standard orchestral repertoire of that era -- always tending towards the lighter, more popular side. Frequent pieces the orchestra played include “Three Dances from Henry VIII” by Edward German, “Marche Slave” by Tchaikovsky, and Schubert’s “Unfinished.” By 1937 the orchestra seemed to increase in skill and ability, as they were able to play the Franck D-minor Symphony in October of that year. Our research revealed that repertoire difficulty increased over time, as did the number of players.¹⁰ Thirty instrumentalists played the federal orchestra’s very first concert on November 2, 1936. In the spring of 1938 its size was variously reported as 35, 36, or 40 players depending on the concert. By 1941, when the orchestra played in Laredo, the *Laredo Times* reported one hundred players in the orchestra. As the orchestra kept performing, its visibility attracted further musicians. In addition to building the Riverwalk, the city was building a symphony.

The political ups and downs of the national Federal Music Project have been discussed by a number of later writers. In the fall of 1939, the Federal Music Project suffered a setback. President Roosevelt announced new financial guidelines that required states to line up separate sponsors equal to twenty-five percent of funding. In San Antonio’s case, the Texas State College of Women and the City of San Antonio stepped in as official sponsors to satisfy the new regulation. Their names can be seen at the bottom of the concert program in Figure 5.

Further changes were forced on the Federal Music Project once World War II began. Government funding was redirected to the war effort. By early 1942, if not before, the San Antonio unit of the Federal Music Project was required to meet a quota of “50% Defense programs.” This figure was met largely by the Tipica and Jazz ensembles, which were used for popular entertainment on nearby military bases, but partial responsibility lay also with the classical orchestra.¹¹ The purpose of the federal orchestra in San Antonio changed. It now played more often at venues on base, rather than performing for the whole community. The WPA orchestra still played some official concerts, but they became more irregular. By 1942, regular concerts in the Municipal Auditorium were almost nonexistent. The orchestra continued to play concerts for servicemen and women at the United Service Organization, but it seemed to slowly disappear from the public eye. It was last mentioned in the *San Antonio Light* on January 24, 1943, for one of these performances at the United Service Organization. Roosevelt announced that all operations of the WPA would be closed out by February 1, 1943. He kept his word. The WPA orchestra in San Antonio ceased to exist after that date.

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¹⁰ A 12-page typed “Catalogue of Music of the Texas Music Project” is preserved in the San Antonio Public Library’s collections. Dating from ca. 1943, it lists 273 orchestral scores and documents what must have at one time been the entire orchestral library of the San Antonio Federal Orchestra. “Catalogue. Music of the Texas Music Project, Works Progress Administration, San Antonio, Texas.” Unpublished typescript. Texana/Genealogy Department, San Antonio Public Library.

¹¹ Louise K. Lyons, unpublished letter to Walter Dunham, 1 p., typed. Jan. 13, 1942. UTSA Special Collections, John M. Steinfeldt Family Papers.

Knowing that the Federal Orchestra existed, and briefly flourished, we now can begin to put in place the larger context surrounding the 1939 creation of a new orchestra known as the San Antonio Symphony. The Federal Orchestra's significance to San Antonio's music history is threefold.

1. At a very basic level, it provided jobs for musicians beginning in 1936, and in so doing, stabilized the careers of existing musicians and attracted new musicians to the city who found work here, allowing them to make something approaching a living.
2. It popularized orchestra music in San Antonio on a massive scale, reaching tens of thousands of people a year, many of them school children.
3. It developed in San Antonio a renewed appetite for this music -- important in a city that witnessed disbandment of its previous symphonies.

By the time it ran its course, the Federal Orchestra had introduced people from all over the city to symphonic music. A broad cross section of the population had attended its concert events. The national director of the Federal Music Project, Nikolai Sokoloff, reflected this sense of inclusiveness in an annual report. He further hoped WPA orchestras themselves would include all people in the ensemble, regardless of their race or gender. Women were specifically included in the San Antonio Federal Orchestra and can be seen in the known photos of the ensemble (see Figures 3 and 4 above). Writers of the time, such as Margaret Grant and Herman Hettinger, also observed how WPA orchestras aimed at broad inclusivity: "By breaking down the barriers of social exclusiveness and artistic snobbery, [the WPA orchestras] have awakened the interest of large groups of the public which have been indifferent to symphony concerts hitherto."¹² Because concerts were free, the San Antonio Federal Orchestra minimized concerns over cost as a barrier to classical music. The necessity of buying season tickets did not exist. Any community member was welcome to attend their concerts.

The founders of the new San Antonio Symphony in 1939 clearly owed much to the inspiration set by the Federal Symphony Orchestra. Around the country, dozens of other cities felt inspired by the Federal Music Project to create new civic orchestras or rejuvenate lapsed orchestras. Des Moines, Tulsa, Hartford, Buffalo, Syracuse, Providence, Richmond, St. Petersburg . . . all of these cities experienced new interest in orchestral music in the late 1930s as a result of their Federal Music Project orchestras, and subsequently founded or reestablished civic orchestras during this period.¹³ Here in San Antonio the two orchestras clearly shared many of the same musicians. During the 1941 summer concert series, the *San Antonio Light* reported that "28 members of the San Antonio symphony orchestra" would join the WPA orchestra. Another article published by the same paper on June 5, 1941, indicated that more than half of the WPA orchestra's personnel was made up of members of

¹² Margaret Grant and Herman Hettinger, *America's Symphony Orchestras and How They Are Supported* (NY: W.W. Norton, 1940), 222.

