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Professor Webster

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Roosevelt University Performing Arts Library Archives: Fall 2023 Practicum

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After eight weeks working within Roosevelt University's (RU) archives, I can say I have learned quite a lot. I attended practicum sessions Wednesdays from 9:00a to 2:00p most weeks this semester. My site supervisor, Laura Mills, was extremely helpful and very kind throughout my entire time working with her. I specifically appreciate that she never made me feel too new to the profession (even when I felt very green). I greatly appreciate the opportunity to not only get archival practice, but also because these specific archival collections relate to my specific career goals of working within a performing arts library. Overall, I learned archival work is messy and difficult, and that the performing arts complicate the work we do in archives.

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Before I get into specifics, I wanted to give a very short and crude history of Roosevelt and specifically the performing arts college.

1867: Chicago Musical College

1954: Merged with Roosevelt University's School of Music

1996: Schaumburg campus incorporated

1997: RU established the College of Performing Arts (Music Conservatory and Theatre Conservatory under one admin unit)

2000: Renamed Chicago College of Performing Arts

2023: Claire works in the archives

Just from this abridged history, you can see the complex history of the archives we have. Not only are we looking at hundreds of feet of documents recording the history, but the documents themselves have been moved and transferred and stored many different places over the many years. This photo is the Auditorium Building of Roosevelt University which houses the entire performing arts college, as well as other classrooms, a huge, famous proscenium stage and the library and archives.

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The archives live in the Performing Arts Library on the top floor of the Auditorium Building. This photo shows my regular set up with a box of files, my iPad, and (because I'm a good archivist) no food or water, no pens—but as you can see it's just in the middle of the Performing Arts Library. Not only are records of the Performing Arts Library and CCPA here, but archives for the entire school and history of the school are here as well.

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These are just a few of the many collections that are in the archival repository of Roosevelt University. I was not working with any of these on the left, but I wanted to mention them to give some context and to continue describing just how much there is.

On the right here, there's a little diagram to better illustrate what series of a collection I was specifically working on, which is the Music Conservatory series of the Chicago College of Performing Arts collection. As you can see there are other series that are in this collection, and I did interact with some of the Theatre Conservatory records because some of those boxes were mixed in with the boxes I was working from, but for the most part it was the Music

Conservatory. Types of documents that might be found in here include all things faculty and admin (so professor evaluations, adjunct applications, faculty publications and compositions, every concert the faculty participated in, every memo sent to or from any music/CCPA office or department), all things students (student recital programs, theses), and of course history of the college. Other things found in this series include recorded items such as DVDs, CDs, and even cassettes.

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This brings me to my first, grand realization of the practicum, which is archival work tends to be a lot of work for one person to handle. I, probably like many of you, get real joy from organizing and classifying things outside of the professional organizing I do in libraries and this practice. I think part of the reason I never truly comprehended the workload before this practicum is because I so enjoy the work. It wasn't until I saw a few of the many hundreds of boxes in the archives that I understood the gravity of my situation.

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Pictured on the left is one section of the big room RU archives are stored in. As you can see, it is a mess. The entire room is not this messy, I just wanted to emphasize how much and how messy some parts of the collection are. This photo also brings up a good point Laura made on my first day during a tour. She said she was thankful the archives weren't in a basement because she loves windows, and because it creates a lot of different problems preservation wise. I mentioned it must be a little scary though, to be on the top floor of the building. Does that not create other preservation issues? Her response was basically yes, if there is ever a disaster such as a roof

leaking or caving in. Also if any of these pipes or shoots were to fall, a lot of damage could come to a lot of records. Unfortunately there's not a lot Laura can personally do about that, as moving the archives would require many layers of administration agreement. (Plus it's probably best the archives are in the library and accessible to students, faculty, researchers.) Pictured on the right is the cutest 1960s notebook I have ever seen in a file of documents from 1966-67 about the 90th birthday celebration of Rudolph Ganz—a prominent pianist and Chicago Musical College president.

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The second realization I've come to about archives is like many archival repositories, the RU archives are in multiple stages of processing. Some have been completely processed, are on a public catalog, and easily accessible to students, faculty, and scholars. Other items have been fully or partially noted in an Excel sheet, but have not been entered into the public catalog. Even more items are sitting in boxes, unprocessed and (possibly) untouched for years or decades.

