The Metropolitan Opera Archives

By MARY ELLIS PELTZ

New York City

ROTTING in a sooty basement, rust-stained in ancient tin boxes, eaten by rodents or pulverized by old steam leaks, stuffed higgledy-piggledy into ripping cartons—this was the condition of the archives of the Nation's greatest opera company 10 years ago. And you can't blame the management. Too busy getting up the curtain and dealing with the public, ignorant of the ways of their predecessors, overworked and understaffed, these gentlemen had to spend their time in the present and the future. Though every so often a conscientious secretary would send down another pile of papers to the building superintendent for storage, those papers were merely ancient history.

As editor of *Opera News*, the Metropolitan Opera Guild magazine, and author of half a dozen books on opera, I had learned during 21 years of frustration that it was useless to ask for information from Metropolitan Opera authorities. Even the official history of the company was peppered with inaccuracies. The bound programs were falling to pieces. So when I decided to retire, some 10 years ago, I asked the chairman of the Metropolitan Board of Directors if I might undertake the organization of the Archives as a volunteer worker. All I wanted was a room and some shelving, a bit of light, and a telephone. To reinforce my request I was decidedly eloquent on my personal experiences.

How to proceed next? A course in library techniques at Columbia University proved about as useful as one in astronomy. At Radcliffe a 7-week institute in archival procedures taught me something about government archives, university archives, the archival needs of banks, churches, and libraries—even the U.S. Marine Corps. Nothing, however, was forthcoming about the archives of an opera house.

Trips to Europe were more productive. I learned that Covent Garden managed with a large closet. Paris divided its archives in three groups: current management papers, those that were turned

The author, for 21 years the editor of *Opera News*, is Archivist of the Metropolitan Opera Association and author of several books on opera and the Metropolitan Opera, including *The Metropolitan Opera Guide*, *Accents on Opera*, and *The Magic of Opera*. She is also a director of the Metropolitan Opera Guild, chairman of its Speakers Bureau, and a frequent panelist on the intermission programs of the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts.

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access

over as historic material to the Archives Nationales, and the decorative sketches and musical manuscripts that found their way to the library-museum in the Opera House. Later my mouth watered as I examined the historical material in Vienna and the papers salvaged from the destruction of the National Theater in Munich.

Five main functions of our local task evolved automatically: preservation of what should be preserved, disposal of what was ephemeral, systematic arrangement, cataloging of materials, and service to a growing public.

Volunteer assistance was readily forthcoming. My first helper offered an impressive experience in bibliographical and library research and a mature taste for opera. Soon half a dozen turned up, and a second room became necessary. Those who could not spell were set to work putting papers in chronological order. Those who could not count could alphabetize. Those who could not do either proved admirable destroyers of canceled checks, preserving only checks with famous autographs. Not such a tedious process as one might suspect! A hundred human dramas are whispered in a sheaf of variegated checks.

We obtained file cabinets in a variety of ways. At a performance of "The Makropoulos Secret" we noticed that the letter files of a hundred-year-old law library had been carefully antiqued but were actually new and clean. Suspecting that the play would close shortly, we begged the producers to bequeath us these useful properties. From a board member who was moving his office we got half a dozen respectable metal cabinets. A World War I typewriter was unearthed and put to use. We would not ask a penny of the hard-pressed opera company.

One day we found eight old large-size dollar bills in an ancient ledger; we had to visit half a dozen banks before the money was recognized as legal tender. "Tell the girls to buy champagne," urged our association sponsor. Instead we bought new transfiles. Eventually the company decided to give us whatever equipment would otherwise be thrown away. We bought a roll of contact paper and re-covered Signor Gatti-Casazza's correspondence cases, having obtained permission to destroy the "No, we have no job for you" letters, the "thank you's" and the "no, thank you's."

Just before closing up for the summer after our first spring, we arrived one morning to find 70 tin boxes piled in confusion across our carefully excavated pathways through the archives. Disdaining fears of tetanus, we pried open the rusty locks and found the con-

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access

tracts of 50 years. To open their crackling folds and file them alphabetically took several weeks during the following autumn.

Different departments in the Opera House were discovering our existence. Mounds of photographs, costume designs, clipping books, press releases, payrolls, worksheets, vouchers, budgets, reports, and assorted correspondence crowded our offices. Assorted? Yes. Sorted? No. And that is where we lost our *respect des fonds*, watchword of the Radcliffe Institute. One secretary filed chronologically, year by year. Another filed 3 years together. One filed under the name of the writer, another under the name of the organization, a third under the name of the city. We resisted the temptation to refile under subjects; it would have been convenient in the end but impossible to achieve.

Meanwhile we decided on a series of card catalogs. Two, begun by a pious volunteer years before, recorded every performance of every opera singer since 1883, when the Opera House opened. Two identical cards listed the dates of each performance of a single role by a single artist in 1 year on a single card. One list we filed under the artist's name, one under the opera and role. To keep this heroic effort up to date requires at least 100 hours each October, but it has paid off in our ability to offer prompt and accurate information about who sang Carmen and when, and whether Sadie Snooks ever sang at the Met, and when and what. We have extended the operation to the men of the orchestra, the men and women of the chorus and ballet, and the directors of the company.