¹³ This phenomenon is discussed in Bindas, *All of This Music*, 18-22, as well as in other sources, including Cornelius Baird Canon, "The Federal Music Project of the Works Project Administration: Music in a Democracy," Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1963.

the San Antonio Symphony. These members included Lucas Cerna, concertmaster of the federal orchestra, Barbara Faught, Theo Lira, Henri De Rudder, and Juan Macias. Dan Silva often appeared as a conductor and arranger for the federal orchestra in early years. He played clarinet for the San Antonio Symphony once it began. The schedules of the two orchestras overlapped comfortably, allowing some musicians, like Silva, to play in both. Importantly – this is a critical distinction – one orchestra was funded by the federal government, while the other was private, funded through ticket sales and personal philanthropy in a model familiar from today’s orchestra world.

Confusion in the two orchestra’s names seems to have been widespread – and tolerated. From the beginning the Federal Orchestra was often called “the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra.” Even after the present-day San Antonio Symphony was formed in 1939 the existing federal orchestra still freely used that name. The concert program shown in Figure 5, above, clearly shows the Federal Orchestra playing as “The San Antonio Symphony Orchestra.” We can see the same nomenclature problems at work in the concert announcement shown in Figure 6. Both examples are typical for the era.

Figure 6. “S.A. Symphony to Play in Garden.” Concert announcement. *San Antonio Light*, June 6, 1941. Retrieved from newspaperarchive.com.

S. A. Symphony to Play in Garden

The San Antonio Symphony orchestra of the Texas Music project, which will play its first summer concert of the season at the Sunken Garden theater Friday at 8:30 p. m., was at the time of its organization in 1936 San Antonio's first symphony orchestra in 17 years.

At that time it was composed of 25 musicians, and its library was limited. Yet it shouldered the task of re-educating a city that loved but had forgotten the worth of symphonic music.

Today with 40 members and the augmented library of the Texas Music project and its co-sponsor with the city of San Antonio, the Texas State College for Women, the WPA symphony is again bearing its annual burden alone.

DIFFICULT JOB.

The job of keeping San Antonio conscious of and interested in symphonic music through the summer months is no mean one. Walter Dunham, who conducts the San Antonio symphony knows this, and he

lliar Tchaikovsky with a generous sugar coating of Victor Herbert.

Thus San Antonio's own conductor has selected for the orchestra's opening concert a program perfectly blended to suit local musical appetites and needs.

DUNHAM COMES TO S. A.

Walter Dunham, native of New Jersey, came to San Antonio in uniform in 1917, educated at Leifson-Hille conservatory, Philadelphia, and at the University of Pennsylvania. Discharged from the army in 1918, he taught music at the Bon Avon school. Later he served as organist and choirmaster at St. Mark's church for 12 years and was municipal organist for six years.

Now as conductor of the San Antonio symphony, San Antonian Dunham, in his twenty-third year of leadership in local music circles, looks forward to the orchestra's greatest warm-weather season since its Centennial organization. Already auspiciously launched by the Tipica orchestra, the summer concert series has been unusually well attended.

After 1939, concert activities mentioned in the city’s newspapers began to show less use of the word “federal” in references to the orchestra. Instead, the orchestra typically appeared as “the symphony orchestra of the WPA music project,” or, simply, the “WPA orchestra.” Max Reiter’s new orchestra was often referred to as the “San Antonio Civic Symphony” in early newspaper coverage -- a title not acknowledged in the San Antonio Symphony’s official online history. Yet when it was registered with the Secretary of State’s office in 1939, the

orchestra took as its official name the Symphony Society of San Antonio – a name it came to regret many times in later decades for its elitist connotation. By the mid war years, in 1943, the San Antonio Symphony was able to lay sole claim to that name following the WPA orchestra's phase-out.

Evidence we uncovered also suggests that federal funding may have been one factor in the financial stability of the current San Antonio Symphony in its first season. Private contributions and ticket sales funded the Symphony Society of San Antonio, yet concert programs from its first season cite "Federal Music Project" in acknowledgments, as if this *public* funding source contributed to this apparently *private* organization. Most likely this took the form of federal subventions for some musicians' salaries during concert weeks. The FMP disappears from lists of acknowledgements after the new orchestra's October 7, 1940, concert. As scholars begin to take notice of the Federal Symphony, inevitably some shifting of the historical record will take place. Currently, for example, the San Antonio Symphony takes credit for pioneering the concept of children's concerts beginning in 1943, pointing proudly to its long record of dedication in this area. Clearly, however, the Federal Orchestra had already introduced the idea in San Antonio eight years earlier to great success.

Resurrecting the Federal Orchestra from the dustbin of history allows us to discern a richer picture of orchestral music in San Antonio and South Texas. Without taking anything away from Max Reiter's ability to galvanize the private sector into creating a new orchestra in 1939, we can now see that the vision he is credited with owes much to the citizens of San Antonio who had already been creating a community for classical orchestra music since 1936. During these same years, radio broadcasts of symphony concerts from St. Louis, Boston, and New York could be heard weekly in San Antonio and other cities in the American West. In modern business terms, the Federal Orchestra helped "create a market" for orchestral music in San Antonio. The slightly later San Antonio Symphony capitalized on the appetite for orchestral music it had fostered. Max Reiter also capitalized on the core group of orchestra musicians that Federal Music Project had gathered in the city. The new Symphony Society of San Antonio formally launched in the fall of 1939, with a short season of four concerts featuring dazzling international superstars such as Jascha Heifetz, Alec Templeton, and opera stars Zinka Milanov and Nino Martini. Its season brochure advertised "A Ninety Piece Orchestra, A Conductor of Authority, Four Famous Guest Artists." That ninety-piece orchestra? It wouldn't have been possible without the Federal Music Project's activities over the preceding three years -- important years of orchestral activity in San Antonio that allowed new civic dreams to take wing.