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THE LIFE AND PATRONAGE OF ELIZABETH SPRAGUE COOLIDGE: EXPLORING DEVELOPMENTS
IN CULTURAL PHILANTHROPY WITH THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF AMERICAN CLASSICAL
MUSIC

by

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The Life and Patronage of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge:
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Abstract:

The decades around the turn of the twentieth century presented a sudden growth in American musical life and more specifically, classical music. My thesis explores how this crucial and formative moment coincided with the rise of cultural philanthropy in the United States. As musical life was becoming institutionalized, individualist cultural philanthropists such as Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge created and supported these opportunities in innovative and unconventional ways. By examining the case study of Coolidge, this thesis explores how the institutionalization of classical music in twentieth-century America connects to new ideas about the role of patrons in artistic life and society in general. Her Berkshire Quartet and chamber music festivals, relationship with Carl Engel and the Library of Congress, utilization of the radio, and influence on academia provide insight into other methods of individualist patronage. Additionally, this thesis considers how this period saw other women engage in patronage and music sponsorship, further contributing to the institutions of American cultural and musical life.

Introduction:

In 1864, Elizabeth Penn Sprague was born to Albert and Nancy Sprague (née Atwood), and grew up on Chicago's prosperous Gold Coast. She was born into wealth largely due to her father's successful grocery business named Sprague, Warner, & Company, which he had founded during the Civil War. Although the Sprague's were considered nouveau riche, both of Elizabeth's parents came from respected old families with lineage dating from colonial times.¹ Throughout her formative years, she found herself constantly surrounded by musicians and began piano lessons with a protégé of a protégé of Franz Liszt at eleven years old. Although she always longed for a professional career in music, such a public life was out of the question for an upper-class Victorian girl.² An only child, Elizabeth spent a great deal of time with her parents, who had always encouraged using one's wealth to support the arts.

Albert Sprague, Elizabeth's father, successfully applied the entrepreneurial skills learned in the administration of his own business to the service of artistic endeavors in Chicago. He considered the pursuit and enjoyment of music to be "life's single most beautiful adornment."³ In 1882, he joined the board of the Chicago Musical Festival Association and also began a working relationship with Theodore Thomas, who would become the first conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1891.⁴ Elizabeth grew up with an awareness of morality in the administration of wealth and saw her father as a prominent cultural philanthropist and advocate of classical music. He was an active participant in the institutionalization of the professional symphony in one of the most prominent cities in America. New symphonic

¹ Barr, Cyrilla. (1998.) *Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: American Patron of Music*. Schirmer Books, 4.

² *Ibid.*, 25-38.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

institutions contributed to the elevation of symphonic repertoire, increasingly considered to be a “divine” art form. Men like Albert Sprague helped shape these new cultural institutions with the hopes of protecting an evolving American standard for the arts. However, the involvement of these upper-class business tycoons contributed to the increasing inability of the lower-class to access developing cultural institutions. Some of them even believed that the finest forms of classical music could only be understood by “the most cultivated persons” and inserted their influence in accordance with this idea. They believed in the sacralization of art for the good of the public and possessed a degree of competition with Europe’s finest artistic centers. Likewise, they sought to establish institutions that could produce great artists and educate the public sufficiently enough to appreciate them.⁵ Elizabeth not only grew to follow the example of her father and intervene on behalf of the arts, but also developed patterns of patronage that would set her apart from the cultural philanthropists and other “cultivators” of art of the late nineteenth century.

This thesis will demonstrate how the life and patronage of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge reflect a period in which cultural philanthropy developed alongside emerging institutions of classical music. All aspects of this institutionalization were evolving as Coolidge was growing up and experiencing the joys of classical music for the first time herself, before fully flourishing by the 1920s. These evolving institutions included the symphony orchestra of the upper-crust, extravagant opera houses, conservatory music schools, classical music publishing houses, instrument production and trade, and classical music reviews presented in media. This institutionalization of classical music reflects a period when American classical music practices

⁵ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988, 115.

began to shift away from European trends and found classical music intersecting with American life as it never had before. Emerging communities of composers and magnificent concert venues provided the framework for developing artistic hubs to flourish as sites of cultural significance. Coolidge's contribution came in the form of providing new opportunities for classical musicians to make a living with the exclusive study of string quartets as well as the establishment of the country's first ever chamber music festival. Additionally, her work with Carl Engel, Oscar Sonneck, and the Music Division of the Library of Congress helped cement the United States as a country of world-class musicological endeavors.

