Sometime in the spring of 2005, Lancaster resident and composer John Bosserman brought an old manuscript orchestra score to the Lancaster Festival office. Little did we realize that over the next year, a search to learn about that score would lead in many directions, and we would uncover many amazing, sometimes unexpected, connections between Lancaster artists and musicians with people around the world. The search for answers led to a partnership between the Lancaster Festival and the Fairfield Heritage Association, and culminated in the exhibition “Early Art and Music – Lancaster’s Legacy” held in the Goslin Room of The Georgian during the 2006 Festival.

In the beginning, the search centered on that original orchestra score and its composer, J H Zimpfer. In a local diner, Festival Director Lou Ross saw an old photograph of a group of Lancaster citizens with musical instruments. Named in the photo was Jacob Zimpfer, and the group was the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra. Could that be the same man? A check of the phone book uncovered a George Zimpfer. I made the call, and asked, “Do you know of a man named Jacob Zimpfer, who conducted the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra in 1910?” “He was my father!” George related that his father had studied music at the New England Conservatory in Boston, and had expected to give up music when he moved to Lancaster around 1908. After being convinced to organize and lead the orchestra, he held the group together until 1917. Three concerts were given each season, in the old civic auditorium on the third floor of City Hall. George mailed us a concert program from 1914, which included an impressive list of local business leaders as supporters. One of the works on the program was also composed by Zimpfer. So, he was writing works for orchestra here in Lancaster. Was the score for ‘Rural Suite’ that we had the only surviving example?

The next step seemed to be a search for old music. One of the people I asked was piano teacher Marie Murray. She uncovered two pieces – “The Mechanics Band March” by Dr. Gabriel Miesse, Jr. and “I Remember When I Try To Forget” by Jacob Keller Kirn. I recognized the Miesse name from the greenhouse that used to be out on Old Columbus Road, and Keller Kirn had been listed in the Symphony Orchestra program. There were photographs of a sculpture and still life painting by Dr. Miesse in the book “Heritage of Architecture and Arts” written by Ruth Drinkle and published by Fairfield Heritage Association.

A round of questions to Festival volunteers and supporters turned up some tantalizing clues, which hinted at more information and connections yet to be uncovered. What special kind of person was Dr. Miesse if he had been composing, painting, and sculpting, in addition to being a well-known physician? Could we find more of his creations? What led him to dedicate a march composition to the Mechanics Band? What about Jacob Keller Kirn? We’d heard a suggestion that he was not only composing, but had a second career as a concert pianist in addition to being a banker. If he supported the orchestra, did he know Zimpfer?

It looked like we needed some experts in local history. Lou and I met with Joyce Harvey, Fairfield Heritage president. We related what we had uncovered so far, and that we felt there was more to be discovered. We also had the support of Festival Artistic Director, Gary Sheldon, who shared our enthusiasm for the project. Part of the Festival mission is to connect with the community, and what better way to connect with a town like Lancaster, that is so proud of its heritage. Would FHA be interested in a collaboration? Perhaps if we could locate more paintings, there could be an exhibition.
during the 2006 Festival in July. Maybe we could include some of the music in performance. Joyce began by passing the word among the FHA volunteers, to see who might be interested in helping uncover more of this aspect of Lancaster’s History.

I spent time in the winter poring over microfilms of the Daily Eagle and the Lancaster Gazette, finding reviews of many of the Symphony concerts. I discovered that Zimpfer had written several other works for the Orchestra. This group of musicians was playing together as volunteers, and included high school students and businessmen. One individual was a dentist who also was crafting violins that were used in some of the concerts (We were amazed to find that a violin made by this man was part of the collection of the Georgian Museum). I ran across a description of an 11 year old guest artist The Lancaster Symphony Orchestra, ca. 1910 from Sugar Grove, Loy Kohler, who played piano at a concert “showing much promise”, and later in life taught piano at Capital University. Another young member of the orchestra was Rod Shaw, a clarinet player. Rod must have been something of a prodigy, and is still remembered by former students as being able to give lessons on many different instruments. I imagined Zimpfer at work, composing music, trying to teach many different instruments, selecting and obtaining music, rehearsing and conducting the group. He must have been dedicated. I verified with an archivist at the New England Conservatory that he did indeed study there, from 1903-1905. During 1905, he studied composition with George Chadwick, then director of the Conservatory. Chadwick is generally ranked second in importance to Aaron Copland as an American composer of that time. I also ran across an article mentioning that Zimpfer joined the Mechanics Band as a trombonist during the time he conducted the Symphony.

Soon, we were finding connections and new information from many sources. Every few weeks, a phone call or e-mail would start another frenzied effort to follow up a new piece of information. Karen Smith, the FHA office manager, found one of Miesse’s published piano works for sale on EBAY. We contacted the winner of this item, and discovered he was Kevin Rosier, a former school mate of Karen’s and an avid collector of Lancaster memorabilia. Kevin would later prove to be a generous source of materials loaned to the July exhibition. Bob Lawyer, whose grandfather was Wil Sands of Carroll, told us about the Sands Regimental Band. This group was linked to the Ohio National Guard, and the Rainbow Division of the US Army in WWI. Bob loaned several old photos of the band, including one which named as members clarinetists Shaw of Lancaster, and Fred Zimpfer (Jacob’s brother), both members of the Lancaster Symphony Orchestra. Virginia Sears and her husband Jim loaned several photos of the Mechanics Band. Jim’s great-grandfather was in the Band for many years. One of the Sears photos connected names with faces, and demonstrated that half a dozen or so orchestra musicians were in the Mechanics Band.

