

## NOTES ON JOHN CURTIS AND HIS WORK PROJECT STATUS DECEMBER 2004

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On the title page of *One Hundred Years of Grand Opera in Philadelphia*, John Curtis introduces himself first as a "Member of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania," and then as the "author of the lyrics, dialogue, etc., of Bolossy Kiralfy's Grand Historical Spectacles: *Louisiana*, *Pocahontas*, *Carnival of Venice*, etc., produced at the International Expositions at St. Louis, Mo., Jamestown, Va., Portland, Oregon, and Brussels, Belgium." The two "etc." are his own notation. He also wrote a farce, *A Strenuous Courtship*, produced at the Chestnut Street Opera House under the direction of Klaw & Erlanger in 1907.

John Curtis' great achievement was this research culminating in a typescript that chronicles one hundred years of grand opera beginning with a performance of *Don Giovanni* at the Chestnut Street Theatre on December 26, 1818, and ending, according to his own words, with a performance of Puccini's *Trittico* by the Metropolitan Opera on December 17, 1918. His work actually began in 1794, surveying Philadelphia's early history of drama and English ballad-opera, but that performance of the Mozart's opera becomes the starting point from which he measures time for the "one-hundred years."

John Curtis began a second book *Philadelphia's Second Century of Opera*; the *Forward* is dated Philadelphia, January 1, 1919, and in this forward he acknowledges that this is a work that he will not be able to finish. The introduction continues for fifteen pages before he chronicles the first performance of 1919. The work is written like a diary where Curtis makes entries for the events and performances when they happen. The work ends abruptly in mid sentence on page 199 (which has been torn in half) after chronicling the performance of December 26, 1922.

Throughout the second book, John Curtis refers to his earlier book in the past-tense as though it were a perfectly completed work, yet mysteriously the years 1911-1918 are missing. He very clearly states that the earlier work concludes with the aforementioned *Trittico* of Dec. 17, 1918. These missing years are a great loss. I will have to recreate them from the newspapers, but will never be able to match the accuracy and detail that Curtis, who lived and attended opera in Philadelphia during this time, would have achieved.

The opening paragraph of volume 1 of the first book (two volumes) begins with the words "It is with mixed feelings of regret and relief that I put aside the typewriter, that modern successor to the more poetic quill, and send this History on its way. The relief is due to the fact that a long, exacting and oft-times exasperating and perplexing work is done; the regret, that I seem to be parting with friends with whom my lot has been happily cast for more than twelve years." Four pages later he dates this forward Philadelphia, April 15, 1920. Apparently, he had started writing the second book before the first had been completed.

In this first volume of the first book on page 271, Curtis writes about the Walnut Street Theatre, “the oldest theatre in America... begun as a circus in 1808, and converted into an enclosed theatre in 1811, remained a theatre until the close of the season of 1919-20. As I write these lines, the old walls, which are beginning to crumble and crack with age, are in their last day. I have just returned from a trip to Ninth and Walnut Streets to make a photograph of the building before the wreckers attack the walls tomorrow. And today, the last that will find the old walls intact, is Sunday, May 9, 1920.” John Curtis wrote these words just after he documented the April 29, 1840 performance of *Sonnambula*. Apparently work on the actual typescript had begun only a few months before, for 645 pages later, on page 267 of the second volume he mentioned that the current date of writing was now August 1920 — This notation occurs just before a November 11, 1873 performance of *Trovatore*.

John Curtis must have actually completed the years 1911-1918 in manuscript form, but may have been unable to type them before whatever unkind event stopped his work in 1922. He always refers to *One Hundred Years...* as a completed work in his second book, mentioning several incidents from the 1911-1918 period as being documented fully in that first book. And, in the second book, *Philadelphia's Second Century of Opera* he provides totals for several works such as *Trovatore*, 215 performances as of March 16, 1920, and the 105th performance of *Barbiere* on March 22, 1920, thus demonstrating the first book had indeed been completely researched and finished at least in manuscript form.