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Laura is the sole archivist of RU, so not only is she processing items from the Chicago College of Performing Arts, but also from other RU departments, administration records, histories of the colleges and university, history of the Roosevelts and the spaces and places of the school. Laura was hired in 2007 and has been the only archivist the entire time, so MPLP has been implemented in a number of different ways. One of these ways is the Excel sheet (pictured here) I was primarily working with when describing the archives. Because Laura already had a working Excel sheet, we decided I would go through the Music Conversatory boxes (which

contained files and audio/visual items mostly) and match single Excel entries (usually describing at the file level) with files already in the boxes.

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To walk through my process: I would take CCPA Box 1 while simultaneously finding CCPA Box 1 Excel entries, match them together, then I would move the Excel entry into a separate sheet.

Moving the entry from the original spreadsheet to a second sheet indicated the file was in the box and described accurately. I repeated this process for every file and item inside roughly twenty CCPA boxes, which yielded about 820 entries into the new spreadsheet.

This job was not too tiring, but very repetitive. What was most exciting, however, was when a box was not recorded at all in the original sheet. This is when I would be fully responsible for describing the file-level items in the new Excel sheet.

When I was doing this specific task of creating new documents, Laura kept saying “These are now accessible to the people! Thank you!” And for many weeks I was like “How, though, if they are just in this private Excel sheet?” This is where Laura being the sole archivist is kind of awesome because she could go into this Excel sheet, see files being described at that low level, then go into the public catalog—they use ArchivEra—and describe the items at a higher level and make them available. Then, if a user needs them, she knows personally where everything is and can easily retrieve an item/file/box. She can be more specific with users and describe to them personally what’s in the boxes if they want more detail. This whole process is very MPLP.

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Which brings me to the final realization I'll share today which is that the performing arts greatly complicate archival work in almost every way. In processing these records, we need to ask basic appraisal questions like "Who created this," but the response with performing arts archived items is many people. This composer wrote the music, these faculty members performed the music, this student conducted the music, another person recorded the audio. In arranging, when we are creating collections and series and groups and subgroups we have to ask "What do these things have in common? Why are they together? Should they be kept together?" From a performing arts perspective, especially one located in college, the number of subgroups in one collection only grows. For example, there are many recitals that happen within the Music Conservatory, but we can't simply have a "Recitals" subgroup because it would contain hundreds and hundreds of records. So we divide it up: Student Recitals, Faculty Recitals, Guest Artist Recitals, Chamber Orchestra Recitals, etc. Pictured here is the most exciting CCPA Box to open, partly because it isn't files! And partly because this box of cassettes was actually broken. As you can see in the top right photo, the box is bowed which blocked the drawer from opening. We had to break the box and it was a blast. Then in the bottom right, we can see the title(?) of one of the tapes. But how do you go about giving this cassette a title? How do I assign it a subgroup, or even a series or collection if this is what's written on it?

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I touched on a little bit of preservation of these records when talking about the space at the beginning, but the performing arts also complicates preservation. Because performing arts are so ephemeral, the records of performances are often audio/visual, non paper items. There is an inventoried sound room in the library dedicated to better preserve these items, but a lot of them

just end up in the same big room with the paper documents, inside archival boxes. From what we've learned about the physical preservation of these objects, this is not ideal. Different kinds of records need different temperatures, humidities, and light.

Where it gets most complicated though, is in use, access and copyright of these records. Almost every single CD I described in the Excel sheet will have a different usage policy because of copyright of music and recordings. Similar to the issue of creator, there are so many creative layers that go into creating a record of a performance. Depending on who wrote the music, who played the music, in what context they played the music, if the recording aired on radio or TV—all are factors in determining how the average user can interact with the record. Pictured here we have the worst choice in fonts for titling a file, an old book of music, and a joke about Rudolph Ganz have a lot of patience and that's why he has four honorary doctorate degrees.

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I end with this beautiful resignation letter from a part-time faculty member named Matilda. It reads:

Dear Dean Gandre,

After a relationship spanning sixty years—beginning as a very young piano student at Central YMCA College-Roosevelt College; going on to collegiate studies at Roosevelt College; and eventually as an Instructor in Piano at Roosevelt University; Chicago Musical College of Roosevelt University; and finally at Chicago College of Performing Arts; it's time for a change! With a fond farewell to all, I wish to inform you that I will not be returning to my part-time teaching position in September of 2004.

Sincerely,

Matilda M. Gershon

I just think this letter is really classy and encapsulates what certain institutions mean to some people. This woman spent her whole life playing and teaching piano, just like so many people dedicate their lives to one, singular field or purpose. I really hope I can continue working in archives so I can help record and make known how people like Matilda make giant, inhuman institutions very personal.