

McLean County Museum of History

Marie Litta Collection

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Collection Information

Volume of Collection:	One Box.
Collection Dates:	1877-1930
Restrictions:	Many brittle documents. Use photocopies unless authorized by Librarian / Archivist.
Reproduction Rights:	Permission to reproduce or publish material in this collection must be obtained in writing from the McLean County Museum of History.
Location:	Archives
Notes:	For additional information, see: Marie Litta Photograph Box and Marie Litta Object Collection.

Historical Sketch

Marie Eugenia Von Elsner was born in Bloomington on June 1, 1856 in a small cottage on East Front Street to Hugo Von Elsner and Amanda Dimmitt Von Elsner. Hugo was a native of Germany who came to Bloomington in 1854 and began to teach music classes. Amanda was the daughter of William Dimmitt, one of Bloomington's pioneer settlers, who employed Hugo to teach Amanda to play the piano. The two fell in love and after a brief courtship were married in 1855.

Marie (pronounced *Maria*) began to study music when she was a child. There is a legend about Marie which states that while the Von Elsner's were visiting friends in Old Town Township, McLean County, they went to a Methodist church and took Marie with them. The congregation began to sing and young Marie, after listening to the first verse of the song, proceeded to sing along during the second verse, much to the amazement of her parents. When services ended and Marie arrived at home, she began to sing the song to her younger sister. At that time Marie was only four years old!

Realizing her potential, Hugo began to cultivate her voice. At age five (in 1861) he took her to Springfield where she sang before a group of volunteer soldiers. As the years passed her voice grew stronger and from the age of 10 to 14 Marie traveled with her father to Chicago, Cleveland, and New York, where she gave concerts to the public. Marie was especially popular with the German population in Cleveland and the head of the Music Conservatory there, Dr. John Underner, took it upon himself to help Marie further her musical and vocal education. After four years Dr. Underner decided it was time for Marie to travel to Europe, where she could receive better instruction. On October 25, 1874, at the age of 18, Marie, with Dr. Underner, set sail for Europe.

They arrived first in London where Marie was warmly received by Sir Jules Benedict, the teacher of another great soprano, Miss Jenny Lind. Marie then moved on to Paris to study with Madame Viardot, a great opera teacher. After a year's instruction Marie went back to London where she debuted, under the alias of "Signora Bronzini" at the Drury Lane Theatre. Marie's singing was a success, but her acting was not. She went back to Paris and engaged the services of Madame de la Grange, a much more supportive teacher, who helped Marie complete her vocal and dramatic training.

In 1877 Marie appeared for the first time on a Paris stage. She made her debut at the Theatres des Italiens in "Lucia di Lammermoor." Her name had been changed from Von Elsner to Litta (an Italian noble's name) because French sentiments at that time were decidedly anti-German. Marie was a great success, her full soprano voice enchanted the crowd, and she was crowned the "Queen of Song." Finishing the opera season in Paris, Marie went to Vienna for a short time before returning to America in October of 1878. Sadly, Marie's father, who had long dreamed of the day when he would hear his daughter sing Grand Opera on stage, had died on July 7, 1878.

After a visit to her home town of Bloomington, where she received a warm reception and gave her first American concert, Marie went on a nationwide tour with the Max Strakosh Opera Company in 1879. After two years she joined with another manager, Henry L. Slayton, and was given her own company—The Litta Concert Company.

For two years Marie traveled with her concert company, performing in many cities and small towns all over the United States. She was very popular with the public and did well financially (Marie was able to buy her mother a new house). Sadly, in the spring of 1883 Marie became ill and rather than taking time to rest, she pushed herself to finish her concert tour (she also stated that she did not wish to cause her manager to suffer a financial loss at her expense). After a performance in northern Michigan, at the end of which she collapsed and was carried from the stage, Marie fell into a delirium, with constant vomiting, and begged to be taken home to Bloomington "to die." Marie's younger sister Jessie Von Elsner, who had recently joined the concert company as a contralto, accompanied Marie on the train, and the two arrived in Bloomington on June 5,

1883. Marie remained bedridden, falling in and out of consciousness, until she finally slipped into death at 8 a.m. on the morning of July 7, 1883.

Marie was only 27 years old at the time of her death. The official cause of death was listed by the doctor as “cerebro-spinal meningitis, induced by physical over-exertion, exhaustion, and rheumatic afflictions.”