This institutionalization occurred simultaneously with the rise of the female individualist patron, who, like Coolidge, explored new ways to assert herself in a patriarchal society through authority over American cultural life. For the purposes of this thesis, "individualist" will be defined as one who pursues a distinctly independent course in thought or action. This label stresses the independence with which these women carried out their philanthropic work, according to their own views regarding areas in the arts that were often neglected or overlooked altogether.⁶ Their actions contributed to a greater outpour of American compositions and opportunities for performers and planted the seeds of a genre that would become known as distinctly American as the century progressed.

Music sponsorship was widely practiced in Europe during this time and had been a defining feature of the professional lives of European composers and performers throughout the Baroque, Classical, and Romantic periods. While emerging in the United States between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the exclusive patronage of chamber music and string quartets

⁶ Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 28.

had never been widely practiced by American patrons of the arts. Coolidge's "interest in the old and new would remain a distinctive mark of her future endeavors"; she embraced European traditions while simultaneously contributing to the shift away from European ideas about composition and performing.⁷ She became a champion of New Music and "modernist" trends of composition, especially as they applied to string quartet repertoire, combining two areas of classical music which had been thus far overlooked in the United States.

Cultural historians such as Neil Harris, Lawrence Levine, and Joseph Horowitz view the years from 1870 to roughly 1920 as an integral time in the growth of cultural arts institutions. They note the evolution of the status and overall quality of burgeoning symphony halls and opera houses, but rarely mention the rising status of chamber music and, more specifically, professional string quartets. Additionally, their observations of the developments in cultural philanthropy explicitly note the decline in the accessibility of these art forms for those in the lower- or middle-class. I not only plan to consider this shift, but also how patrons like Coolidge democratized classical music culture in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It is a goal of this thesis to compare and contrast the wealthy business tycoons who spearheaded the financial backing of America's cultural institutions in the early nineteenth century with the twentieth century female patrons detailed by Kathleen McCarthy and Cyrilla Barr. It is important to understand how their early work in music auxiliaries and clubs and later work on symphony boards provided the opportunity for an affluent woman's influence on the arts, even if they were not yet able to break through the male-dominated philanthropic sphere. The work and innovations of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge builds off the initial philanthropic endeavors of

⁷ Barr, Cyrilla. "The Musicological Legacy of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge." *Journal of Musicology* 11 (1993): 253.

women in music and deliberately shows her willingness to break the mold in which she found herself.

The Institutionalization of American Classical Music, 1870-1920

Before addressing the ways in which classical music at the turn of the century was becoming institutionalized, it is important to understand the fundamental changes taking place and how this period marked the beginning of a shift away from European traditions. It is clear that there was a deliberate desire to show off American artistic prowess, highlighted by emerging soon-to-be-world-class symphonies and extravagant opera houses. The changes occurring within the classical music world can be viewed partially as explanation of how and why it was becoming a more integral part of national identity.

American musical culture between the 1870s and 1920s experienced a pattern of development from “the general and eclectic to the exclusive and specific.” Over the years, American composers felt the impact of society’s growing preference for all-things European, and especially those compositions which had already stood the test of time.⁸ The word “culture” was becoming synonymous with the Eurocentric products of the symphonic hall and opera house.⁹ Thus, the early decades of the twentieth century saw changes that began in the last third of the nineteenth century: the masterworks of the classic composers were to be performed in their entirety by highly trained musicians on programs free from the “contamination” of lesser works (which were often considered to be by American composers). This similarly resulted in a new distance between the amateur and professional musician and it was asserted that only highly

⁸ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988, 144.

⁹ For the purposes of this thesis, I am generally referring to “culture” as that which society considers to be excellent in terms of the arts, specifically.

trained professionals had the knowledge and the skill to understand and carry out the intentions of the composers of this “divine art”.¹⁰

Succeeding this period of change and development in musical language was the rise of the new aesthetic trend of modernism. As several composers began to use music to engage in social, political, and economic issues, nationalist music began to take shape, especially around the period of contention during and between the world wars. The identity of twentieth century classical music did not lie with one predominating genre (such as Romanticism of the nineteenth century) but possessed many distinct styles as composers were reacting to the Romantic movement in differing ways. Living composers frequently found themselves in competition with the music of the past, which ultimately became a great theme of modernism in the classical tradition.¹¹ American composers’ choices of what to preserve and what to change varied, reflecting in what they valued most in the tradition as well as what was deemed acceptable to present in the new and impressive symphonic halls. Impressionism, Post-Romanticism, and Expressionism are all European-based examples of popular genres of classical music evolving in America, but perhaps the most indicative of the growing institution of American classical music is the nationalist musical movement.¹²

This period also featured a greater emphasis of chamber music, as American repertory of string quartets began to grow. One of the most renowned groups at the turn of the century was

¹⁰ Ibid., 139.