John Curtis notes that he is was unable to attend the February 14, 1922 performance of *Traviata* due to the serious illness of his son. Again he mentions the illness of his son preventing from attending the April 18, 1922 performance of *Samson*. When the Russian Grand Opera visited Philadelphia for a two week stay on April 22, 1922, John Curtis notes that he was unable to attend the first week of performances due to “preparing to remove to a suburb,” and was also unable to attend the second week due to moving and unpacking. On the final page of his work John Curtis mentions that he could not attend the December 26, 1922 performance of *Lorely* due to the condition of his son. John Curtis, Jr., his son, a noted conductor of a local youth orchestra, died on May 5, 1923, at his father's house, 406 S. Narberth Ave., Narberth, at age twenty-nine.

For two years, I had believed that Curtis stopped work on his history of opera in Philadelphia due to his own sudden death or illness, but now I wonder if the book containing the last seven years was not destroyed by someone, or stolen.

John Curtis was born on November 11, 1867. He died at his home, 105 Grayling Ave., Narberth, on April 26, 1927 after an illness of ten days. His obituary in the Evening Bulletin mentions that he was the son of John and Emma M. Curtis, was educated in the public schools, and that after some years in the photographic supply business, he entered newspaper work in 1900. He was connected with the Philadelphia Press, the Evening Telegraph, the Evening Times, the North American, and the Public Ledger. For the last thirteen years of his life, he was a member of the Evening Bulletin staff, where his “*Pathfinder* articles blazed the trail for a series of enchanting one-day motor trips to and among places of historic or scenic interest.” He also “answered the myriad of questions, of almost endless variety, which came to him day after day as the Query Editor.” He was survived by his widow, the former Miss Caroline Potter, of Germantown.

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My work this year was focused mainly on continued newspaper research which began with the Philadelphia Inquirer, July 1930, and continued through early 1950. Upon reaching 1950 this past October, I felt that I should quickly jump backwards and complete the missing Curtis years, starting with May 1910, and continue through 1918. I soon realized that this could not be done quickly at all, it has taken three months to reach March 1915 with the Inquirer, and I skipped the summer months in order to achieve this progress. The good news is that the New York Public Library has a second newspaper, the Public Ledger, covering this period, which seems to have more extensive opera coverage. So, after I have finished with the Inquirer, I have to do the work again a second time with the Ledger. The two papers compliment each other, so I shouldn't entirely rely on just one of them. The slow place is due to some papers being almost 80% illegible, and the fact that opera is being performed five times a week during season. More good news, the New York Public Library is now starting to open on Sundays.

Harry Saunders has been a tremendous help, he voluntarily visited the Curtis Institute of Music where the librarian, Joanne Seitter, allowed him to copy all the programs of opera performances from their private archive. Harry has continue to provide programs for the Opera Company of Philadelphia, as well as for smaller operatic events. Harry's plan for next year is to tackle the Academy of Vocal Arts and possibly the Opera Theater of Philadelphia.

Work on the John Curtis is complete except for a few missing pages that we need to get from the Historical Society. I was able to use the Vera Brodsky Lawrence books, *Strong on Music*, covering the history of music in New York City from 1836 to 1862, to determine the first names of many singers where John Curtis had only known a last name. I hope I have assigned these correctly. If I am able to continue to work on this project long enough, I hope to use the newspapers to supplement the Curtis for lighter works such as operettas that he refused to document. I won't be able to do the entire 19th century, but hope to be able to provide details for some, such as when Offenbach visited Philadelphia and conducted his own works.

Last May, Harry Saunders, Bill DePeter, and I visited the Urban Archives at Temple University. When the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin closed its business in 1982, the newspaper's archives were acquired by the library. The purpose of this first visit was to discover how the archives were organized to determine how we could use them for our research. Clippings are organized two ways, chronologically by name of opera company, and alphabetically by name of opera. Ongoing newspaper research in New York has prevented me from returning to the Urban Archives. I am trying to exhaust newspapers at my own door step here before doing newspaper research in Philadelphia, but like the Public Ledger, the Bulletin often seems to have more announcements and reviews for opera than the Inquirer.

At this juncture, I won't try to predict the status of the project by the end of 2005. Newspapers of the early 1930s would fit one month per roll of microfilm; by the 1940s they are taking two rolls per month, and in early 1950 three roles per month. Even though legibility has improved, a lot of time consuming manual craking is required to cover a short period of time. I worry that we may reach a point where one Sunday paper may take a roll, but I dare not look that far into the future.

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