

# Cambridge, Massachusetts Birthplace of American Composer Leroy Anderson

by Jane Anderson Vercelli

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While the entertaining music of Leroy Anderson is heard all over the world today, the composer who wrote *Sleigh Ride* was born, grew up and was educated in Cambridge, Massachusetts thanks to his Swedish parents, who had immigrated as children to the United States and ultimately chose to make Cambridge their home.

During his lifetime, Anderson arranged, conducted and composed largely instrumental music, including such well known compositions as *The Syncopated Clock*, *The Waltzing Cat*, *The Typewriter*, *Bugler's Holiday*, *Trumpeter's Lullaby* and the Christmas classic *Sleigh Ride*.

Leroy's father, Bror Anton Anderson, the seventh of eight children, was born in Övarp near Kristianstad in southern Sweden and immigrated with his family to Chicago in March 1882. (The family name was changed from Andersson to Anderson in the USA.) A graduate of North Park College in the 1890's, he moved to Philadelphia and then to Cambridge, where he worked for the post office his entire life. As a young man, he played mandolin and banjo.

Leroy's mother, Anna Margareta Anderson, was born in Stockholm, the youngest of four daughters of Bengt Jönsson and Maria Lovisa Horling. (The family name was changed from Jönsson to Johnson in the USA.) The family immigrated in 1887 to Worcester, and then to Cambridge. Bengt, a skilled maker of fine furniture, built Victorian piano cases for the Ivers and Pond Company of Boston. The most musically gifted of the four daughters, Anna played piano, organ, and guitar, and was excused from doing housework to protect her hands.

Anna and Bror, whose nickname was Ed, met and married in October 1904, when both were 25. They lived with Anna's parents and two unmarried sisters in the family house at 269 Norfolk Street, where Leroy was born on June 29, 1908.

In 1909, Anna and Ed bought land at 12 Chatham Street. The next year, they took out a mortgage to build a three-decker house, which still stands. By all accounts, their home was filled with music.

Anna played piano and taught Leroy to play as soon as he could reach the keys.

Once Leroy could play piano, he accompanied Anna on guitar. In time, Leroy also learned to play organ, tuba, accordion, and double bass.

After graduating from Cambridge Grammar School in 1921 and Cambridge High and Latin School in 1925, Leroy Anderson entered Harvard College as a member of the class of 1929.

At Harvard, Leroy arranged and composed music for the Harvard University Band, played trombone, and eventually became the director. In 1936, the manager of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, George Judd, also a Harvard alumnus, asked Leroy to arrange Harvard songs for the Boston Pops, beginning a collaboration with its director, Arthur Fiedler, that lasted for the rest of his life. Although Leroy Anderson did not live in Cambridge after World War II, his ties to his hometown remained strong through his relationship with the Pops. Through the years, Fiedler premiered pieces that Anderson composed and asked him to arrange music for the Pops to play, including selections from Gershwin's *Girl Crazy*, which Anderson completed shortly before he died on May 18, 1975 at his home in Woodbury, Connecticut.

Anderson's Centenary was celebrated in concerts around the world in 2008.

The Boston Pops Orchestra and conductor Keith Lockhart with pianist Michael Chertock gave two performances of an Anderson tribute - June 3 and June 4, 2008. They included Leroy Anderson's *Piano Concerto in C*, *Fiddle-Fiddle*, *The First Day of Spring*, *The Typewriter* and *Clarinet Candy*.



**City Hall  
Cambridge, Massachusetts**

Photograph by Rolf Anderson

The Boston Landmarks Orchestra, under the direction of conductor Charles Ansbacher, dedicated part of a concert at the Hatch Shell in Boston on September 3, 2008 to Anderson's music.

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