¹¹ Burkholder, J. P., Grout, D. J., Palisca, C. V., *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2019, 779.

¹² Nationalist works made use of the musical ideas or motifs associated with a specific country or region, often utilizing traditional folk tunes. While American composers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to employ traditional European models of composition, they also further developed this native style almost entirely independent of European influence by the end of the century. A new “Americanist” trend incorporated national styles and sounds into the more familiar European genres.

the Flonzaley Quartet, which was assembled by patron Edward de Coppet after extensive search throughout Europe.¹³ Once the group arrived in the United States, it devoted itself to the performance of chamber music, receiving countless musical dedications in their name. The string quartet at this time began a tradition of the highest artistic ideals and, at first, represented the efforts of American composers to emulate the work of European masters. In accordance with the emerging “Americanist” trends, twentieth century composers in America began to consciously infuse folk and native melodies into their work as the string quartet became a medium for “composers’ experimentation”.¹⁴

It is no coincidence that these evolutions in musical sound between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries contributed to and occurred simultaneously with the institutionalization of American classical music practices. This growth in American musical life resulted largely from the nation’s immense industrial and economic expansion at the time, as the growing middle and upper classes increasingly found themselves with surplus cash and the leisure time with which to spend it. Concert halls and opera houses were just beginning to emerge in the late nineteenth century and formal concerts became one of the many outlets during which one could experience “cultivated” music in America.¹⁵ Symphony orchestras now had season-ticket holders, often sporting formal attire. Opera houses were dawned in “red plush and

¹³ Edward J. de Coppet was a wealthy American banker and patron of music who hired four prominent musicians to devote themselves entirely to quartet playing in 1903. This group, named the Flonzaley Quartet after his summer villa in Switzerland, performed privately for his household and did not often perform in public.

¹⁴ Horowitz, Joseph. “Reclaiming the Past: Musical Boston Reconsidered.” *American Music* (Champaign, Ill.) 19, no. 1 (2001): 18-38.

¹⁵ Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 26.

brass,” featuring performances in foreign languages.¹⁶ Music conservatories were sprouting across the country, reflecting a rise in professional opportunities for young, aspiring musicians. Publishing houses were churning out sheet-music for both amateurs and professionals to enjoy. Promising young musicians were being trained by American musical instructors in instrumental studios using affordable instruments (some of which were now being mass-produced in factories). Musical publishing, journalism, and instrument trade sprang up in response to pressures of the marketplace. Although federal and local governments throughout the twentieth century provided occasional cultural and charitable organizations to monetarily aid these advancements in the arts, the high American standards of this nascent music scene would require a more direct, “European-style” form of government aid to continue to flourish.¹⁷

The Beginnings of Cultural Philanthropy in American Classical Music Institutions

This is where cultural philanthropists began to fill in the gap. Historian Neil Harris claims that the “most creative period in the history of our cultural institutions” was between 1870 and the First World War.¹⁸ It was during this short period that institutions like the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Museum of Art in New York, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, Art Institute of Chicago, Metropolitan Opera, and so many others took shape. The arts had been viewed as “high culture” and a luxury for the rich since just after the Civil War.¹⁹ Opera, which had once been a more informal art form, was now seen as a “galaxy of fashion and beauty” and for the “better class, the most refined and intelligent” of citizens. Opera performed in its native tongue was no longer

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Ibid., 26-30.

¹⁸ Harris, Neil. *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

considered a part of popular culture and was now performed for far more “homogenous” audiences in the finest opera houses which were controlled by a few rich benefactors.²⁰

This shift coincided with the movement of big businessmen into the realm of cultural philanthropy. Many of these men claimed the arts demanded more cultivated audiences and are described by historian Joseph Horowitz as “shackled by conservative taste and psychological need, of influential citizens whose notions of cultural uplift revealed anxious disapproval of restless immigrants.”²¹ According to Lawrence Levine, musical culture of this era was largely owned and controlled by a few rich men who deemed it a part of the life of a great city to accommodate the finest opera houses and greatest symphonies.²² The United States sought to establish institutions that were competitive with Europe’s finest musical establishments and marketed to audiences deemed educated enough to appreciate them. Just as museums were experiencing an influx of private patronage, concert halls and opera houses had become “museums” for displaying the musical artworks of the past 200 years.²³ It was during this time that the American musical world became less fluid and more hierarchical.

