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Music Division

Guide to the

Russell Oberlin papers

1930-2016

JPB 17-20

Processed by Matthew Snyder, 2018.

Summary

Creator: Oberlin, Russell, 1928-2016

Title: Russell Oberlin papers

Date: 1930-2016

Size: 6.83 linear feet (20 containers)

Abstract: Russell Oberlin (1928-2016) was an American singer and teacher renowned for being the first countertenor in the United States, and one of the earliest in the world to have an international career. His papers, dating from 1930 to 2016, document his childhood and education, his performance career, his teaching, and his research into the history of the countertenor and castrato singing.

Access: Some collections held by the Dance, Music, Recorded Sound, and Theatre Divisions at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts are held off-site and must be requested in advance. Please check the collection records in **the NYPL's online catalog** for detailed location information. For general guidance about requesting offsite materials, please consult: <https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/requesting-archival-materials>

Conditions Governing Access:

Sound and video recordings are unavailable pending digitization.

Preferred citation: Russell Oberlin papers, JPB 17-20. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Language of the Material: English

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Creator History

Russell Oberlin (1928-2016) was an American singer and teacher, renowned for being the first countertenor in the United States, and one of the earliest in the world to have an international career. A

founding member of the New York Pro Musica Antiqua ensemble, Oberlin was at the forefront of the early music movement that gained significance in Western performance practice from the 1950s onward.

Born in Akron, Ohio, Oberlin began singing professionally at a young age. He graduated from the Juilliard School in 1951, and joined the New York Pro Musica Antiqua (later known as the New York Pro Musica) the following year. The group was one of the first in the modern era to specialize in repertory from Medieval and Renaissance composers. Oberlin trained and started his career as a traditional tenor, but the ease and facility with which he could sing in a higher range without using falsetto made him uniquely suited to performing older art songs, some of which were written for castrati.

In 1955, Leonard Bernstein featured Oberlin in his recording of Handel's *Messiah*. That same year, Oberlin performed in Bernstein's *The Lark* with the Pro Musica. Other featured engagements included Pro Musica's production of *The Play of Daniel* (a Medieval liturgical drama) in 1958, which was later recorded and broadcast on public television; and the role of Oberon in Benjamin Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (produced by John Gielgud in 1961 at Covent Garden, London). Oberlin also recorded and toured the United States and Europe as a soloist in recital and with orchestras, and made several other television appearances, such as a CBC performance of Bach's *Cantata No. 54* with Glenn Gould (1962).

In 1964, Oberlin retired from regular performance. Shortly thereafter, he joined the faculty of Hunter College, where he taught voice and choir until his retirement in 1994. He also lectured and taught in Europe, and researched the history of countertenors and castrato voice as a Fulbright scholar in 1968 and 1969. Oberlin died at his home in New York City in 2016.

Scope and Content Note

The Russell Oberlin papers, dating from 1930 to 2016, document Oberlin's childhood and education, his performance career, his teaching, and his research, through annotated scores and scripts; photographs; scrapbooks; letters; teaching and research files; business files containing professional correspondence, clippings, interviews, and concert programs; and sound and video recordings.

The scores and scripts, which are arranged by composer or author, hold songs, song collections, pieces for duo or chorus, and scripts for readings or narrations. All are annotated, or contain composer inscriptions or autographs. The annotations denote phrasing suggestions, note corrections, and edits. Songs and song collections mainly date from Oberlin's performance years, while choral pieces and scripts date from his teaching years at Hunter College forward (the middle 1960s to the 2000s). Most of the scores are published, but there are a few manuscripts present, most notably a full score for Leonard Bernstein's *The Lark*. Most other manuscripts are probably in Oberlin's hand, not that of the original composer, and may have been used for teaching purposes. Composers who inscribed scores to Oberlin include Marc Blitzstein, Richard Hundley, and Ben Weber.

