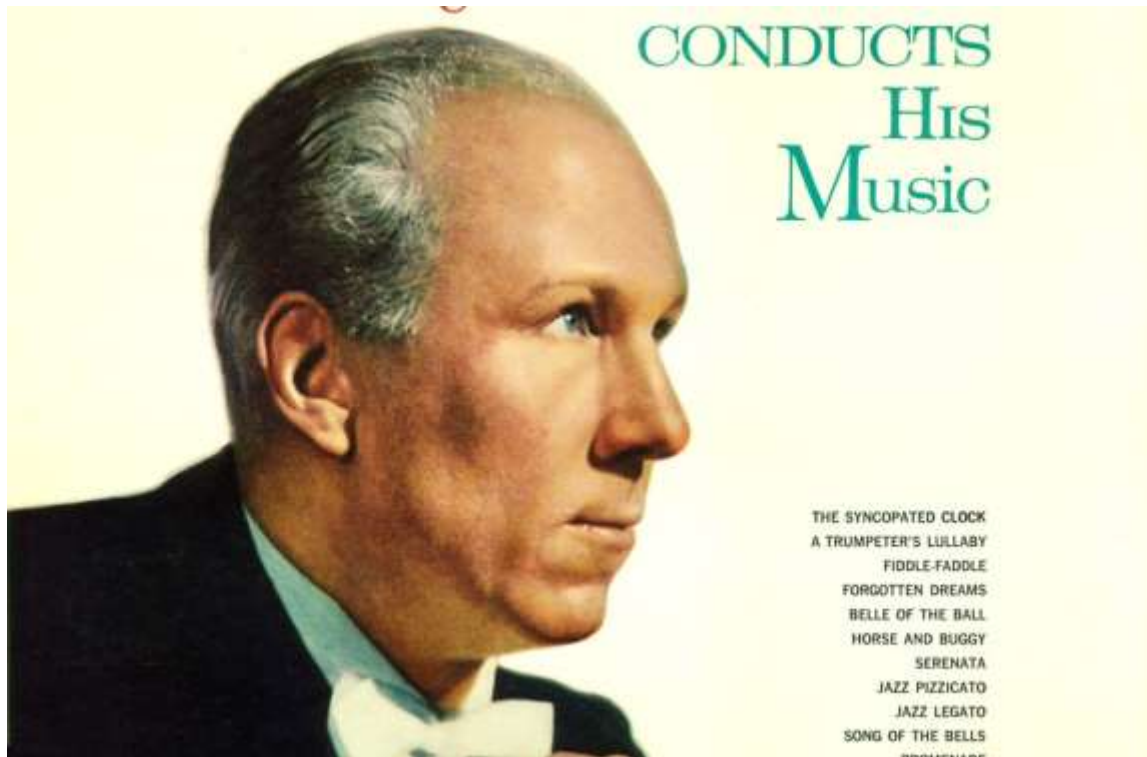


MUSIC

# Master of the Light Classic: Leroy Anderson

The composer of 'Sleigh Ride' helped define America's spirit of optimism at mid-century

BY NEIL COTIAUX TIMES NOVEMBER 16, 2022



The United States had led the Allies to victory in World War II, and with the war over, members of “The Greatest Generation” looked forward to getting back to civilian life, making a living, and spending time with their growing families.

Jane Anderson Vercelli looks back on her early years growing up in Connecticut with great fondness. “It was an idyllic time. It was an idyllic childhood,” remembers the oldest child of American composer Leroy Anderson.

Born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Leroy Anderson was first taught piano by his mother, and by his father, the trombone. He earned a master of arts in music from Harvard University. When the war ended, Anderson found himself grappling with a postwar housing shortage as a “starving artist” who had a limited number of musical compositions to his name.

Anderson, his wife Eleanor, and Jane moved in with his parents in Cambridge and then to New York City. In 1946, the composer and his family, which now included son Eric, spent the summer in Woodbury, Connecticut, in a cottage owned by other relatives.

There, and during future stays, Jane was enthralled by the countryside, recalling “a quintessential, winding, New England road with a brook on one side that later crosses over to the other side in rivulets and fields.”