The establishment of the nation’s first permanent symphonic orchestra occurred in Boston in 1881 with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and ultimately created a model for other American cities who wished to elevate their arts scene.²⁴ Critic, journalist, and editor John Sullivan Dwight had been struggling for such an institution for decades. He longed for a

²⁰ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988, 101.

²¹ Horowitz, Joseph. “Reclaiming the Past: Musical Boston Reconsidered.” *American Music* (Champaign, Ill.) 19, no. 1 (2001): 19.

²² Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988, 93-101.

²³ Burkholder, J. P., Grout, D. J., Palisca, C. V., *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton and Company, 2019, 779.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

permanent and independent orchestra that would “epitomize and disseminate the highest musical standards” and longed for the performance of music that was “uncompromising in its devotion to cultural perfection.”²⁵ Dwight understood that a permanent orchestra devoted to the standard works of the great composers could not survive on what he called “gate money.”²⁶ It was not long before Boston stockbroker Henry Lee Higginson announced his intention to fill the void left by the lack of “a full and permanent orchestra. . .such as may be found in all the large European cities.”²⁷ Higginson declared that the Boston Symphony Orchestra would be made up of sixty musicians and give twenty concerts during its premier season. He stressed artistic excellence and elevation of public taste over sparing expense. Men like Dwight and Higginson seemed to view themselves as the preservers of culture over anything else. They believed that the art and the good of the public came before considerations of money.²⁸

The New York Times declared that symphonic endeavors such as these required the intervention of the wealthy. It is important to note that men like Higginson also guaranteed their own influence within the orchestras they financed. They determined the style and length of programs, often emphasizing their favorite composers and musical tastes. Joseph Pulitzer, a major funder of what came to be known as the New York Philharmonic, was another example of a patron of the arts who did not intend for his contributions to be solely financial; he had matters of taste and culture in mind. These matters soon came to dominate the symphonic scene.²⁹ The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the “Philharmonic Society of New York” shift from a musician’s cooperative enterprise (who elected their own conductor and chose the repertory) to

²⁵ Ibid., 120.

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁷ Ibid., 122.

²⁸ Ibid., 127.

²⁹ Ibid., 128.

an institution dependent on wealthy financial backers and a board of trustees. Representatives on these boards, who were also investors and patrons, usually belonged to established upper-class families. Some were attracted to these institutions because of their new corporate business-like structures while others hoped to improve their social status. However, many of these people were also committed to raising the levels of public taste. These patrons, through their monetary contributions, began to shape new cultural institutions with hopes of protecting their standard of the arts. The consequence of the involvement of these upper-level business tycoons, however, was the inability of the lower-class to easily access American cultural institutions.³⁰ The elevation of symphonic repertoire (now considered to be “divine art”) and, by association, the great cities in which these symphonies resided, resulted in the purposeful deprecation of other popular music genres.

Theodore Thomas, the premier conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, reinforced these cultural shifts and class designations. He believed that symphonic music could only be understood by “the most cultivated persons” and that there should be concerts for these classes which would exhibit a higher grade of musical performance. The problem, as was seen in New York and Boston, was that a great symphony orchestra that held up this standard needed the kind of guaranteed financing that would make it independent of the marketplace.³¹ The group of financiers to the new Chicago Symphony orchestra were some of the most affluent families in Chicago with names like Field, McCormick, Armour, Otis, Swift, Pullman, and Sprague. This

³⁰ Harris, Neil. *Cultural Excursions: Marketing Appetites and Cultural Tastes in Modern America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, 12-26.

³¹ Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: Harvard University Press, 1988, 115-116.

last family, of course, refers to the parents of the lifelong champion of chamber music, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge.

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge

The life and legacy of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge reflect a period in time that saw musical philanthropy rise alongside the institutionalization of classical music and the emergence of the “individualist” female patron. Even as Coolidge avidly contributed to musical life in ways similar to other affluent women, she also developed a style of her own. She began with the familiar route of the women’s music club, but soon moved beyond it into a position that ultimately challenged the United States government to take on the cause of the arts.



