



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Melville Charlton collection

1906-1976

Sc MG 92

Summary

Creator: Charlton, Melville, 1880-1973

Title: Melville Charlton collection

Date: 1906-1976

Size: 0.5 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: Gift of Myrtle Charlton, July 1978.

Revision History: Finding aid updated by Lauren Stark.

Abstract: Melville Charlton was the first African-American organist to be admitted to the American Guild of Organists. This collection contains correspondence and memorabilia documenting Charlton's seventy years as a musician.

Preferred citation: [Item], Melville Charlton collection, Sc MG 92, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

Processing note: Accessioned by Debra Carter, 1978, and Janice Quinter, 2007.

Separated Materials:

Transferred to the Photographs and Prints Division: photographs.

Transferred to the Sheet music collection, Sc MG 915, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division : sheet music.

Creator History

Melville Charlton served as organist for several churches and Jewish synagogues in New York City; he also gave concert tours and wrote the popular piano piece, "Poem Erotique". He was the first African-American organist to be admitted to the American Guild of Organists.

Born in New York City in 1880, Charlton studied piano as a child and obtained his musical education in the public schools. He undertook additional studies at the City College of New York and graduated from the National Conservatory of Music in 1904. Charlton's professional career included tenures as organist at Union Theological Seminary, 1911-ca. 1940, and for three of New York's largest Jewish synagogues, Temple Emanuel, Sinai Temple, and the Temple of the Covenant. Charlton further served as the organist for St. Philip's Church, St. James Presbyterian Church, and two churches in Brooklyn. In 1915, he became the first African American to pass the examination of the American Guild of Organists, and in 1924, Howard University conferred upon him the honorary degree of Doctor of Music. During the early twentieth century he played regularly in concerts; over the years his piano piece "Poem Erotique" has remained popular with concert pianists. For sixty-six years Charlton maintained a studio in Brooklyn, where he trained over a thousand piano students and one hundred organ pupils. He died in 1973.

Scope and Content Note

The Melville Charlton collection includes two letters commending Charlton's playing (1927 and 1959); two letters from the American Guild of Organists that have been mounted onto a plaque; news clippings containing biographical information; and a dismantled scrapbook of congratulatory letters from other musicians honoring him on his 90th birthday celebration. There are also concert programs (1911-1974) of his performances. A certificate from the American Guild of Organists and the Howard University diploma bestowing Charlton's honorary Ph.D. (1924) complete the collection.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American composers
African American musicians
African Americans in the performing arts
Organists

Names

Charlton, Melville, 1880-1973

Container List

- b. 1 f. 1 Correspondence and biographical information 1906-1974
Includes membership cards.
- b. 1 f. 2 90th birthday scrapbook 1970-1971
Concert programs
- b. 1 f. 3 Charlton's performances 1911-1974
Other performances 1972-1976
- b. 1 f. 5 Sheet music fragment
- b. 2 Certificates and plaque 1915-1956