Chicago Opera Archives

Introduction

In the early 1980's The Lyric Opera of Chicago deeded an extensive scenic materials collection to Northern Illinois University in care of Alexander Adducci of the theatre arts department. The Lyric then donated a collection of archival documents, largely from the Chicago Civic Opera period, to NIU in 1984 and together these make up the Chicago Opera Archives special collection. Property rights in the collection are held by NIU; literary rights are subject to applicable copyright laws. There are no restrictions on access to the collection.

Scope and Content

The Chicago Opera Archives collection, dated 1910-1998, includes materials from Chicago Grand Opera, Chicago City Opera, Chicago Opera Company, Chicago Civic Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago. Some items from the earlier organizations are representative of operatic theater productions from the late 1880's.

The bulk of the archival documents are from the Civic period (1922-1932) and include programs, production notebooks, timesheets, ground plans, construction drawings, photographs, inventory records, property lists, touring information, costume renderings, source drawings, expense records, correspondence, and blueprints. The production notebooks provide detailed production records of over 70 operas. The archival document collection, occupies approximately 100 linear feet of shelf space in the NIU Rare Books and Special Collections annex. Included are approximately 100 boxes, 450 loose paper/cardboard materials, and 40 miscellaneous books.

Boxes 1-22 contain printed programs from the Civic period through the Lyric period. Boxes 23-28 contain Civic period expense records. Material orders from the Civic period are contained in boxes 29-34. Time sheets from the Civic period are contained in boxes 35-44. Civic period production notebook materials are contained in boxes 45-72. Photographs and miscellaneous items from the Civic period are contained in boxes 45, 80, 89-90 and 91-99.

In addition, the archives include an extensive scenic collection, which contains over five million square feet of stage materials, including 1500 painted backdrops, 2000 folding scenic flats, floor cloths, three-dimensional units and properties, as well as 121 intricately detailed, ¼ inch to 1 foot scale scenic maquettes. According to Alexander Adducci, NIU Theatre Arts professor of design, there is no known collection equaling the magnitude and quality of this assembly of primary operatic theater materials from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
There is little representation for the years (1933-1953), between the Civic and the Lyric organizations, and the Lyric items are limited to programs and a few miscellaneous promotional publications. Many of the drawings and blueprints from the Civic period are in need of conservatory/preservatory attention and are difficult to access in their fragile condition.

A preliminary inventory of the Civic opera records was prepared by Sally DeFauw in 1986 and Glenn Rodden further organized and recorded photographs in 1987. DeFauw noted that the loose rolled drawings and blueprints were “extremely brittle and will not take much handling.”

In 1993, this inventory was further updated and detailed on legal pad sheets organized into manilla folders by Josie Fania, a Library Science student. There is no single, up-to-date published inventory to represent the collection. Several rolls of broadsides from the Civic period, shelved with the other loose rolled items, are not represented in the DeFauw inventory.

**Historical Sketch**

Though Chicago had hosted touring opera companies since 1850, Chicago Grand Opera, formed in 1909, was the first of its resident companies. The Chicago Grand Opera, which gained most of its initial scenery, costumes and performers from the closing of Oscar Hammerstein’s Manhattan Opera House in New York, opened its first season in November, 1910.

The Chicago Opera Association was incorporated in 1915, when the Chicago Grand Opera company failed financially. The Chicago Opera Association continued until 1922, when the Chicago Civic Opera Company was formed. Though the Civic was directed to appeal to a broader audience, including those with more moderate incomes, it folded at the end of the 1931-32 season.

From 1933 until the formation of the current resident company, The Lyric Opera of Chicago, (initially named Lyric Theatre of Chicago) in 1954, three additional opera companies were formed and folded due to financial instability. Another Chicago Grand Opera Company performed two season from 1933-35; the Chicago City Opera Company lasted five seasons from 1935-39; and the Chicago Opera Company performed from 1940-1946. From 1946-1954, there was no resident company in Chicago.

The NIU Chicago Opera Collection represents the city’s rich operatic tradition spanning from the late 1880’s to the late 1990’s. The expansive scenic collection supplemented by the archival document collection are important to the field of operatic theatre on regional, national and international levels.
Works Cited


