From the fall of 1948 through 1958, one hundred thirty-two musical compositions were created in response to the commissioning project of the Louisville Orchestra. Performances of approximately one hundred of these were preserved on long-playing records. This massive plan to commission both American and foreign composers to write compositions for a classically-sized orchestra provoked national and international cultural and political repercussions. The Rockefeller Foundation, in an unprecedented grant to an artistic endeavor, gave a total of half a million dollars to support this activity. The United States State Department found it a useful tool in the Cold War. Listeners all over the world heard broadcasts of Louisville Orchestra world premieres aired on the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe.

The first purpose of the study is to narrate the history of this project. As no thorough examination of primary archival material has previously existed, the history of the commissioning project is locally spotted with folklore or is simply unknown. In this study, primary emphasis has been given to the written documentation in published materials, typed minutes of the Orchestra Board, correspondence between the Orchestra’s management and various agencies and composers, and other supporting papers saved in the Files of the Louisville Orchestra, which are housed in the University of Louisville Archives and Records Center. These are supplemented by current interviews by the writer and by oral histories, also housed in the University Archives. In the course of the narrative, four commissioned works are examined in greater detail, each having special significance to the project, and each representing a distinctly different aspect of mid-twentieth-century orchestral music.

The second part of the study focuses upon special areas of interest including composer selection, the national and international politics of the 1950s as they affected the project, and general conclusions regarding styles of orchestral music in the mid-twentieth century, and the impact of the commissioning project.

Several appendices provide hitherto unavailable lists of works created by the project and composers who received consideration for a commission, as well as a copy of the standard commissioning letter and the original Rockefeller grant proposal.