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Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, July 3, 2010, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Ferde Grofé (1892-1972). *Café Society* (1938). Philadelphia Sinfonia, Gary White. Live. 27:26

Ferde Grofé. *Mississippi Suite* (1926). Boston Pops Orchestra, Keith Lockhart. RCA 68786. Tr 3-6. 13:38

It's a work by one of the significant names in American music, but it hasn't been heard for 70 years, until now. We know Ferde Grofé as the composer of the well known *Grand Canyon Suite* and as the original orchestrator of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for Paul Whiteman's band, but *Café Society* is a ballet from the height of his career that fell into oblivion. Gary White, conductor of the Philadelphia Sinfonia, the youth orchestra that recently played this at Philadelphia's Kimmel Center, will share with us the full story behind this fanciful evocation of Prohibition-era nightlife.

Commissioned by Catherine Littlefield for her ballet company, *Café Society* depicts the swanky nightclubs of the time. Certain aspects of American culture we now take for granted actually first sprang forth in the 1930s: rich folks mingling with entertainers, gawkers slipping tenners to doormen to rub shoulders with the celebrities, paparazzi snapping in from the edges, and gossip columnists enticing the rest of us to read all about it in the morning paper.

Grofé satirizes it all in *Café Society*. He was in the vanguard of a controversial movement—the mixing of jazz and classical music—and his longevity doing it (first with Whiteman, then on his own) attests to his success. He and Littlefield both worked in musical theater and knew exactly what they wanted from this piece: a fun entertainment. It includes a cab whistle, a boxing match (with count out), a romance, and a periodically-almost-falling-over drunk. Grofé conducted the 1938 premiere in Chicago, but a 1942 concert performance by the Pennsylvania W.P.A. Symphony Orchestra in Philadelphia (one of the 33 federal or “civic” orchestras around the country) yielded the materials housed in the Fleisher Collection.

The composer's son, Ferde Grofé Jr., thrilled to have this music performed again, granted Gary White complete access to the original sketches at the Library of Congress. The conductor painstakingly compared those to the Fleisher materials and a piano reduction in the possession of dance historian Sharon Skeel. He cleared up a number of confusing passages and errors, Fleisher reprinted a new set, and the May 2010 performance was a rousing success. In the audience were a dancer from the very same Littlefield Company and a niece of Catherine Littlefield.

The *Mississippi Suite*, Grofé's first major orchestral work, shows the composer's fondness for what he called “the American musical spirit,” something he returned to again and again. The four movements—Father of Waters, Huckleberry Finn, Old Creole Days, Mardi Gras—are a travelogue, very like what he accomplished in suites for the Hudson River, Niagara, Hollywood, the 1964 New York World's Fair, and, of course, the Grand Canyon. About his most famous work he wrote, “Always we must realize that there is much more to hear. Our land is rich in music, and if you listen you can hear it right now. This is our music you hear, surging forth, singing up to every one of us.” That is the significance of Ferde Grofé.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).