Elizabeth Penn Sprague at age seventeen, 1882. Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge hailed from the upper-class like most cultural philanthropists before her. She devoted her time, money, and efforts to providing the joys of classical chamber music to the everyday American household. Her goals seemed to lie beyond monetary gain as her work provided invaluable platforms for composers, performers, and new styles of music in the United States. As an advocate of American chamber music, she strayed from the patterns of treating philanthropy like a business enterprise while simultaneously collaborating with the United States government to

create a recorded collection of American musical achievement. This partially reflects the individualism in her distinct patterns of patronage, the scope of her engagement with the

American public, and other unorthodox trends that can be seen in her work. Her legacy is one that has lived on through her hundreds of commissions and work with the Library of Congress. Considering Coolidge's background is necessary in understanding how the tragedies of her personal life led to her dependence on music in times of sorrow and why she felt compelled throughout her life to be its champion.

Elizabeth met her husband Frederic Shurtleff Coolidge, an orthopedic surgeon, at the age of twenty-four and had married him by the time she was twenty-six. She was elated when she gave birth to a baby boy named Albert Sprague Coolidge, but her joy was short-lived. Her husband contracted syphilis when he cut himself during the surgery of a patient with the same disease. He would also develop tuberculosis and suffer multiple strokes in the twenty years between his initial diagnosis and ultimate death. It was around this time that Coolidge began to lose her hearing, having to rely on a hearing aid for the rest of her life. In 1916, she lost her father, mother, and husband in the span of fifteen months and was left completely alone after her son's marriage. At the age of fifty-two, music became her only solace. She described it as a "mechanical stabilizer" that gave her a "sense of power and balance."³²

Inheriting between three and four million dollars, Elizabeth became determined to give back to music, as it had been her only source of joy and artistic outlet for so many years. Her first act of philanthropy, inspired by her father's example, was a gift of \$100,000 to the Chicago Symphony. This impressive sum was donated just a week after her father's death and highlighted Coolidge's determination and desire to contribute as a prominent cultural philanthropist.³³

Chamber music had long been one of her greatest passions in life, and she was resolute to devote

³² Barr, Cyrilla. (1998.) *Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: American Patron of Music*. Schirmer Books. 49-105.

³³ Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1997, 189.

herself to its promotion. According to musicologist Cyrilla Barr, Coolidge's reasons for dedicating herself so exclusively to this "intimate medium" stemmed partly from her eagerness to participate in the music making herself as well as the desire to retain a degree of control in her sponsorship that would not be possible as a patron of the symphony or opera.

On May 10th, 1916, Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge received a letter from Chicago Symphony Orchestra violinist Hugo Kortschak with an inquiry that echoed the changing status of chamber music, and classical music in general, in the early twentieth-century United States. Kortschak appealed to Coolidge to sponsor his string quartet, allowing he and three others to leave their orchestra jobs and devote themselves to the exclusive study and performance of chamber music.

"If I take the liberty to approach you as a stranger, I do so knowing of your generous interest in all matters of art. You are undoubtedly aware that the art of Chamber Music in the way of development in this country as the success of the two leading string quartets in New York (The Kneisel and the Flonzaley Quartet) plainly shows. This branch of musical art will be in a short time looked upon here as it is in Europe, as the most refined and expressive form of music. . . .What we need now is the possibility to give all our time and strength to the Quartet work and to make it our exclusive vocation. I have fullest confidence that we would in a short time stand in line with the very best in this field and be one of the important factors in American musical life. This can be done only through the financial help of people who love art sufficiently to lend this help for arts sake."³⁴

³⁴ Kortschak, Hugo. Hugo Kortschak to Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, May 10, 1916. From Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

A devoted supporter of the arts, Coolidge had long been in search of an opportunity to financially support a string quartet of her own, which she also hoped to use for her own musical enjoyment. She greatly admired Edward de Coppet's patronage of the Flonzaley String Quartet, who had become preeminent performers of chamber music in the early twentieth century and it seems she already had a few ideas about how to expand on his traditional patterns of patronage.

“It is a strange thing that your proposition is exactly what I have been having in mind for some years, particularly since my mother died lately, and I have felt myself able to turn my attention more practically to helping the cause of good music. Ever since I have known the late Mr. E. J. de Coppet, and have had the wonderful privilege of listening to the Flonzaley Quartette both at his house and in public, I have wished that the time might some time arrive when I, too, might foster and develop a string quartette of finest quality.”³⁵

Coolidge agreed to Kortschak's proposal under the pretense that the quartet reside in Pittsfield Massachusetts, her summer residence. Its founding members Kortschak, Serge Kotlarsky, Clarence Evans, and Emmeran Stoeber soon came to be known as the Berkshire Quartet, or more colloquially as her “Berkshire Boys.” Although patrons of symphony orchestras and opera houses were not uncommon by the early twentieth century, sponsorship of smaller ensembles was just beginning to take root in the United States as the appreciation of classical music in new forms was spreading. The Berkshire Quartet became a central feature around which Coolidge organized her Berkshire Music Festival, the very first chamber music festival presented in the United States.