The photographs contain performance and rehearsal images, portraits of Oberlin, and informal images from throughout Oberlin's life. The portraits date mainly from Oberlin's performance career (1950s to the mid-1960s) and include work by Carl Van Vechten, Ken Heyman, and Atelier Von Behr. Performance photographs date from the same time frame, and include images from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, with John Gielgud. Also present is a bound book of photographs of the New York Pro Musica in rehearsals and performance in the early 1950s (box 5, folder 4).

Other photographs show Oberlin teaching classes at Hunter College, and with friends and colleagues such as Ned Rorem and Geoffrey Holder. Childhood photographs of Oberlin date from his school days to his young adulthood.

The four scrapbooks provide a detailed chronology of Oberlin's career. Oberlin assembled Volume 1 contemporaneously (from the 1930s to 1945), while he prepared the other three volumes (dating from 1961 to 1994) retrospectively, in support of his academic promotion. The scrapbooks contain business and personal letters, programs, clippings, and contracts, as well as a few photographs.

The letters, which are divided into chronological and alphabetical sections, contain letters from friends, colleagues, and students; business letters and contracts; and fan mail. Most of the letters are incoming, but a few drafts of responses are also present. Notable people who wrote to Oberlin include Leonard Bernstein, Marilyn Horne, Ned Rorem, Carl Van Vechten, and Ursula Vaughn Williams (widow of Ralph). The letters from Oberlin in the alphabetical section are to his mother. The largest set of letters to Oberlin were written by Stella Besse, a disturbed fan.

Oberlin's teaching and research files center on his work at Hunter College from the 1960s to the 1990s, and on the research projects he undertook in the United States and abroad. The largest of these is his historical survey of music created for the countertenor and castrato voice, a topic Oberlin continued to research up to the early 2000s. This file holds Oberlin's papers and articles, some published; notes; correspondence with other singers and researchers; and published articles by others. Also present is a lecture by Oberlin called "The Art of the Troubadour and Trouvère," most likely delivered at Hunter. The teaching files also contain notes, letters, and programs regarding his classes and his direction of the Hunter College choir, as well as the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, in which Oberlin was active for many years.

The business files document engagements, tours, recordings, and festivals through letters, contracts, publicity material, and financial records. They also hold datebooks and an address book; Oberlin's passport; and his school diplomas. The publicity material contains flyers, brochures, biographies, programs, clippings, and interview transcripts. The programs offer detailed coverage of Oberlin's performances from throughout his life. The interview transcripts are the complete versions of interviews published in the 1980s. Other significant topics in the business files include the New York Pro Musica, a tour of *The Lark*, and recordings released on Deutsche Grammophon and Lyrichord Discs.

The sound and video recordings include several interviews of Oberlin dating from the 2000s; the 1965 television production of *The Play of Daniel*; a 1961 CBC radio recital; 1962 CBC television performances with Glenn Gould; *The Lark* with Leonard Bernstein conducting; a circa 1957 radio broadcast of the New York Pro Musica; a 1977 production of *Façade* (poems by Edith Sitwell, music by William Walton); a 1979 production of *L'Histoire du Soldat*; and several examples of Oberlin performing in theatrical pieces or literary readings, including *Samson Agonistes* by John Milton, and *The Great Debate In Hell* (a reading of Books I and II of Milton's *Paradise Lost*). Also present are two lectures by Oberlin, and performances of the Hunter College choir under Oberlin's direction. Sound and video recordings are unavailable pending digitization.

Key Terms

Occupations

Countertenors
Early-music specialists
Singers.

