

The early American musical theater collection, 1720-1989
An inventory of holdings at the American Music Research Center



American Music Research Center, University of Colorado at Boulder

Descriptive summary

Title	Early American musical theater collection
Date(s)	1720-1989
Identification	COU-AMRC-32
Creator(s)	
Repository	The American Music Research Center University of Colorado at Boulder 288 UCB Boulder, CO 80309
Location	Housed in the American Music Research Center
Physical Description	8 linear feet

Scope and Contents

Ballad operas collected by AMRC founder Sister Mary Dominic Ray, including research and teaching materials about actors and operas, articles about comic operas in the United States, and an index of opera titles.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

Arranged alphabetically by title. Individual operas are catalogued separately and available in the Howard Waltz Music Library.

Access

Open.

Publication Rights

All requests for permission to publish or quote from manuscripts must be submitted in writing to the American Music Research Center.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Early American musical theater collection, University of Colorado, Boulder

Index Terms

Access points related to this collection:

Corporate names

American Music Research Center

Subject headings

Music -- United States

Ballad operas

Ballad opera

Opera

Operas

Brief History of Early American Musical Theater (Ballad or Comic Operas)

(Material from "Drums, Wigs & Six Wax Lights by Sister Mary Dominic Ray)

A ballad opera is a comic play interspersed with music which consists of ballad (popular) tunes of the day and they are usually sprinkled with music from well-known Italian operas, even Handel operas. The predominant feature of a ballad opera is a substantial amount of dialogue. Plots deal with romance and very often include both the bourgeois and aristocracy within one opera. Heroines are frequently in the frustrating position of loving one person and being forced to marry another; and to add to that unhappy state of affairs, there are the expected (and unexpected) disguises of one kind or another.

After 1733 there emerged a new development in ballad opera: the pastiche. Although the pastiche retained a sizable number of ballad tunes and the usual substantial proportion of dialogue, its new characteristics were that the greater part of the music was written by several different composers and was compiled by a composer – not just by a musically interested gentleman of the theater, as was the case in the ballad operas.

The first printed evidence of an opera performance in America was February 8, 1735. The play, *Flora*, was advertised in the *South Carolina Gazette* from Charleston, South Carolina. For a period of 125 years (1735 – 1860) there was a vigorous theatrical life in America. The theatrical companies were producing plays of Shakespeare, Moliere, Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, and a substantial proportion of ballad operas and other forms of comic opera such as pastiches, farces, and pastorals.

By 1750 the New York theater company, Kean & Murray Company of Comedians premiered *The Mock Doctor* at the Rip Van Dam Warehouse. The first evidence of a full-fledged orchestra accompanying an opera was 1752 with the performance of *The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay.

It is unknown where the earliest theatrical group, Kean & Murray Company, originated from, but it is thought that they came from Jamaican theatrical fields. In 1752 the London group,

Lewis Hallam Company of Comedians, arrived in America from the stages of Drury Lane, Covent Garden, the Haymarket, etc. Although the members of this group were not the most notable, they were considered good seconds. This Hallam Company soon gathered into its fold several of the best actors of the dissolving Kean & Murray group, which could not begin to compete with this new and brilliant set of actor-singers, nor with their magnificent sets and costumes – supposedly the “finest and most extravagant,” fresh from the hands of the best London designers. Having picked up a number of American actors, this Hallam company, by 1763, was already being called the American Company. A few years later, it came to be known as the great Old American Company. In 1794 this company was rivaled by the new Wignell & Reinagle Company of Philadelphia. This group also had their own handsome sets, costumes, and orchestra; it also maintained its own spectacular ballet.

The comic opera flourished until soon after 1820, when the long decline in theater began and production of comic operas dwindled until 1860, when it died out. A few American composers – Benjamin Carr, G. Tobyn, James Ralph, Andrew Barton, and a handful of others – wrote a few comic operas, but none seems to have made much of a mark in the world of musical theater.

Detailed Description

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1	7	Articles – Comic Operas performed in Philadelphia and New York
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1	9	Articles – Drums, Wigs & Six Wax Lights by Sister Mary Dominic Ray
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