³⁵ Coolidge, Elizabeth Sprague. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge to Hugo Kortschak, May 13, 1916. From Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.



The Berkshire String Quartet. Photograph, ca. 1916. Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

This festival directed the stream of contemporary chamber music compositions, many of which were played for the first time at the Berkshire festivals. It also included a competition which encouraged the composition of chamber works. An astonishing eighty-two entries were submitted the first year, with compositions from world renowned composers such as Ernest Bloch, Ottorino Respighi, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, and Paul Hindemith.³⁶ Although Coolidge's first festival took place two months before the end of World War I, it featured attendees from countries still in deadly combat. For example, Italian violist Ugo Ara from Italy and Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler, each of whom had fought against the other's homeland, arrived and listened in appreciation to each other's music. The festival opened with the Star-Spangled Banner and a performance of Beethoven's Op. 127 String Quartet performed by the Berkshire String Quartet and proved to have a deeper significance, utilizing art to minister sorrow, inspire hope, and strengthen spiritual devotions.

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge's relationship with Carl Engel and the Library of Congress is largely considered to be her most significant philanthropic endeavor. She saw the potential in the Library of Congress to become the major musical research facility of the United States. It was

³⁶ Barr, Cyrilla. (1998.) *Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: American Patron of Music*. Schirmer Books, 133-152.

unusual to involve the government in the business of art, especially since a federal partnership of this kind would have been extremely bold of Coolidge to encourage, since she had only been able to legally vote for a few years. Coolidge first met Carl Engel, Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress, when she invited him to one of her Berkshire festivals. It was after this first meeting that Engel first proposed the idea of someday adding her collection of autographed scores to the Library, memorializing her contributions to the history of music in the United States.³⁷ Soon, Coolidge was also inspired to donate an auditorium to the Library of Congress (located in the Jefferson Building) as well as start a trust fund that would collect interest and take care of the maintenance and staff salaries related to the upkeep of the building.³⁸



The Coolidge auditorium under construction, 1925. Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress

Women as Cultural Philanthropists and New Patterns of Patronage

Coolidge, and other patrons like her, proved crucial to reversing the elitist associations of classical music that were cemented by the actions of her parents and those like them. The first

³⁷ Carl Engel to Elizabeth Coolidge, October 5, 1922. Holograph letter. Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 153-170.

quarter of the twentieth century saw affluent women like Coolidge venture into the realm of cultural philanthropy and begin to enjoy greater autonomy outside the domestic sphere through the lens of musical development. In many ways, Coolidge's work to provide a greater accessibility of classical music to the masses reversed the widening dichotomy and hierarchy that classical music culture witnessed in preceding decades. This democratization of classical music allowed for its performance in multiple venues with audiences that now included the growing middle class. In her study of women's role in American philanthropy, historian Kathleen McCarthy noted that "by the century's end, even male-dominated cultural organizations began tapping into the marketing networks developed by women's auxiliaries and clubs."³⁹ Although these clubs were generally exclusive to women of prosperous backgrounds, their hard work coupled with close ties to wealth allowed them to build systems of financial support that eventually resulted in the establishment of two major institutions of American musical life: concert series of touring artists and local symphony orchestras.⁴⁰

Women rapidly answered the call to become "cultivators" of musical culture in their communities, and the number of women's music clubs increased dramatically through the foremost decades of the twentieth century. Many of these clubs quickly developed well-attended and well-financed concert series', offering classical music to the public in hopes of raising the musical tastes of their communities. Ten major cities first supported permanent symphony orchestras between 1842 and 1919, and women were actively involved in organizing nearly all of them. For example, in February 1894, the Ladies' Musical Club formed a female governing

³⁹ McCarthy, Kathleen D. *Women's Culture, American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

⁴⁰ Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 65-66.

board of directors to solicit funds and carry on the day-to-day management of the Cincinnati Orchestra (alongside a male advisory committee), which was first led by future First Lady Helen Herron Taft. It is clear from the writings of the female coordinators of concert series and symphony orchestras that they saw their support as a way of exercising influence and power in public. This challenged the socially accepted notion of a woman's place in the home and by working together, women like Coolidge used the universal love of music to break out of this seclusion.⁴¹

