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Subsidy of the Arts in Free Europe and the United States

By Henry Lee Munson

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Henry Lee Munson is Vice President of Harold L. Oram, Inc., a public relations and fund raising counsel firm. His interest in the national cultural scene was intensified during his year's service as National Program Director for the proposed National Cultural Center.

After conducting a nation-wide survey for the National Cultural Center, Mr. Munson found that no comprehensive information existed in the United States as to what other countries did in the way of cultural support, and why they had decided to do what they did. Mr. Munson was encouraged to conduct a study himself, and the following article represents the Summary of his Report.

Incidentally, two prominent foundations are currently studying the economics of the performing arts. One of the executives assigned to this study contacted the Austrian Embassy for the most up-to-date description of their cultural program. They told him they had it all for him, and sent this foundation a copy of Mr. Munson's report.

Government support, or subsidy, of any aspect of American life, be it growing potatoes or not growing potatoes, enjoys such disfavor in the national mind that it is difficult indeed to arouse sympathy for it where it is most desperately needed—in our culture. Add to that the unpleasant truth that America, by and large, has rated the dollar well above culture as a vital factor in attaining the fullness of its life. Alone among the great nations of the world, we allow our finest cultural institutions to stumble yearly from financial crisis to financial crisis, perhaps someday to oblivion.

One need only look at the record. In New York, the Metropolitan Opera cheated death only by the personal, eleventh-hour intervention of President Kennedy and the tireless ministrations of the then Secretary Goldberg; the

N. Y. Philharmonic Symphony was rescued when the trap had all but closed. The same with the Philadelphia and Cleveland orchestras. And the great San Francisco Opera barely struggled to its feet at the count of nine. The tragedy is that these are all cultural institutions of international stature, the kind whose virtuosity our government likes to flaunt abroad as the aesthetic image of our nation. And yet it doesn't spend a cent to guarantee that any one of them will open for business next year.

All the cases cited above concern, of course, the performing arts where labor disputes most naturally arise. But these disputes brew from the artists' legitimate anxieties for some assurance of regular employment. A study of the security which Free European governments offer their artists, in the form of annual contracts and paid vacations, reveals some shocking comparisons with our own effort—or lack of effort. And the most conspicuous is one of attitude.

These Free European nations—and Iron Curtain countries too—treat their artists as national assets, guardians of a heritage as personal and prideful to their peoples as nationality itself. To preserve this, they believe that government subsidy of the arts, stressing superb quality above financial return, is an entirely proper lien on the citizens' money—and the citizens thoroughly agree. The American official attitude is diametrically opposite and quite consistent. It shudders at spending anything; but there's a gathering suspicion that the citizens *do not* thoroughly agree.

Our government doesn't even allot a dime for the purchase of American works of art for our embassies and

consulates throughout the world! Such art as does grace their walls is either on temporary loan from a museum or is owned personally by the incumbent; when he leaves, the walls are bare again. Strange, isn't it, that America, which has become the world center of modern painting and whose artists have captured the imagination of all peoples, should have no federal funds permanently to display this art anywhere, be it in our embassy in Moscow or in a consulate in Cambodia.

Free Europe places the performing arts on the same level as museums and libraries, all incurring deficits but considered essential to the development of national taste and the fulfillment of national life. To cite only one category, no country expects its ticket sales to cover more than 30 per cent (often only 10 per cent) of its opera costs. The Metropolitan Opera, on the other hand, must cover 85 per cent of its costs through tickets, the rest through benefactions. And the Metropolitan can never afford more than 30 or 33 rehearsals for a performance, nor has it produced a new work since 1958. In Europe, up to 200 rehearsals are common; and last summer, at the Berlin Festival alone, eight world premieres, including operas, were presented.

Each of these countries, too, buys the best of its artists' creations and distributes them to museums, schools, public buildings and to their embassies and missions abroad. Moreover, all of Free Europe often pays as much as 30 per cent of initial publication costs for its poets, writers and composers. We pay nothing.

Here are some salient facts drawn from this study of cultural support by the governments of seven Free European nations:

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The British government turned to subsidy of the arts during World War II, as a fillip to national morale. It has never stopped. England's most renowned cultural exports, second only to Sir Winston and Diana Dors, are the wonderful Old Vic theatrical group, slum-born in an effort to improve the social conditions of its environment, and the Royal (formerly Sadlers Wells) Ballet. They are welcome the world over and last year they received a combined subsidy from the government of about \$900,000.

West Germany funnels more money into support of the arts than any Free European country. Almost all direct aid comes from the states, but for 1960—the latest available figure—the combined federal and state aid totaled an astounding \$67,000,000. These funds sustained 128 theaters and operas to the extent of two thirds of their costs. And attendance is booming. So is the country.

The Austrian government spends more on its five national theaters than on its entire foreign service, including all its embassies and consulates. In return, its income from tourism which reached nearly \$270,000,000 in 1961 absorbs close to 80 per cent of its unfavorable trade balance.