News of Marie’s death spread rapidly. Her funeral was held at the First Methodist Church in Bloomington. Many people were in attendance (the church was full) and hundred of others gathered outside of the Church. Marie was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery where, two years later, on July 4, 1885, a monument purchased with funds gathered from the citizens of Bloomington was raised in honor of her memory.

Scope and Content Notes

The Marie Litta Collection consists of materials relating to the life, career, and death of the famous Bloomington soprano. The bulk of the collection consists of newspaper clippings concerning her career and her death. There are also newspaper clippings regarding her brother, Don Von Elsner who was a well-known Bloomington band leader in the 1880s, and his death, the erection of the Litta Monument in Evergreen cemetery, and article about Marie’s grandfather, William Dimmitt and deeds for land sold in his name, and a death notice for Count Litta, from whom Marie took her stage name.

Included in the collection is a book, titled Litta: An American Singer by John M. Scott, a scrapbook with newspaper clippings about Marie’s death and funeral, an autograph book, several handwritten notes with information for/from newspaper articles, and a paper on Litta, delivered circa 1930, by Florence Evans. The collection also includes concert programs, programs from the dedication of the Litta Monument, and a libretto from the opera “Mignon.”

Included in the Litta collection, donated over several years by various members of Bloomington community, are several photographs, a jeweled tiara from an opera performance with wooden case, a set of Opera glasses with case, and several samples of dress fabric and trim from Marie’s stage costumes.

Box and Folder Inventory

Folder 1: Biographical Information on Marie Litta

- 1.1.1 "Miss Marie Von Elsner: The Latest Prodigy in Vocal Music. How a Beautiful Girl, from Bloomington, Illinois, Astonished the Critical Parisiana," January 29, 1878, transcribed 3 pgs. typed.
- 1.1.2 "Bloomington's Prima Donna: The Early History of the Debutante, Madlle Litta," 2 pgs. typed, n.d.
- 1.1.3 Newspaper article, n.d.
- 1.1.4 McLean County Biographical, 4 pgs., 1887 (?).
- 1.1.5 One page biography, four page bibliography, no author, nd.
- 1.1.6 28 pg. typed biography by Florence Evans presented to Wesleyan School of Music, 1930. (2 copies)
- 1.1.7 City directory search for Marie (Von Elsner) Litta, 1866-1899, 1 pg.

Folder 2: Litta Monument, Dedication Programs, Memorial Articles

- 1.2.1 July 6, 1885 (?), "A Silent Witness: The Unveiling and Dedication of the Monument to Bloomington's Sweet Singer," Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.2.2 "Memorial to Litta", n.d., "The Litta Memorial", n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.2.3 "Marie Litta: The History, Photograph and Description of the Monument," n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.2.4 "The Last Tribute", "A Litta Memorial", "To the Litta Monument Committee", "Poetry", "The Unveiling of Litta's Monument", n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.2.5 "This is Litta's Birthday", 1908, "Flowers for Litta's Grave", n.d., "The Queen of Song", n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.2.6 Dedication programs, July 6, 1885, address by Mr. James S. Ewing (2 copies).
- 1.2.7 Dedication program (same as above) but in 8½ by 11 format, not booklet format.

Folder 3: News Clippings-Death of Marie Litta and Don Von Elsner

- 1.3.1 "Litta", 1879 (?), obituary of Count Litta
- 1.3.2 "The Dead Singer", July 7 1883 (?), Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.3.3 "Ceased Singing?", July 7 1883, Daily Pantagraph (?), 2 pgs, 2 copy.
- 1.3.4 "Her Last Song Sung" n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.3.5 "Litta is Dead", n.d.
- 1.3.6 "Our Loved and Lost", n.d., "A Nation's Sweet Singer at Rest", "Burial of Litta"
- 1.3.7 "The Memory of Litta", July 15 1883, Daily Pantagraph.
- 1.3.8 "Death of Stalks Abroad", "Don Von Elsner Dead" (Marie Litta's brother), n.d.
- 1.3.9 "The Dead Musician", n.d.
- 1.3.10 "In Quiet Rest", n.d.
- 1.3.11 "Fatality in a Family", n.d.

- 1.3.12 “The Funeral Arrangements”, n.d., “The Funeral of Don Von Elsner”, n.d., “Letters of Sympathy”, n.d., “Don Von Elsner’s Funeral”, n.d., “The Death of Don Von Elsner”, n.d.

