THE ECONOMICS OF THE CREATIVE ARTS: 
THE CASE OF THE COMPOSER
Marianne Victorius Felton

Introduction

The economic condition of the performing arts has in recent years received considerable attention from professional economists, as well as from leaders in government, business, and philanthropy. At the same time, the economic condition of the creative artist - the writer, poet, playwright, painter, sculptor, choreographer - has all but been ignored. Yet in the long run, the cultural contribution of this era in history to future generations will largely depend on the creative output of these individuals. The object of this study is to focus attention on the condition of one kind of creative artist in twentieth century America: the composer of serious music. It is hoped that the findings of this study will have relevance for other fields of creative activity as well.[1]

The field of the creative arts is generally conceded to be an economic disaster area. The objectives of this study are (1) to obtain information about the professional activities of composers, an area in which the economic profession has to date been fairly uninformed, (2) to use this information to identify the major problems facing composers and, in the light of an economic framework, to ferret out reasons for these problems, and (3) to try to formulate some policy suggestions as to how some of the problems might be minimized or overcome.

The study was based primarily on a questionnaire which was sent to the population of 1,560 composers of serious music residing in the United States. In addition, personal interviews were conducted with representatives of the leading publishing firms and record companies in the industry.

Before proceeding with the results of the survey, clarification is needed on two matters of definition: First, what do we mean by "serious" music? And second, who is a composer? Admittedly, no completely objective answer can be given to either of these questions.

In the music business, among performing rights organizations such as ASCAP or BMI and among publishers and record companies, "serious" music is thought of in juxtaposition to "popular" music. Some people refer to "serious" music as "symphonic or concert" music, some as "classical" music. To the music historian, however, "classical" music means music composed
mostly in and around Vienna between the dates 1770 and 1830. Consequently, the more general term "serious" music is preferred. No one seems to know exactly how the term "serious" came about, but everyone is agreed that it is inadequate. As Aaron Copland explains it,

> Very often our music is serious, sometimes deadly serious, but it can also be witty, humorous, sarcastic, sardonic, grotesque, and a great many other things besides. It is, indeed, the emotional range covered that makes it "serious" and, in part, influences our judgment as to the artistic stature of any extended composition (Copland 1960:26).

Another criterion which enters into the differentiation between "serious" and "popular" music is the subtlety and complexity of its musical invention and formal organization. A "serious" composition is seldom written "off the top of the composer's head," but is carefully worked out based on strict and usually complex theoretical and formal principles. Unavoidably, some grey areas result. For example, should we consider Leonard Bernstein's music for "On the Town" as "serious" or "popular?" In view of the fact that the bulk of Mr. Bernstein's compositions clearly belong in the realm of "serious" music, all of his works will be included in this category.

The question of who is a composer is far more difficult to answer. It was not the intention to include each and every individual who had ever penned an original tune, even if all such persons could be found. So a market constraint was imposed. In order to be considered a composer for the purpose of this study, a person had to have at least one serious composition either published, commercially recorded, performed at a public concert for which admission was charged, or performed on television, radio, or film. Clearly, imposition of such a market requirement results in a special population. First of all, it excludes all persons who may have aspired to being composers but, for whatever reason, gave it up. Secondly, it excludes those who compose regularly but who, for reasons which may or may not be related to ability, never market their work. A third group excluded themselves. These are composers who clearly met the market test through known publications, recording, commissions, or performance, but who considered themselves more expert in another specialty such as performance or music history or theory; that is, they do not think of themselves primarily as composers.[2]

The economic role of the "serious" composer is that of a producer of capital - cultural capital. By cultural capital is meant the collection of artistic creative output such as paintings, sculptures, architectural treasures, novels,