Greece is a most interesting showcase. Recently it inaugurated a series of festivals as tourist attractions, but realized immediately that their quality had to be drastically up-graded. Government money poured in with spectacular success. But Greece's most intriguing contribution to cultural burgeoning was not flood-lighting the Parthenon but the establishment of a revolving fund of only \$100,000. From this, theatrical producers can borrow up to \$4200 to be repaid, at no interest, within one or two years. The result? More than 100 plays, many of them American, were staged in Athens last year, more than twice what Broadway was able to spawn.

France, of course, is unique in the whole history of state-supported culture. The pulse of this conception throbbed strongly through the centuries of the kings; but even during the Revolution it didn't miss a beat. Actually, the Comédie Française, which President de Gaulle has called "the very pride of France," was born in 1804 by an act of government under the First Empire; and one of its most vital supporting decrees was drafted by Napoleon as he braced himself against the gales and blizzards of Moscow in October 1812. Since then, the French have held staunchly to the doctrine that art, in any form, is a communication of national spirit from the artist to the people. It must, therefore, be sustained at any cost. It is the

French conviction that culture must always be available to its citizens—plays to be experienced, paintings to be seen, music to be heard.

The only cultural gesture our government has made has been through the State Department—in 1954. Each year this Department has set aside about \$2,250,000 for sending American drama, dance and music groups or individuals to all corners of the world. These tours were handled exclusively, and most intelligently, through ANTA (American National Theater & Academy) and have been enormously successful. Now the State Department has taken over these panels and administers the program itself. But it won't belittle this program in the slightest to point out its limitations. First, it is confined solely to the performing arts; second, it subsidizes only those artists who have already reached stardom and in no way encourages the incipient artist; and third, this all takes place abroad.

Commenting on this project, Mr. Herman D. Kenin, president of the American Federation of Musicians, said; "It is hypocritical, perhaps dishonest, for the government to portray these highly competent and successful artists whom we send abroad as typical of American cultural life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Actually, most of our promising performers and entertainers have no assurance whatsoever that they can make a steady living from their profession and many are literally struggling for existence."

Perhaps the State Department panel arrangement for the export of our cultural talent could set a pattern for nurturing our potential talent at home. There are basically three panels, and one sub-committee, composed of teachers, composers, performers and critics in the fields of drama, music and dance. They represent every section of the country in both professional and amateur skills. The names of groups or individuals who have been screened by these panels and found artistically competent are submitted to the State Department. The State Department, and this is most important, has absolutely no voice in the judging of competence. Its only function, after considering the recommendations of the panels, is to decide which artists to send to what areas of the world and how much money to allot.

Surely some similar system of panels, sifting both creative and performing talent in embryo and recommending to a federal agency empowered to give financial aid to those people of positive promise, would set a brush fire sweeping through our whole cultural effort.

One question arises in all our minds:

would government support of the arts mean government dictation of the arts? In all the seven countries of Free Europe visited for this study, not one instance of such interference was found. The opposite was universally the rule. A fine confirmation comes from Austria where a government cultural administrator, a staunch Catholic, was asked to release funds to back the very anti-clerical play, *The Cardinal*, with whose theme he violently disagreed. But the producer immediately got the money. "You Americans," a West German said recently, "constantly boast of your wonderfully democratic form of government and its expression of the popular will. But the truth is, so it seems to us, that you don't trust it—at least not in aid to the arts."

The late President and Mrs. Kennedy were keenly aware of our country's "cultural gap," to paraphrase our missile men. They had made all forms of art an integral part of White House life. The late President appointed the very able August Heckscher, head of the Twentieth Century Fund, as White House consultant on culture. Mr. Heckscher has long advocated the use of government funds to seek out, abet and sustain new talented artists or groups who now flounder in a state of insecurity or suspended bankruptcy.

"An industrial civilization," Mr. Heckscher wrote in the report of the PRESIDENT'S COMMISSION ON NATIONAL GOALS, "brought to the highest point of development, has still to prove that it can nourish and sustain a rich cultural life . . . The time has now come when we must acknowledge them (the arts) to be central and conceive their fullest development as essential to the nation's moral well-being . . . Among our own people, meanwhile, there is a deep and persistent questioning about the significance of our material advance. The ultimate dedication to our way of life will be won not on the basis of economic satisfactions alone, but on the basis of an inward quality and an ideal."

Ideals and symbols shape society and it is the artist, the musician, and the writer who shape these ideas and symbols for us. They provide the priceless core of civilization. Their nurturing is essential to the quality of life we live. How can individuals, foundations and corporations be expected to shoulder this entire job? Why should they be expected to carry the entire burden? (How can they under the present tax system?—Ed.) Is it not ultimately the responsibility of society? In our form of society, it is governments—city, state and federal—that constitute the means for common social action.

THE END