There is much to consider when examining the patronage of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and how her methods contrasted those of other philanthropists, both male and female. Recent scholarship acknowledges the many ways in which her sponsorship of musicians and composers alike was both conventional and unconventional. Above all, she recognized the importance of easy access for the listener. Unlike other patrons of the time, Coolidge rarely, if ever, charged admission for her concerts and even utilized radio broadcasting to expand the audience of American chamber music. Additionally, she sought to introduce chamber music to upper-level learning institutions in order to inspire its scholarship for younger audiences. Not only did she serve as a benefactress for composers and performers, but also for researchers and lecturers.

Coolidge often let personal relationships define where she placed her loyalty. She had a particular kinship with female composers and performers. Some of her longest-lasting personal and professional relationships, as well as the most fruitful, were with women such as Rebecca Clarke, May Muklé, Emma Lubbecke-Job, and Harriet Cohen.⁴² Going hand-in-hand with

⁴¹ Whitesitt, Linda. "Women as 'Keepers of Culture': Music Clubs, Community Concert Series, and Symphony Orchestras". from Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1997: 65-81.

⁴² Banfield, S. "Too Much of Albion?" Mrs. Coolidge and Her British Connections. *American Music 4* (1986): 60.

Coolidge's aptitude for creating close personal relationships was her ability to network, particularly outside the United States. After establishing success through concerts and festivals at the Library of Congress, Coolidge furthered her contributions by organizing festivals in Europe, which then brought many of the composers and ensembles she met abroad to the United States. These festivals would provide her with the opportunity to meet local composers and musicians such as Gian Francesco Malipiero, Ottorino Respighi, and Manuel de Falla. Coolidge would then begin to commission works from these new acquaintances and make arrangements for them to travel to the United States under her sponsorship. During a 1931 trip to Europe, Coolidge attended frequent "teas, receptions, and civic functions" where she would meet local composers whose works she would later program.⁴³ Coolidge often launched the careers of unknown musicians in the United States after hearing and meeting them abroad.⁴⁴ Instances like these illustrate how involved and "hands-on" she was in the music making and performing processes. She clearly demonstrated her adoration of the medium as more than purely a financial backer.

Although Coolidge's wealth was substantial, her patronage was not unaffected by national, and especially international, conflict. She felt the limitations of her work during the Great Depression, when even her finances were "seriously curtailed." This, coupled with her poor health in the early 1930s, hindered further sponsorship of lecture tours and patronage of chamber music festivals. During the Depression, it was difficult for any musician to tour profitably and no concert manager could reasonably take the business risk of traveling extensively. Coolidge "assisted in the rebirth of the quartet in Chicago" during this time,

⁴³ Tome, V. "Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: A Life of Philanthropy in the Twentieth Century." M.M. diss., West Virginia University (2007): 67-69.

⁴⁴ Banfield, S. "Too Much of Albion?" Mrs. Coolidge and Her British Connections. *American Music* 4 (1986): 76.

presenting countless cycles of chamber concerts for free. While the Depression may have altered the way in which she chose to make music available to others, it did not directly prohibit her from continuing to do so.⁴⁵

As Coolidge began to feel the effects of age in her ability to travel, she began to explore other avenues in her support of American chamber music. In 1925, Coolidge initiated radio broadcasts of her concerts with Arlington's Navy Radio Station being the first to air performances. Due to difficulties with the transmission of the concerts, however, they chose not to broadcast performances the following year. By 1930, Coolidge had commenced a working relationship with the National Broadcasting Company, who had offered to air four half-hour programs to be heard on Sunday afternoons, which developed with success.⁴⁶ Coolidge believed that this would greatly expand her outreach, allowing people to hear and study music in their homes. Coolidge also began to focus on providing university students with the necessary opportunities to access the world of chamber music. In this way, she "hoped to inspire young musicians to participate in the fostering of chamber music in the United States."⁴⁷ She would not only sponsor lecture series' on chamber music, which were presented at institutions of higher education, but also musical research by students. She felt that the next generation of music scholars was crucial to further developments in chamber repertoire and provided students with finances to conduct their research.⁴⁸

Because of her international reputation, many European artists continued to appeal to her for sponsorship around this time. When Hitler invaded Belgium in 1940, the Pro Arte quartet was