Subjects

Music -- United States -- 20th century

Names

Oberlin, Russell, 1928-2016

Van Vechten, Carl, 1880-1964

New York Pro Musica Antiqua

Container List

Scores and Scripts

- b. 1 f. 1 *Anonymous. "Laisse Moy Soupirer"* undated
Manuscript.
- b. 1 f. 2 **Bach, Johann Sebastian** 1960s-1980s
Choral works, used at Hunter College.
- b. 1 f. 3 **Bates, Barbara Ann** 1962
Manuscript. Two songs for voice and piano, with a letter from Bates to Oberlin.
- b. 2 f. 1 **Bernstein, Leonard. *The Lark*** 1955
Full score, manuscript copy.
- b. 1 f. 4 **Blitzstein, Marc. *Six Elizabethan Songs*** 1960s
Autographed to Oberlin.
- b. 1 f. 5 **Buxtehude, Dietrich. *Magnificat Anima Mea*** 1950s
- b. 1 f. 6 **Byrd, William. *Sacred Songs*** 1950s
- b. 1 f. 7 **Couperin, François. "Troisième Leçon De Ténèbres"** 1950s
- b. 1 f. 8 **de Sermisy, Claudin. "Tant que Vivray"** undated
Manuscript. For lute and voice.
- b. 1 f. 9 **Dowland, John. *Fifty Songs*** 1950s
- b. 1 f. 10 **Fennimore, Joseph. *Bits and Pieces*** 1970s
Autographed to Oberlin.
- b. 1 f. 11 **Grillparzer, Franz. "Funeral Oration for Ludwig van Beethoven"** 2002
Handel, Georg Friedrich
- b. 1 f. 12 *The Messiah* 1955
- b. 1 f. 13 *Utrecht Te Deum* undated
- b. 1 f. 14 **Hundley, Richard. *Eight Songs*** 1980s
Autographed to Oberlin.
- b. 1 f. 15 **Josquin des Prés. *Tu Solus Qui Facis Mirabilia*** 1950s
Milton, John
- b. 1 f. 16 *Paradise Lost* 2002
- b. 1 f. 17 *Samson Agonistes* 2003
- b. 3 f. 1 **Monteverdi, Claudio** undated
Two choral works and one song.
- b. 3 f. 2 **Morley, Thomas. *Two Part Canzonets***
Purcell, Henry
- b. 3 f. 3 *Four Songs* 1958
Edited by Oberlin and Paul Maynard.
- b. 3 f. 4 *"Hark! The Echoing Air"* 1950s
- b. 4 f. 1 **Bass Parts for Various Songs** undated
Manuscripts.
- b. 3 f. 5 **Scheidt, Samuel. *Tulerant Dominum*** 1960s
- b. 3 f. 6 **Schütz, Heinrich. *Drie Biblische Szenen*** undated
- b. 3 f. 7 **Stevens, Denis. *The Five Songs in As You Like It*** 1960s
Autographed to Oberlin.
- b. 3 f. 8 **Stravinsky, Igor. *L'Histoire Du Soldat*** 1979

Scores and Scripts (cont.)

- b. 3 f. 9 *Thomson, Virgil. Shakespeare Songs* 1960s
Autographed to Oberlin.
- b. 4 f. 2 *Vivaldi, Antonio. Nisi Dominus* undated
Voice part.
- b. 3 f. 10 *Walton, William. Façade* 1975-1978
- b. 3 f. 11 *Weber, Ben. Four Songs, Opus 40* 1970s
- b. 3 f. 12 *Whitman, Walt. Memories of President Lincoln* undated
- b. 3 f. 13 Unidentified 1962, undated

Compilations

- b. 3 f. 14 *The A Capella Singer* 1960s
Edited by H. Clough-Leigher.
- b. 3 f. 15 *Invitation To Madrigals* 1960s
Edited by Thurston Dart.

Photographs

- b. 4 f. 3 *Childhood to Young Adulthood* 1930-1948
Includes image of Oberlin at CBS radio in New York City, 1941.

Portraits

- b. 3 f. 16-17 1950s-1970, 1990s-2000s
- b. 5 f. 1 2009
- b. 4 f. 4 Heyman, Ken early 1960s
- b. 4 f. 5 Van Vechten, Carl 1957
- b. 4 f. 6 Von Behr, Atelier 1950s

Performances

- b. 5 f. 2 1950s-1960s, 1980s
- b. 5 f. 3 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* 1961
At the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, with John Gielgud.
- b. 5 f. 4 *New York Pro Musica* 1950s
Informal photos, rehearsals, and performances.
- b. 5 f. 5 Teaching 1970s-1980s
- b. 5 f. 6 Informal 1950s-2014
- b. 5 f. 7 *With Others* 1950s-2003
Includes Ned Rorem, Geoffrey Holder, and Lowell Lieberman.
- b. 4 f. 7 *Other People* 1950s-2000s
Includes a signed headshot of Donald Dame.