Publicity from one press release and one national magazine resulted in many gifts. We have welcomed old programs and photographs, albums of singers of the past, books for our slender reference library—everything except librettos, of which we have an adequate supply. Our prize package, however, came from a personal contact: Adelina Patti's love letters to her brother-in-law's brother, Max Strakosch, written in a beautiful spidery script by the 21-year-old soprano in 1863.

Service to the public requires a minimum of an hour a day through the working year. "Who did my grandfather sit next to in the Dress Circle in 1922?" "How large a stage band did Bruno Walter get in 'The Magic Flute'?" "Some examples of composers' handwritings, please. They may be photostated." (They had better be.) "My grandfather, the conductor, died many years ago in New York. Have you any little souvenir of him to send me in Naples?" (We found an appreciative letter from an eminent composer to copy for her.) "What are the names of all the horn players in the

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access

history of the Metropolitan orchestra?" "Where was Nellie Melba in 1926?"

Pictures and programs. We send them off every day to fans, libraries, conservatories, newly formed archives, museums, television studios, shut-ins, historians, even the singers of yesteryear. Requests come from Japan, Sweden, Spain, and South Africa. Our correspondents pay postage and the cost of reproduction, when necessary. We also handle letters from schoolchildren, for whom we have prepared abbreviated histories of the Metropolitan Opera. When we are asked for information readily available in standard books, we consult the postmark. If it represents a town large enough to contain a public library, we send a bibliography. Otherwise, although we resent the student's desire to let someone else do his work, we do it ourselves.

Disposal has proved more time-consuming than research, but quite as interesting. To read through the correspondence of a general manager for 20 years is to open new vistas on human nature. The man you thought was inscrutable and cold turns out to have been generous and diplomatic. The man you remembered as arbitrary turns out to have delegated his chief decisions to a colleague. The man you knew as a martinet turns into a sentimental wit. These three are all dead. Someday their real natures should be made known to the public.

As to their correspondents one finds an occasional genius, like the inventor who offered his plans for a new opera house the walls of which in case of fire could swing out gently like the petals of a faded tulip and permit the audience to escape in record time. More numerous are the partisans: for or against opera in wartime, for or against Mme. X or Herr Y, for or against the repertory. Parents are usually aggrieved, plaintive, or grateful. Long-retired stars have always preserved their great voices, though all they ask is one more appearance. Auditionists request encouragement, advice, or the names of future instructors. They usually bear defeat on all three grounds with good grace, or at least with silence.

The disposal of financial papers can more easily be planned and executed than the destruction of old letters. We keep deposit slips, bank statements, fire inspection reports, inventories, payrolls, vouchers, bank statements, and earning records for 7 years only. With typically archival nostalgia we cling, however, to the calf-bound ledgers of the nineties with their handsome, legible handwriting, and we resent the incomprehensible, bulky sheets of modern mechanical records. The typewriter, carbon paper, and Xerox process may

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access

have relieved mankind of much toil, but the resulting explosion of paper threatens to stifle us.

In the new Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center we are settled two stories underground. Here we find the old equipment shabby and practical; the new and streamlined is glorious to behold and most inconvenient to our needs. The soot that drifted through the windows on 39th Street has been replaced by fine plaster dust. The drinking water is deliciously cold, the toilets are remote, and the weather remains a mystery. When we want to know whether to take an umbrella to our homeward bus, we call up someone at the Stage Door. One third of our promised space has been given to electrical storage. But the historic pictures of Patti, Eames, and Sembrich hang on our steel and concrete walls. In that company our elderly octette of workers finds appropriate companionship while in contrast our hearts remain young and gay.

"In this condition he left 'em"

He was likewise a great lover of method and dispatch in all sorts of business, which made him find fault with the management of the Secretaries office. And, indeed, with very good reason; for from the time of Bacon's Rebellion, till then, there never was any office in the world more negligently kept . . . Many original patents, records, and deeds of land, with other matters of great consequence were thrown loose about the office, and suffer'd to be dirtied, torn, and eaten by the moths and other insects. But upon this gentleman's accession to the government, he immediately gave directions to reform all these irregularities; he caused the loose and torn records of value to be transcribed into new books, and order'd Conveniencies to be built within the office for preserving the records from being lost and confounded as before. He prescribed methods to keep the papers dry and clean, and to reduce them into such order as that any thing might be turn'd to immediately. But all these conveniencies were burnt soon after they were finished, in October, 1698, together with the office it self, and the whole State-House [at Jamestown]. But his diligence was so great in that affair, that tho' his stay afterward in the country was very short, yet he caused all the records and papers which had been sav'd from the fire to be sorted again, and register'd in order, and indeed in much better order than ever they had had been before. In this condition he left 'em at his quitting the government.

—Robert Beverly, with reference to the work of Sir Edmund Andros, onetime Governor of Virginia, as quoted in Virginia Historical Society, *Occasional Bulletin* no. 13, p. 11 (Oct. 1966).

Downloaded from https://prime-pdf-watermark.prime-prod.pubfactory.com/ at 2025-07-01 via free access