⁴⁵ Tome, V. "Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge: A Life of Philanthropy in the Twentieth Century." M.M. diss., West Virginia University (2007): 74-75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

stranded in America without their cellist, who had remained in Europe due to illness. Coolidge arranged for him to reach the United States and, even though their first violinist had died in the meantime, Coolidge was able to assist the quartet in becoming the quartet-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (a position they still hold to this day) while also sponsoring their trips to California universities to work with students. This is commonly believed to be the first instance of an artist-in-residence at a state funded university, which was only made possible by Coolidge's intervention and financial assistance.⁴⁹

According to musicologist Cyrilla Barr, two elements of Coolidge's philanthropic style in particular emerge as proof of her individualist patronage. Firstly, her method of endowment was usually designed to "indoctrinate the recipient in the art of sound fiscal planning, by instituting a program and then gradually withdrawing support over a period of years," instead of doling out monetary gifts and remaining detached from the work itself. Second, Coolidge was unique in that she herself was a musician and had even appeared as a soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra earlier in life. She had knowledge of musical culture and understood artistic instinct. She was determined to place the "integrity of the art" above her own pleasure or preferences. She displayed a great acceptance of music unfamiliar to her and was a constant champion of contemporary works—whether or not they actually adhered to her personal taste.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Barr, Cyrilla. "A Style of Her Own" from *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1997.

⁵⁰ Locke, Ralph P., and Cyrilla Barr, eds. *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists since 1860*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1997, 195-196.

Conclusion

The life and patronage of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge reflect a period in time that saw cultural philanthropy contribute to and develop alongside rising institutions of classical music. Classical music institutions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were viewed as means of cultural uplift and civic improvement. They were increasingly viewed as ways to “sell” culture to the masses. Selling the classical music experience as culture gave American music institutions ongoing sources of support.⁵¹

Philanthropy, and especially sponsorship of the arts, has become a central element of civil society and is responsible for countless cultural structures. Some have considered cultural philanthropy to be a reaction against the ever-growing lower- and middle-class presence in the public sphere.⁵² The pervasiveness of cultural philanthropy across time prompts one to consider how culture, ethics, and politics are intertwined.⁵³ Historian Aurelie Vialette suggests that philanthropists always donated with the expectation of something in return; their “charity” served only to benefit those who were cultivating the art themselves. For example, several of the big businessmen turned cultural philanthropists of the late nineteenth century funded their city’s cultural endeavors with the expectation that the city would experience the elevation to a prominent artistic hub. They often had a moral and/or political desire to enhance their own social status or acquire influence.

One could argue that Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and other patrons like her changed the relationship between philanthropists and the working class. She gave with the hope that music

⁵¹ Spitzer, John. *American Orchestras in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 223-224.

⁵² Vialette, Aurelie. *Intellectual Philanthropy: The Seduction of the Masses*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2018, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 1.

could become increasingly more accessible to the masses and maintained that philanthropy was not necessarily linked to money alone. In return, she requested that her beneficiaries participate in national and international tours or chamber music festivals and continue to participate in chamber music outreach projects. Musical philanthropy was her means of developing social harmony. Its unifying effects resonated when the greatest musicians of a fractured world came together for Coolidge's very first Berkshire Chamber Music Festival in 1918 and again when she brought chamber music into the homes of radio listeners all over the country for her 1936 "Chamber Music Hour."⁵⁴ Coolidge's work marked a stark departure from the male-dominated sphere of cultural philanthropy that existed before her and she, along with other affluent female patrons of the time, forged a new path for the individualist patron. These shifts in philanthropic method coincided with the rapidly changing cultural scene as the arts began to intersect with American life as it never had before.

⁵⁴ Comments by Mrs. Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge on Library of Congress Chamber Music Hour, WJZ. Typed transcript, January 14, 1936. Coolidge Foundation Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

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Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Collection from the Library of Congress -

Sources drawn from this collection include:

- Letters between Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge and Hugo Kortschak
- Programs from Coolidge's first "Berkshire Festival of Chamber Music" as well as her first recital with the Library of Congress at the Freer Auditorium
- Letters between Carl Engel (Chief of the Music Division of the Library of Congress) and Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge
- Coolidge's address to radio listeners on the willingness of the National Broadcasting Company to allow her a "Chamber Music Hour" (1944)
- Photos of Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the Berkshire Quartet, and the Coolidge Auditorium

These sources are used to further evaluate Coolidge's patterns of patronage and specifically her relationship with Carl Engel and the Library of Congress, which was perhaps her greatest endeavor as a musical benefactress.