Scrapbooks

- v. 1 1930s-1945
- v. 2 1961-1975, 1980
- v. 3 1961-1994
- v. 4 1976-1980

Letters

- b. 5 f. 8-10 1950s
- b. 6 f. 1-5 1960s-1990s
- b. 7 f. 1-6 1990s-2016, undated

Letters (cont.)

- b. 8 f. 1 American Academy in Rome 1984-1990
- b. 8 f. 2 Bernstein, Leonard 1957
- b. 8 f. 3-5 Besse, Stella 1983-1997
- b. 9 f. 1 Fan mail.
- b. 9 f. 2 Century Club 1983-1997
- b. 9 f. 3 Dunforth, Judith 1995-2001
- b. 9 f. 4 Horne, Marilyn
- b. 9 f. 5 Institute of International Education 1988-1990
- b. 9 f. 6 MacDonald, Heather 2011-2013
- b. 9 f. 7 *The New Yorker* 1997
- b. 9 f. 8 Oberlin, Russell 1950s-1960s
Letters to Oberlin's mother.
- b. 9 f. 9 Pfaltz, Madeleine 2012-2013
- b. 9 f. 10 Rorem, Ned 1978-2011
- b. 9 f. 11 Schneidman, Ruth 1956-1957
- b. 9 f. 12 Talma, Louise (Estate) 1996-1998
- b. 9 f. 13 Trustees of Gramercy Park 2000-2013
- b. 9 f. 14 Van Vechten, Carl 1956-1960
- b. 9 f. 15 Vaughn Williams, Ursula 1994-1995

Teaching and Research Files

- b. 10 f. 1-2 American Academy of Teachers of Singing 1987-2015
- b. 10 f. 3 "The Art of the Troubadour and Trouvère" 1960s-1970s
Lecture text, slides, supplementary readings.
- b. 10 f. 4-6 Countertenor and Castrati Research 1969-2004
- b. 11 f. 1 Fulbright Fellowship 1968-1969
- b. 11 f. 2-4 Hunter College 1968-1996
- b. 11 f. 5 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship 1966

Business Files

- b. 11 f. 6-7 1950s-2014
- b. 11 f. 8 Canadian Broadcast 1991, 1994, 2011
- b. 12 Datebooks and Address Book 1958-2015
- b. 13 f. 1-2 Deutsche Grammophon 1963-2014
- b. 4 f. 8 Diplomas and Passport 1941, 1950, 1958-1961
- b. 13 f. 3 Esoteric Records 1956-1958
- b. 13 f. 4 *The Lark Tour* 1955-1956
- b. 13 f. 5-6 Lyrichord Discs, Inc 1994-2007
- b. 13 f. 7 Marlboro Music School and Festival 2011
- b. 13 f. 8 Metropolitan Museum of Art 1995
- b. 13 f. 9 New York Pro Musica 1954-1956, 1967

Publicity

- b. 14 f. 1 1950s-1970s, 2008
Clippings

Business Files (cont.)

Publicity (cont.)

Clippings (cont.)

b. 14 f. 2-3 1950s-1960s

b. 4 f. 9 1960s

b. 14 f. 4-8 1970s-2010s

Interviews

b. 14 f. 9 1985

b. 15 f. 1-3 1987, 2000-2003

Programs

b. 15 f. 4-6 1940s-1960s

b. 16 f. 1-3 1960s-2013

b. 16 f. 4 Recording Information 1970s-2000s

b. 16 f. 5 Royal Opera House, Covent Garden 1961

b. 16 f. 6 Sony Music 2012-2013

b. 16 f. 7 United Kingdom Educational Commission 1968-1969

b. 16 f. 8 Video Artists International, Inc 2004-2006

b. 16 f. 9 Young Audiences, Inc 1957

Audio and Moving Images 1955-2013