Guide to the W.H. Auden Collection of Sound Recordings ARS.0087

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Descriptive Summary

Title: W.H. Auden Collection of Sound Recordings
Dates: 1950-1983
Collection number: ARS.0087
Collection size: 8 boxes: 423 vinyl LPs, 2 open reel tapes
Repository: Archive of Recorded Sound

Abstract: The W.H. Auden Collection of Sound Recordings consists of vinyl LPs once owned by poet W. H. Auden and his partner Chester Kallman. Included are copies of The Rake's Progress (Auden and Kallman wrote the libretto), Auden reading four poems on an Argo LP, and one LP dedicated to Auden from poet Cornel Lengyel.

Language of Material: Multiple languages

Access
Open for research; material must be requested at least two business days in advance of intended use. Contact the Archive for assistance.

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Preferred Citation

Sponsor
This finding aid was produced with generous financial support from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

Scope and Contents
The W.H. Auden Collection of Sound Recordings consists of vinyl LPs, many of which were once owned by renowned poet W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, Auden’s companion and artistic collaborator. Auden and Kallman lived in Greece in the early 1970s, and after Auden died in 1972, Kallman gave their record collection, along with two open reel tapes, to St. Catherine’s British Embassy School in Kifissia (a suburb of Athens). Around 1995, the school decided to liquidate their record collection, and a man named Stephen Montgomery, whose wife worked at the school, rescued them. The Montgomerys returned to Abigdon, England with the collection in 1997. While making a film on Auden for the BBC in 2000, John Fuller and BBC producer Roger Thompson were put in touch with Montgomery, who offered them access to the collection. Fuller and Thompson subsequently pledged to find it a good home. Thompson donated the collection to Stanford in 2008.

It is certain that records were added to the collection after its donation to the school. There are many children’s records (some with other names and addresses written on them) and records released after Auden’s death. In a sense, this might be better called the St. Catherine’s Collection, since we’ll never know which precisely were Auden’s records. Outside of one dedication by poet Cornel Lengyel, there are no inscriptions or other markings on the records that indicate Auden’s presence. The majority of records are classical music and opera, although there is one box that contains comedy, spoken word, soundtracks, and other odds and ends. The range of material is fairly wide, but limited conclusions may be drawn from the kinds of composers and performers included.

Despite the lack of provenance in the collection, there are some recordings which may be safely assumed to have been Auden’s. There are two 3 LP sets on the Columbia label of the opera The Rake’s Progress, with music by Stravinsky and libretto by Auden and Kallman: two copies of Columbia Masterworks SL-125 from 1953 and one copy of CBS 72278-72280 from 1965. In Kallman’s notes to the latter, he recounts that Stravinsky “had asked us, when the libretto was completed, whether any particular voices or timbres of voice had been on our minds during our writing of the various roles. There had been. And so we loaned him a record album with discs of Steber (Anne), Stignani (Baba), Bjöerling (Tom) and Domgraf-Fassbender (Shadow).” Additionally, one of the two open reel tapes contains a portion of an NBC radio broadcast of Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Auden and Kallman translated the libretto for an NBC Opera Theater production of Don Giovanni in 1961, and it is likely that this is a recording of that production. Auden reads four of his poems on an Argo compilation called The Poet Speaks. Finally, one LP, Selected Poems by Cornel Lengyel is inscribed “to W.H. Auden, in appreciation - Cornel Lengyel.”

Source
The W.H. Auden Collection of Sound Recordings was donated to the Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound by Roger Thompson in 2008.

Indexing Terms
Auden, W. H. (Wystan Hugh), 1907-1973
Kallman, Chester, 1921-1975
Lengyel, Cornel Adam
Association copies of sound recordings

Box 2, Box 3, Box 4, Box 5, Box 6, Box 7

1. Classical and Opera LPs
Scope and Contents
The collection is strong in the works of Strauss (at least sixteen records), Tchaikovsky, Liszt, Verdi, and Stravinsky. Other composers include Dvorak, Schubert, Puccini, Mozart, Wagner, Wolf, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Schumann, Elgar, Donizetti, Berlioz, Mahler, Sibelius, Ravel, Bizet, and Chopin. Among the singers are Kirsten Flagstad, Montserrat Caballe, Beniamino Gigli, and Jussi Bjoerling, as well as several titles in the German Lebendige Vergangheit reissue series. Sir Thomas Beecham conducts on at least six recordings. Many are British pressings. It is rather strange that there are only two recordings by Benjamin Britten, considering Auden's association with him.

Box 1

2. Non-classical LPs
Scope and Contents
Stereo test and demonstration records; Lester Young on Verve; misc. spoken word including Gene Derwood on Spoken Arts (2 minor spelling corrections in insert in blue ballpoint pen) and The Poet Speaks on Argo RG 517 (includes Auden reading four poems, originally recorded in 1959); church bells; soundtracks; children's records; souvenir records; Greek language learning LP from 1983; Theodore Bikel; misc. popular music; misc. humor including Florence Foster Jenkins (two records), Tiny Tim, Beyond the Fringe (Dudley Moore, Peter Cook, etc.).

Box 8

3. Open reel tapes
Physical Description: 2 open reel tapes
Scope and Contents
5" reel: "Te Kinobisbunde" ("Hymn to St. Cecilia Beloit College" is crossed out). 1. German language radio show, Bavarian dialect, poor fidelity, low volume. 2. Alternate track inaudible, very low volume. Two kinds of tape, many old and deteriorating splices.