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Leroy Anderson – American composer of Swedish descent

BY THERESE ERICSSON

Ever heard the “Typewriter” tune? The television *Late Show* theme called “Syncopated Clock”? “Blue Tango”? The Christmas classic tune “Sleigh Ride,” with the sound of clattering hooves and neighing horse? They were all written by a Swedish-American composer named Leroy Anderson.

Son of immigrant parents

He was born in Cambridge, Mass., in 1908 to Brewer and Anna Anderson. Brewer’s original name was Bror Anton Andersson, and he had immigrated to the United States with his parents and siblings in 1882. Anna had immigrated in 1887 with her parents and three sisters. Brewer and Anna met and married in Cambridge. They were blessed with two sons: Franklin Leroy born 29 June 1908, and Russell Brewer born 14 July 1911. They resided at 12 Chatham Street near Harvard University.

Anna and Brewer Anderson, a postal clerk, decided to bring up their sons in Cambridge so that they could attend Harvard College, which gave full scholarships to Cambridge-born students who qualified. Music was always a large part of the Anderson family life. Brewer liked to play the accordion and the mandolin, and he also sang Swedish folk songs. Anna, who was an organist at a Swedish-American church, taught Leroy to play the piano and organ.

A young composer

As a child, Leroy Anderson composed

short pieces of music and took lessons in piano, double bass, and trombone. He studied music at Harvard for about five years. He earned his master’s degree in 1930, but being uncertain whether music would enable him to earn a living, he enrolled in a Ph.D. program at Harvard, studying German and Scandinavian languages. During the years before World War II, both Leroy and Russell played in jazz bands and orchestras on board transatlantic ships.

While Leroy was at Harvard, he was the director of the Harvard Band. For a Harvard reunion concert, Arthur Fiedler, the charismatic conductor of the Boston Pops Orchestra, had heard Leroy Anderson’s arrangements for the Harvard Band,

and was impressed. Fiedler asked for an original composition, and Leroy first wrote “Jazz Pizzicato,” and then “Jazz Legato.” Fiedler’s encouragement made Leroy change his mind, and instead of taking a job as a language teacher, he started a career as a conductor, arranger, and composer.

More time for composing

After World War II, during which he was stationed in Iceland as a translator (he mastered about eight languages), Leroy Anderson got more time to compose. One of the first pieces was “Syncopated Clock.” It occurred to him that there were countless pieces containing the sound



The Harvardians on a European tour 1929. Leroy Anderson on far left with tuba. Photo taken in Stockholm. © Leroy Anderson Family.



Leroy Anderson outside his home in Woodbury, Connecticut, 1968.
© Leroy Anderson Family.

of a ticking clock, but it was always beating at a regular rhythm. He thought the idea of a syncopated clock was intriguing and set out to write it. It turned out to become very well known, mainly because it was used as a theme song for "The Late Show" for 25 years.

During the late 1940s he wrote several other well-known pieces such as "Fiddle-Fiddle," "Serenata," "Sleigh Ride," and "Trumpeter's Lullaby". The latter was written on request from Roger Voisin, the first trumpeter of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, who was tired of playing the same type of trumpet music (usually loud and martial) all the time. He wanted something different

to play, and Leroy then wrote a quiet lullaby-type of piece for him. In the early 1950s he wrote "The Waltzing Cat," "Belle of the Ball," "The Typewriter," "Blue Tango," and a few others. "The Typewriter" melody is well known, even though few people use a typewriter nowadays. The piece can still be heard on American radio as introduction to news broadcasts. "Blue Tango" was a big success and made it to number one on the *Hit Parade* in 1952, much to the composer's surprise. It was the first instrumental piece to reach the top of the popular music charts.

Leroy Anderson called the music he wrote "concert music with a pop quality." His compositions are still

being played by orchestras all over the world, and especially now during 2008, the centennial year.