Fairfield Heritage volunteer Diane Eversole began to emerge as a key player in the search. Husband Charlie and grandson Clint became chief muscle when the time came to move items from the Goslin room to temporary storage for the exhibition. Diane’s interests and knowledge of local history and personalities helped to broaden the focus of the project. She explored connections between Miesse and Richard Outcault (Outcault once took art lessons from Miesse), which led to knowledge of Outcault’s employment by Thomas Edison.

Late in the winter, we also began to learn much more about Dr. Miesse. This large family has an extensive local genealogy, maintained by FHA volunteer Dorothy Ruble Hudson, a descendant. Dorothy connected us with cousin Ralph Van Gundy, whose mother was a great-granddaughter of Dr. Miesse. Ralph was occupied in clearing the family home after the recent passing of his father, but was also keenly interested in preserving documents and photographs, and shared his family’s pride in its ancestors. Ralph graciously allowed us access to materials found in the house, and loaned many for the exhibition. The Van Gundy home was a Miesse gallery, with paintings in almost every room. Ralph had
been gathering music and papers together, and hidden in these stacks were some real gems. I found a set of music parts for one of Miesse’s piano marches written for brass and wind instruments, in his own hand. Could this arrangement have been played by the Mechanics Band? With Ralph’s permission, I later sent these parts to the Adelphi Band, and the work was performed at the 2006 Festival Fair Day. Among the original piano works in manuscript form was a waltz dedicated by Miesse “To my friend, Jacob Keller Kirn” It seemed then that these three gentlemen – Miesse, Kirn and Zimpfer must have known each other.

Ralph called one day to say that he found something very special that he thought I might want to take a look at. He said “Here’s this stack of manuscript scores. I found it in the same brown paper bag that I remember putting it in when we cleaned out my grandparents home many years ago. It’s a good thing that my parents never threw anything away!” What Ralph had saved was a complete opera, written by Dr. Miesse in 1892. This ‘stack’ of music included orchestra scores and vocal scores for four acts, a libretto and plot synopsis. The libretto, the story behind the opera, was written by Miesse’s brother Charles. The two had collaborated, creating a unique work that must have seemed an extraordinary undertaking for the 1890’s here in Lancaster. Had it ever been performed? Would the opera be appreciated by audiences of today? Could it match up with other better-known works by famous composers? For the answers to the musical questions, I contacted Gary Sheldon. “This is very interesting. Have you seen any duets in the vocal parts? I’m thinking we might choose one for our “Let’s Duet” café concert.” After a short search we did find something, which was later copied out, rehearsed, and performed during the 2006 Festival.

Things were still turning up as July approached. It was hard to know when to stop looking. One of the last things we uncovered was more on Jacob Keller Kirn and his family. Diane had made contact with a grandson, Robert Johnson, who still lived here in town, and had some family history to share. We discovered that Keller Kirn did indeed write more music. One of his songs “Sweetheart”, was selected for broadcast on NBC radio in 1934. After World War II, John Justus Kirn, Jacob’s son, had been stationed in Austria as part of the transitional government. At that time he met and befriended Hungarian composer and conductor Ernst Von Dohnanyi who had briefly worked with Johannes Brahms in Vienna. Von Dohnanyi struggled through the war and was having difficulty returning to his home. John Kirn and his family back home offered both political and financial help to get Von Dohnanyi’s family out of Europe. The composer eventually visited the Kirns in Lancaster several times during residencies at Ohio University.

Late June and early July were the time for some tough decisions. We had discovered so much, and had so many artifacts – How could we make the choices of what to present and what to hold out? We wanted people to feel that sense of excitement that existed as each new connection or music work or painting was uncovered. For help, we turned to Barbara Hunzicker, ‘retired’ Festival director. Her background in museums and art made her a good choice to help arrange and ‘hang’ the exhibition. Diane, Charlie, FHA volunteer Dave Rodenbaugh and Barbara spent several days meeting the challenge of hanging everything in a room with masonry walls and very few hangers in the walls and labeling all of the pieces. Everything was ready for a grand opening on July 21. An on-line recreation of the exhibition will soon be added to the Festival web-site (www.lanfest.org/projects/heritage.html)

Even considering everything that was discovered, it seems likely that there is more out there. Almost every new item raised more questions and more leads to track down. Maybe a box of music in someone’s attic contains another masterpiece, or ties to a whole new family of composers or painters. Perhaps more of Zimpfer’s or Miesse’s compositions will be discovered. Readers are invited to contact Fairfield Heritage (740-654-9923) or the Lancaster Festival (740-687-4808) with any information about Lancaster’s heritage of music or art.