

**THE CENTER FOR POPULAR MUSIC, MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY,
MURFREESBORO, TN**

Diana Gaylen, the “Phantom Nightingale” Collection

14-029

Creator: Gaylen, Diana

Type of Material:

Digital File

Physical Description:

2.37 GB (638 Digital Files)

Dates:

1918-1967 (Bulk dates: 1931-1937)

Abstract (Descriptive Summary):

The Diana Gaylen, the “Phantom Nightingale” Collection consists of 638 digital scans of newspaper articles, contracts, photographs, programs, playbills, and other ephemera collected by Diana Gaylen during her singing career as a “ghost singer” and operatic soprano.

Access:

The collection is open for research.

Restrictions:

Property rights reside with Middle Tennessee State University. Literary rights are retained by the creators of the records and their heirs as stipulated by United States copyright law. For permissions to reproduce or to publish, please contact the Center for Popular Music.

Provenance and Acquisition Information:

The digital files making up this collection were donated to the Center for Popular Music by Jordan Diane Cox in November 2014. Ms. Cox is the great-granddaughter of Diana Gaylen. The original materials from which these digital files were created are in the possession of Mr. Gerald Cox.

Arrangement:

Original order of the materials has been maintained in so far as possible. Digital files are listed in the order in which they were received.

Subjects/Index Terms:

Gaylen, Diana, 1907-1992

Mitchell, Raymond Earle, 1895-

Motion picture actors and actresses

Opera singers

Agency History/biographical sketch:

Elsie Lee Wilson was born on January 28, 1907 in Butte, Silver Bow County, Montana. She had decided on an operatic career at five years old and in the late 1920s, she moved to Italy to study voice and learn French, Italian, Spanish, and German. At some point during her early singing career she changed her name to Diana Gaylen. Various other billings included Diana Galen and Liana Galen. She performed opera in Milan for three years, then she returned to America, where she found that the “talkies had suddenly taken the country by storm.” In 1931 she applied for a voice test at picture studios in Hollywood and she was selected to do “hidden singing” for lead actresses that did not have the ability to sing. Miss Gaylen was the “Phantom Voice of the Stars” including Olivia de Havilland and Greta Garbo.

Miss Gaylen also supplied the singing voices for Walt Disney’s’ animated female characters in Silly Symphonies. “They photograph me singing, and the artists then study the pictures and draw in mouths on the cartoon characters like mine,” she said. Because of her operatic experience, she was also able to “dub” in French, German and Italian for foreign versions of the animations.

In 1936, Diana Gaylen opened as the lead, Mitzi, in “Blossom Time” with her own name on the billing. She eventually sang more than 30 operatic roles in America and Europe including the title roles of “Madame Butterfly, La Boheme, Hansel and Gretel, and Frederika. She married Ray Mitchell, who was a musician, composer, and music critic in his own right, and together they had two children, a son and a daughter. Diana Gaylen Mitchell died on December 23, 1992 in Bothell, King County, Washington.

Scope and content:

This collection consists of digital scans of newspaper articles, contracts, photographs, programs, playbills, and other ephemera collected by Diana Gaylen during her singing career. She was known as the “phantom nightingale” of the silver screen as she sang for leading actresses in the early years of talking pictures. Newspaper articles explain the various ways the “ghost voice” was accomplished using recording techniques of the early 1930s. Sometimes Miss Gaylen prepared actresses in “voice expressions” then her voice was recorded on the vitaphone and played back while the actress mimicked singing. Other times, Miss Gaylen’s voice was dubbed to the taped movie version. Miss Gaylen was the singing voice for Olivia de Havilland in Anthony Adverse, Great Garbo in Romance, and other popular stars of the time, Sally Eilers, Laura La Plante, Norma Talmadge, Sally O’Neill, and Claire Windsor. This type of behind the scenes singing was also called “shadow singing,” “ghost singing,” “ghosting,” “hidden singing,” and “dubbing.” Diana Gaylen noted that she was paid well for her work, but was never credited on screen. Newspaper articles, programs, photographs, and playbills also outline Miss Gaylen’s operatic singing career in her own billing after 1936.

A small portion of the materials pertain to Diana’s husband, Raymond Earle Mitchell (1895-1967). He was a musician and composer who wrote musical scores for 20th Century and Columbia pictures. Some of his songs were “I Must Go Down to the Sea,” “Phyllis,” “Sing No Sad Songs for Me” and “The Tabernacle of God is With Me.” Mr. Mitchell was also a theatre director, operated a theatrical ticket business, and a noted music critic for Los Angeles and Hollywood papers.

Location:

The digital files are located on the Center for Popular Music server

Related Materials:

The Center for Popular Music holds other materials related to 1930s motion picture music, musicals, women singers, and early recording techniques such as original sheet music, sound recordings, programs, posters, and playbills.

Preferred Citation: From the Diana Gaylen, the “Phantom Nightingale” Collection 14-029, Center for Popular Music, Middle Tennessee State University

Finding aid created by Lucinda Cockrell, Archivist, November 2014.

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