Summer in Connecticut proved incredibly hot, and there was no indoor running water where they were staying. But a farmer told Jane’s father about some underground pipes that had earlier brought water from a spring. “So with that, Dad went out and started digging for these pipes,” Jane said.



That single decision allowed Leroy Anderson to tap into his innermost thoughts and arguably emerge as America’s greatest composer of light orchestral music.

“It was a July heat wave and it was so hot that he began to picture winter scenes in his mind while he’s doing this digging with the shovel. That is how he got the picture in his mind that goes with ‘[Sleigh Ride](#),” Jane said.

### ‘Giddy Yap, Let’s Go’

Anderson may also have been inspired to write the song, at least in part, by his Swedish immigrant parents. “They both loved to go on sleigh rides when they were courting,” she said. Taken by his imagination, Anderson wasted no time in putting together the rudiments of his newest composition, and completed “Sleigh Ride” in February 1948. With a full score finished, replete with sounds from temple blocks representing the clip-clopping of a horse’s hooves, bells imitating those around a horse’s neck, a slapstick whip, and the blare of a trumpet imitating a horse’s whinny, “Sleigh Ride” was set for its debut. It wasn’t meant to serve as Christmas music, Anderson said, just a picturesque portrait of wintertime.

That May, the Boston Pops Orchestra, under the direction of maestro Arthur Fiedler, brought to life a delightful piece of music that arose from winter visions on a hot summer day. The less-than-three-minute piece gradually sank into the permanent consciousness of the American public and millions of listeners around the world.

Anderson’s talents had first caught the attention of Fiedler in the 1930s while he served as director of the Harvard University Band. But Anderson harbored some self-doubts and

questioned whether his real talents were to be found elsewhere. When he was offered a position teaching German and Latin at a private school in Pennsylvania, Fiedler persuaded him to follow his musical passions.

The close relationship between the two led the Boston Pops to debut not only one of Anderson's early works ("Jazz Pizzicato" in 1938) but also the debuts of "Sleigh Ride," "Promenade," "The Syncopated Clock," "Fiddle-Fiddle," "Serenata," and "A Trumpeter's Lullaby," all between 1945 and 1950. Each was a lovingly crafted "light classic" that Anderson would seemingly shake out of his sleeve.

Riding a wave of success, Anderson made the decision to personally conduct the premieres of ensuing works in recording sessions with Decca Records, increasing the reach of his crowd-pleasing pieces into households across the nation. In rapid succession, he scored and conducted recordings that included "Blue Tango," "Belle of the Ball," "Bugler's Holiday," "Forgotten Dreams," "Plink, Plank, Plunk!," and "The Typewriter."



"Blue Tango" and "Serenata" provided a romantic twist among Anderson's works, with "Blue Tango" hitting the top spot on the Billboard chart. It, and other recordings for Decca, drew on the talents of musicians who held "first chair" status in the respective sections of their different orchestras.

In addition to records, "Sleigh Ride" could be heard in symphony halls as well as in major department stores that decked the halls during the holiday season. And something new was added: words by Mitchell Parish, a revered songwriter and lyricist.

The Andrews Sisters—LaVerne, Maxene, and Patty—a wildly popular trio who sang their way into the hearts of servicemen during the 1940s, further sustained the popularity of "Sleigh Ride" with their own recording that could be enjoyed at home or by slipping coins into jukeboxes at diners, bars, and nightclubs.

Parish's lyrics invited listeners to "Just hear those sleigh bells jingling, ring ting tingling, too/ Come on, it's lovely weather for a sleigh ride together with you" as imaginary revelers awaited their destination with a "giddy yap, giddy yap, giddy yap, let's go." Those lyrics have stood the test of time and help introduce "Sleigh Ride" to new, younger listeners each year.

