BHC-MSS 0251
Guide to the Records of the Bridgeport Oratorio Society
By Lisa Furchtgott
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Descriptive Summary
Title: Records of the Bridgeport Oratorio Society
Dates: 1898-2004
Quantity: 1 manuscript box; 0.42 linear feet
Abstract: The collection contains programs, ticket stubs, concert reviews, and research concerning the Society's termination in 1940.
Language: English
Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Administrative History:

The Bridgeport Oratorio Society was formed in 1894. It would disband in 1899, then re-convene in 1911. Two concerts were performed each year, with a break from 1917 through 1919. In 1940, the Society expanded and was renamed the Choral Symphony Society of Fairfield County.

Frank Damrosch, the group's founder and its first conductor, was born in Breslau, then part of Prussia, in 1859. He trained as a musician under his father, Leopold Damrosch, who immigrated to New York in 1869 and began the New York Oratorio Society in 1873. Frank arrived in 1871. After spending several years in Denver, where he first worked as a hat salesman, Frank served as the superintendent of music taught in the city's public schools. In 1885, he settled in New York City and directed major choral groups, including some operating at the Metropolitan Opera House, and gave lessons in singing. In 1905, he founded the New York Institute of Musical Art, which in 1926 converged with a graduate institution to become the Julliard School. He died in New York in 1937.

Samuel S. Sanford, co-founder and later faculty of the Yale School of Music, was voted president of the Bridgeport Oratorio Society until its first dissolution in 1899. He was born in Bridgeport in 1849 and died there in 1910.

The two primary conductors of the Society during its second and longer wave consisted of Dr. Arthur Mees, a native of Columbus, Ohio, born there in 1850 and dying in New York in 1923, and then Dr. Frank Kasschau, born in New York City in 1885 and dying in Ridgewood, New Jersey in 1944.

The collection indicates the Society's goal to expose the personal fulfillment and communal spirit opera could provide to the city's working class. After Damosch returned to New York, he founded the People's Singing Classes in 1892, where adult working-class residents were taught to sight-read music, and directed the thousand-member People's Choral Union to emerge from the program.

While the Society's symphony and soloist accompaniments were well-known professionals, paid for that work, its singers were volunteers and remained primarily amateur; many of them belonged to church choirs. Auditions were not required. The Society's numbers ranged from 250 to 350 people over its duration. Although performances initially took place at the Hartford State Armory, those of the second generation typically took place in the auditorium of the city's largest high school, housing 1500 seats. Programs emphasized that children's choruses sometimes singing alongside were drawn from Bridgeport's public schools.

Members paid small dues to maintain practice space. Wealthy donors, on the Society's board or as concert subscribers, provided extra funding and financial management. Lucien T. Warner, a Bridgeport-based banker and heir to the lucrative Warner Brothers corset company, guided the Society's incorporation in 1926. Its value never amounted to more than a few hundred dollars.

Before 1930, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra commonly accompanied it. That year the Society began to perform with Bridgeport Symphony Orchestra. Over the next decade, the symphony became supported in large part by New Deal art programs. In December of 1934, for instance, the Society performed George Frideric Handel's 1741 piece *The Messiah* with the orchestra underwritten by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Over the next several years, the Works Project Administration's Federal Music Program became the Symphony's benefactor. The orchestra continued its service after the Society transformed into the Fairfield County chorus in 1940. Susan Hawley Davis, the wife of a prosperous Bridgeport jewelry company who had played a strong role in reviving the Society in 1911, praised its partnership with the publicly-funded symphony, promising that the two bodies would continue to work "hand in hand" and noting that an oratorio society in Providence, Rhode Island, was interested in constructing a similar relationship.

Scope and Content:

The collection is mostly comprised of concert programs, joined by *Bridgeport Post* reviews of *Samson and Delilah* and *The Damnation of Faust.* The programs typically explain the plot and translated lyrics informing the opera being sung and sometimes offer biographies of their composers. Listed as well are the names of the Society's members, solo and orchestra accompanists, officers and governing boards, and subscribers providing funding. Some also feature advertisements.

Administrative information
Provenance:

Preferred Citation

Names and Subject Tracings

Corporate names:
Metropolitan Body Company
University of Bridgeport

Personal names:
Carlson, William

Corporate names:
Metropolitan Body Company
University of Bridgeport

Subject tracings:
Barnum Festival (Bridgeport, Conn.)
Philanthropists

Arrangement notes:

Series I contains a short, undated history of the original Bridgeport Ontario Society.

Series II contains a list of Oratorio concerts from 1895 through 1899 and programs ranging from 1898 to 1939.

Series III houses news-clippings composed of reviews of the two Oratorio concerts performed in 1915.

Series IV consists of correspondence, news-clippings, programs, genealogical materials, and copies of pages from the Milford and Bridgeport business directories.

Box 1
Series I, History

1. History, undated

Series II, Programs

2. List of programs and assistant artists, 1895-1899, undated
3. Program, 1898
4. Programs, 1912, 1913, 1914
5. Programs, 1915, 1916
6. Programs, 1919, 1920
7. Programs, 1921, 1922, 1923
8. Programs, 1924, 1925, 1926, 1927
9. Programs, 1928, 1929, 1930
10. Programs, 1931, 1932
11. Programs, 1933, 1934
12. Programs, 1935, 1936
13. Programs, 1938, 1939

Series III, News-clippings

14. New-clippings, Damnation of Faust, 1915
15. New-clippings, Samson and Delilah, 1915

Series IV, misc.

16. Research into disbandment date, 2003, 2004