The Swedish roots

His Swedish background hasn't been that well known, although he himself was very much aware of it. Between 1929 and 1937, he made five trips to Europe as a musician and as a student in Germany one summer. In 1929, he played in a band called The Harvardians, a student orchestra, which went on a summer tour to northern Europe. Later, he traveled to Sweden in 1959 and 1966 with his wife and children to visit his father's birthplace in Övarp village, Norra Strö parish, (Krist.).

Bror Anton Andersson was born 24 April 1879, to Nils Andersson and Hanna Nilsdotter at Övarp no. 8. Nils had unfortunately signed a promissory note to help someone else get a loan, and he ended up owing a lot of money when the other person couldn't pay. Nils was an honest man, and he knew that he would never be able to pay it if he stayed in Sweden. Many of his relatives (and also his wife's relatives) had emigrated and settled in the Chicago area, and he chose to do the same. He left Övarp with his wife Hanna and their seven children in March 1882. They arrived in New York on the *S/S Alaska* 17 April. Nils was working as a building constructor in Chicago, like so many other Swedes. Every time someone he knew would travel to Sweden, he sent some money with him or her, and the loan was eventually paid off. After about ten years, the family moved to Maywood, a town west of Chicago. Several other families from Norra Strö had settled there also. Nils died there March 13, 1896, and his wife Hanna passed away 13 January 1919. Of all their seven children, only two have living descendants today.

Leroy Anderson's mother Anna Margareta was born 20 July 1879, in Adolf Fredrik parish, Stockholm, to Bengt Jönsson and Maria Lovisa Hörling. Bengt was a woodworker who made finely detailed furniture. They had four daughters and settled

in the Boston area where Bengt made piano cases for the Ivers & Pond piano company. Anna was the youngest daughter and was not required to do household chores like washing dishes, because she was the talented one and needed to protect her hands to play piano.

It is remarkable that Leroy Anderson, who was descended from a long line of anonymous crofters, soldiers, and tailors, would become a famous composer. His love of music, opportunity to study, and ambition, enabled him to lead a life very different from his ancestors. At the end of his life (he passed away May 18, 1975, in Woodbury, Conn.), he realized that his music had become larger than himself. He knew he had created things that would always be around.

More reading:

This essay is primarily based on interviews with Leroy Anderson's widow, Eleanor Anderson, and their children Jane Anderson Vercelli, Rolf Anderson, and Kurt Anderson. Details about Russell Anderson were provided by his son Mark Anderson. Information about Leroy Anderson's career and music can be found in various articles, some of which are noted below:

Leroy Anderson: a bio-bibliography / Burgess Speed, Eleanor Anderson and Steve Metcalf. – Westport, Conn., 2004

Leroy Anderson: In: *Current Biography 1952* (pp. 18-19)

The Syncopated Clock still ticks! / Leroy Anderson. In: *Music Journal* Sep. 1968 (p. 31)

Salute to a "popular" master / L. Wolfe Gilbert. In: *Music Journal* Nov 1954 (p. 25)

Leroy Anderson. In: *Harvard composers: Walter Piston and his students, from Elliot Carter to Frederic Rzewski* / Howard Pollack. – Metuchen, NJ, 1992 (pp. 20-40)

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Comments to the Ancestral Chart



Most of these ancestors were farmers or sharecroppers, but there are a few exceptions.

Ancestor # 2, Bror (Brewer) Anderson was a postal employee.

Ancestor # 3 Nils Andersson was a building constructor in Chicago. In Sweden he was a farmer at Övarp 8 in Norra Strö.

Ancestor #15 Lovisa Westerström was an unmarried female person (*quinsperson*) when she gave birth to her daughter. On 9 June 1841 she married the journeyman hatter Anders Hörling, whose surname her daughter Maria Lovisa (#7) later used.

Ancestor #20 Jöns Söderberg was a dragoon and served for Skoglösa *rote* of the Sandby company of the Skåne Hussar's Regiment.

Ancestor # 22 Åke Lindgren was a master brick maker (*tegelmästare*) of Färlöv.

Ancestor # 30 Jonas Westerström is recorded as a volunteer (*volontär*), and might have served in the militia during the wars around 1808.

Leroy Anderson's Swedish ancestors