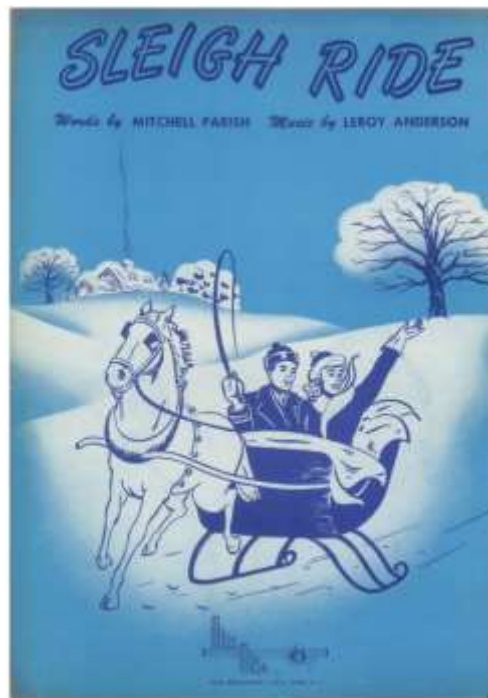
By the early '50s, Anderson stood at the pinnacle of his profession. In June 1952, he conducted the United States Air Force Band in front of the U.S. Capitol in celebration of the band's 10th anniversary, with 10,000 celebrants in attendance. In New York, he frequently served as guest conductor for the Guggenheim Memorial Concerts in Central Park.

A study by the American Symphony Orchestra League in 1953 determined that Anderson's works were the most frequently performed in the country, followed by those of Aaron Copland, a giant of evocative American music.

### Changing Times

By 1953, the Anderson family was happily ensconced in a mid-century modernist home in Woodbury, Connecticut, built with earnings from "Blue Tango," which sold more than a million records. The now-famous composer soundproofed his home, worked in comfort, and engaged in woodworking as a hobby.

From the end of World War II until civil rights and the war in Vietnam began to pull the country apart, Americans were largely optimistic. Anderson's instrumentals continued to permeate the airwaves along with those of other talented colleagues, such as "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing," "Unchained Melody," "Canadian Sunset," "Moonglow and Theme From 'Picnic,'" and "A Summer Place," all of them striking a contented chord with listeners.



But a new generation with new tastes emerged, and so-called middle-of-the-road music lost some of its luster. Changing demographics, the arrival of the transistor radio, and artists like The Beatles and Bob Dylan helped crowd out instrumentals on the radio and in record sales. While the number of radio stations grew rapidly, especially FM stations, programming became narrower and more specialized.



Yet those who believed in instrumentals soldiered on, with composers like Mason Williams (“Classical Gas”) and Herb Alpert (“Route 101”) giving listeners a newer form of pop-instrumental.

In 1972, the Boston Pops, with Arthur Fiedler again at the helm, paid tribute to Anderson in a nationwide television broadcast that recalled the halcyon days of light classics. Anderson took to the podium and conducted one piece, “The Typewriter.” It was, the beloved composer told his wife, “The most important evening of my life.”

Anderson died of lung cancer in 1975 at age 66, survived by his wife, daughter, and three sons. His last composition was a short wedding march used at the 1972 wedding of daughter Jane and British architect Peter Vercelli.

In 2003, at the corner of Chatham and Crawford streets, the city of Cambridge dedicated Leroy Anderson Square. At the dedication ceremony, composer and former Pops conductor John Williams paid tribute to an American original. “Leroy Anderson is one of the great American masters of light orchestral music. Though we have performed his works countless times over the years at the Boston Pops, his music remains forever as young and fresh as the very first day on which it was composed,” Williams told those assembled.

The Anderson family’s mid-century home in Woodbury is now “frozen in time,” said Jane. Panels of information, photographs, and other memorabilia are available for viewing by the public. Free outdoor concerts are held periodically.

Thanks to the arrival of the digital age, Anderson’s works will not be forgotten. YouTube, Spotify, and other online services offer up his music on demand. And orchestras, marching bands, and vocalists continue to perform it. As of 2021, “Sleigh Ride” remained one of the 10

most popular pieces of “Christmas music” worldwide, according to The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers.

“Dad never composed music with an expectation about the public’s reaction,” Jane said. “Once, in the kitchen, he said to me, ‘I just did what I wanted to do. It turned out that people liked it.’” By using the universal language of music to bring people together, Leroy Anderson made the world a better place.

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