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## National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): News Article 02

Donal Henahan

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# Music

*"If the encouragement of private and corporate grantors is the way to keep government out of the arts, ingenious efforts should be made in that direction." (Donal Henahan)*

## MUSIC VIEW

DONAL HENAHAN

# Who Supports the Arts Today? And Who Tomorrow?

**A**n article on funding the arts, which ran in this section a few pages to the north of us last week, read rather like an Agatha Christie mystery: "Who Killed Lady Bountiful?" The lady in question being that nearly extinct patron of the fine arts who could and did wipe out deficits with the stroke of a pen. She and her husband, Lord Bountiful, went about America under such names as Kahn, Belmont and Rockefeller, doing good for the opera, the symphony and museums — and, incidentally, climbing ever higher in the social empyrean, where a concern for these institutions was taken as a mark of old-family status. Now, we are told, these latter-day Esterházy and Medicis have disappeared. Foul play is suspected.

But no. Lord and Lady Bountiful live. They simply have barricaded themselves behind the sheltering structure known as the private foundation. That much the author indicates; but there are implications to this shift that need to be thought about. The inescapable fact is that America's very rich no longer need to appear as deeply concerned with the arts as the great plutocratic families did a few generations ago, simply because contemporary American society puts little social premium on such concern. The bulk of the artistic activity that benefited from the Bountifuls's beneficences in the past was rooted in European high culture, inherited or imported by us to fill a vacuum. For some time, however, the prestige and vitality of European culture have

arts through past grants. If your organization is one of the 250,000 groups actively engaged in arts, humanities or educational work, as defined by the IRS, how can you learn where these putative successors to the Bountifuls are to be found in what has come to be called the "foundation complex"?

A good guidebook, for a start, is the "National Directory of Arts Support by Private Foundations," published by the Washington International Arts Letter and edited by its founder, Daniel Millsaps. Now in its fourth edition, this 216-page reference work is available for \$16 from the Washington International Arts Letter, P.O. Box 9005, Washington, D.C. 20003. A companion volume, the "National Directory of Arts Support by Business Corporations," also is available from the same source, as part of "The Arts Patronage Series."

Although it has become plain in recent years that private financial support for the arts has been drying up, partly as a result of the straitened economy, there is still considerable traffic in grants. The private foundations directory lists the 1,300 funders that now claim to be active in making arts grants and indicates which categories of artistic activity the foundation favors with its gifts. Besides giving a code (M for Music, V for Visual Arts, L for Literature, and so on), the entries offer such fascinating details as total capitalization, names of foundation officers and directors, current grants and where to send your application.

However, as Mr. Millsaps points out in an introduction, it is not always easy to discover which foundations give in what areas and how much, even for professional students of the subject. Complaining that "there is still much secrecy about and within foundations," he notes that "in an annual report of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, one of the nation's 20 wealthiest, it is urged that foundations make a commitment that requests be handled 'adequately, not rejected brusquely or ignored.'" Too many foundation officials, the report charged, have grown arrogant, aloof, lazy and unwilling to venture into new areas. Only a few have open meetings. A Washington public-interest group, the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy, this year published a study of 208 foundations and concluded that secrecy was surprisingly widespread. Thirteen of the foundations even had unlisted phone numbers: don't call us, we'll call you.

It is easy to glance through Mr. Millsaps's directory and find inaccuracies and omissions. A few misspelled names leap out, for instance, and anyone involved with music must wonder why there are no entries for such well-known philanthropies as the Naumburg Foundation and the Fromm Foundation at Harvard. But there are plenty of fascinating details for the grant browser. It would help to know, for instance, that it is the policy of the Frank M. Tait Foundation "to limit all grants to Ohio, with priority to the Dayton area."

The entry for the Western New York Foundation contains a quote from its president suggesting how eagerly some foundations may be looking for a way to get out of the

**'Lord Bountiful is more likely now to yearn to acquire a major sports franchise than to bankroll an opera company.'**

been declining in America as the nation becomes more culturally diffuse and more heterogeneous in population. It would be astonishing if government grants from such sources as the National Endowment for the Arts did not increasingly reflect that shift in national values. Lord Bountiful is more likely now to yearn to acquire a major sports franchise than to bankroll an opera company. And his lady's concern has probably turned toward whatever hospital is willing to name a pavilion for her.

At the moment, there are more than 22,000 foundations registered with the Internal Revenue Service, usually bearing the names of Lord and Lady Bountiful or tax-conscious heirs. Their assets total more than \$32 billion and last year they gave out \$2.24 billion in grants. (Federal law requires foundations to pay out in grants all their income or 5 percent of their assets, whichever is greater.) But more than 1,300 among these 22,000 have demonstrated an interest in the

Continued on Page 24

# Who Will Support The Arts?

*Continued from Page 19*

arts-funding business. He contends that "support of the arts is becoming less and less a responsibility of foundations as State and Federal government provide for increasing budgets in this field. The time is not too distant when the arts will fall into the same category that health agencies now find themselves, where major funding is a governmental responsibility and foundations such as this one will become very

**'America's very rich no longer need to appear as deeply concerned.'**

reluctant to second-guess government funding."

Here we come to the kernel of the debate over arts funding: how enthusiastically should we regard the trend, however gradual, toward governmental financing of the arts? Is there anything in American political history to persuade us that government could act as sole custodian of the arts, the humanities or education without eventually bringing down the entire house in a shambles of mediocrity and mendacity? Any good student would have to answer no to that one. Not that the current mixture of public and private financing ensures either fiscal probity or artistic integrity. We hear complaints on all sides how a few politically astute

artists are able to play the system for all it is worth, not only making themselves rich in the process but effectively blocking opportunities for less-celebrated names. There are grubby rumors circulating in New York right now, furthermore, about a famous musician who played a benefit performance, ostensibly for no fee, but who was actually paid by a secret benefactor who deposited the money in a Swiss bank account. A clever government could and should step in and foil such dodges.

But sharp practices are common throughout our society and would hardly be eliminated if government took full control of the purse. Nor would unscrupulous scrambling for big money by artists and by administrators for what are called nonprofit organizations be likely to abate if Washington tax dollars were to become the sole support of the arts. What would result, however, would be a trend toward centralized authority and homogenized taste. For that reason, anyone with a long-range concern for the health of American culture ought to be happy to see private benefactors encouraged to get back into the arts. Lord and Lady Bountiful, at their worst, were fatuous and vain pretenders whose interest in the arts was superficial. But compared to your neighborhood Abscaming congressman, their aims and pretensions might not seem so bad. If the care and feeding of private and corporate grantors is the only way to keep the government out of the arts, ingenious effort should be made in that direction. Tax-dodging chicanery should be implacably guarded against, but the more hands that write the checks that pay for the arts in America, the better. In diversity there is strength. ■

From the RAYMOND ERICSON "Music Notes" Column  
N.Y. Times 10/26/80:

... Daniel Millsaps and the editors of the Washington International Arts Letter have published a "National Directory of Arts Support by Private Foundations." It will be available in libraries as soon as distribution is completed. For information, write to the Washington International Arts Letter, P.O. Box 9005, Washington, D. C. 20003. . . The Conservatory of Music-University of Missouri in Kansas City will devote this week to a festival honoring Virgil Thomson, who was born in Kansas City 84 years ago. There will be concerts, symposiums, two evenings of excerpts from his three operas and a showing of John Huszar's one-hour film on the composer. The television premiere of the film will take place in New York over Channel 13 on Nov. 24 at 10 P.M. and will be shown nationally on Public Television on Dec. 13. ■

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