



## Mortimer Levitt and the Foundation

The Foundation was created in 1963 by Mortimer Levitt who set aside assets to support the non-profits with which he was involved, namely Young Concert Artists (YCA), Lincoln Center's Film Society and later the Levitt Pavilion for the Performing Arts.

YCA served as a bridge between wannabe concert artists and professional agents. To that end there are annual auditions in New York, Leipzig, Germany, and Paris, France. Mr. Levitt was YCA's board chairman for twenty-eight years and is presently chairman emeritus. Mr. Levitt was also for some twenty-seven years an active board member of Lincoln Center's Film Society.

Mortimer had a long love affair with outdoor music, first in Prospect Park, then several times a day in Luna Park, then summer afternoons at Manhattan Beach, a private beach, east of Coney Island. Then in Lewison Stadium a modest admission price where symphonic music was performed at night in an uncomfortable concrete pavilion. Mortimer loved music under the stars; to him it was really magic. Mortimer does not like opera, but his wife was an opera buff, so they were both happy. The Levitts had a one-year honeymoon and in Rome in one of the several amphitheaters that had been restored, Mortimer rediscovered the magic of listening to music under the stars.

In 1970, Winnie Scott took over Lou Nistico's idea for a bandshell. Unfortunately, they couldn't raise the necessary money to build it. Originally, it was to have been built in Westport's Longshore, a private golf club located on the Long Island Sound, a club that was later bought by the Town of Westport.

The Young Women's League had contributed \$5000 and another \$5000 came from the Kiwanis Club. Levitt told Winnie he would put up the rest of the money but only if he was pleased with the design. The bandshell was to be located right on the water. The first design Winnie presented was something very modern. Levitt thought Westport was a New England town and something more rustic would be more suitable.

John Kemish, the First Selectman selected on using the landfill area, a peninsula some twenty feet high nosing its way like an arrow into the historic Saugatuck River. They were obligated to convert it into a park otherwise it would all have to be shipped away. Odor was no problem (chemicals handled that), the problem was, how to create a structure that would stay up year round. Westport's talented architect, Bruce

Campbell Graham contributed his services, along with a perfect structure that is still being used.

Initially, Levitt had no interest, but the First Selectman insisted that he look at it. When Levitt saw that beautiful location and Bruce said there would be no sinking problem because they would receive a good sized contribution of gravel from the Glendinning Company who in digging for their new building hit upon gobs of gravel. Bruce said it would go a long way in preventing the landfill from sinking. Winnie brought Bruce Graham's plans for their building estimated to cost \$40,000 and Levitt said he would contribute the rest of the money. Calling it the Levitt Pavilion was Winnie's idea and this all happened during the winter when the Levitts had returned to their New York City home.

Westport became a comfortable place to hear music; no hard park benches, everyone brought beach chairs. Levitt put in an underground sprinkler system and the town put in a new lawn. Listening to music, sitting in a beach chair, inhaling the fragrance of a healthy lawn was heavenly. And best of all, there would be no admission charge. Mortimer contributed half the Levitt Pavilion's budget the other half was raised by the board, with an annual benefit at the Pavilion and subsequently with a second annual winter benefit, a black tie dinner dance with an added feature of gambling.

Levitt supported the balance for twenty-five years, which came to an end when a new chairman decided that she could raise money by charging admission to six or seven evenings. As he did not agree that the Pavilion should charge admission, other than the two annual benefits, they came to a parting of the ways –although, Mrs. Levitt stayed on as board member and contributes one or two tables for the annual benefit.

Levitt, who was born in 1907, grew up at a time when almost every community had Sunday afternoon concerts on the village green. When on his ninetieth birthday he sold his company (Levitt was sole owner for sixty years), he decided to replace his eighty-two Custom Shops with some Twenty Levitt Pavilions.

The magic of music under the stars should not be confined to Westport. It deserves to be heard in communities coast-to-coast and his foundation is in position to make that possible.

The Foundation supports music, dance, the arts, as well as educational institutions, among the major recipients are the Metropolitan Opera, Big Apple Circus, Young Musicians Foundation, Marymount Manhattan Writing Center, Scripps College, Joffrey Ballet, Bard College, the Museum of Television and Radio, the New York City

Opera, the Joyce Theatre, the New Victory Theater and the Music Center of Los Angeles.

Mortimer Levitt passed away on July 12, 2005 at the age of 98. The Mortimer Levitt Foundation will continue to support the Levitt Pavilions for the Performing Arts. His wife, Annemarie Levitt, has taken on the role of president of the Mortimer Levitt Foundation and his daughter, Elizabeth Levitt Hirsch continues in her role as vice-president, and develops expansion of the Levitt Pavilion program.