Folder 4: Newspaper Clippings of Marie Litta’s Career

- 1.4.1 “The Rubicon is Passed”, n.d., 2 pgs.
- 1.4.2 “Marie Litta: Authentic History of the New American Prima Donna”, n.d.
- 1.4.3 “Poetry”, n.d., “M’lle Litta”, n.d.
- 1.4.4 “Bloomington’s Prima Donna”, 1874 (?), “Letter from Marie Litta”, February 1, 1879, “Elegant Entertainment”, n.d.
- 1.4.5 “New Operatic Star”, n.d., “The New Opera of ‘Zenobia’”, n.d., “Litta”, n.d.
- 1.4.6 “Litta: Her Debut in Chicago a Magnificent Triumph and Ovation” Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.4.7 “Miss Marie Von Elsner: The Latest Prodigy in Vocal Music”, January 29, 1878, DailyPantagraph (?).
- 1.4.8 “Musical Mention: Close of the Strakosch Season of Opera”, n.d., “Bloomington’s Songstress”, October 23, “Litta Opened The Chattterton”, n.d.
- 1.4.9 “Great Concert Given in 1871: Mrs. J.W. Fifer Recalls Program in Which Marie Litta Was One of the Singers”, May 24 1920, “A Social Triumph”, n.d., “The Charming Musical Event of Last Evening”, n.d., Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.4.10 “The New Prima Donna”, December 2, 1878, “Reception to Miss Von Elsner”, October 23, Daily Pantagraph (?).
- 1.4.11 “The Italian Opera”, St. Louis (?), n.d., “The Early History of the Debutante, M’lle Litta”, n.d., “An American Girl’s Success”, n.d.
- 1.4.12 “The Opera Last Night”, n.d., “Entertainment: Italian Opera”, n.d., Newark Daily Advertiser (?), “The Litta Concert: A Fine Audience and a Grand Artistic Success”, n.d.
- 1.4.13 “Amusements: The Mendelssohn’s Concerts”, n.d., “The Italian Opera Season: The Strakosch Company in ‘Mignon’”, n.d.
- 1.4.14 “Mlle. Litta, the American Prima Donna”, December 5 1877.
- 1.4.15 “Litta at the Tabernacle—An Enjoyable Concert”, n.d., “Music’s Charms: Which Fail to Soothe the Tempest Brewing Between Strakosch and Underner”, Cleveland (?), n.d.
- 1.4.16 “Litta’s Melody: Aply Supplemented by Her Efficient Corps of Musical Supporters”, n.d., “Cleveland’s Prima Donna: The Beautiful Singing of Mlle. Litta-Departure To-Night”, Cleveland Herald, September 6, 1879 (?).
- 1.4.17 “The Litta Concert”, New York (?), n.d., “The Star Course: A Pleasant Evening of Song at the Academy of Music”, Philadelphia (?), n.d.
- 1.4.18 “The Concert: The Finest Musical treat Duluth Has Ever Enjoyed”, n.d., “The Musical Melange”, n.d., Minnesota (?), “Miss Von Elsner”, San Francisco, n.d.
- 1.4.19 Unknown Title, n.d., “Musical: The Italian Opera—‘Martha’”, n.d., Unknown Title, n.d., “Amusements”, n.d.
- 1.4.20 Unknown Title, n.d., ‘Amusements: The Mendelssohns Concert’ Unknown Titles

Folder 5: Books

- 1.5.1 Litta: An American Singer—Marie Eugenia Von Elsner, by John M. Scott, Bloomington IL, 1897, 2 copies.

Folder 6: Autograph Book

- 1.6.1 Autograph book with Litta Autograph, 1880.

Folder 7: Newspaper Clippings Regarding Relatives

- 1.7.1 “One of City’s Old Pioneers: Dimmett Additions to City are Named From William Dimmett Who Came in 1826”, Daily Pantagraph, July 16 1921 (?).
1.7.2 Property deeds, H.L. and Mary Dimmett, 1868, 2 copy.
1.7.3 “S.B. M’Cracken Seriously Ill”, The Detroit Journal, n.d.

Folder 8: Libretto from “Mignon”

- 1.8.1 “The Strakosch Grand Italian Opera”, n.d.

Folder 9: Concert Programs and Tickets

- 1.9.1 Concert ticket, 1878 (?).
1.9.2 Concert program, June 27 1879.
1.9.3 Reception invitation, October 23, 1878.
1.9.4 Concert program, February 21, 1870.
1.9.5 Concert program, September 23, 1883.
1.9.6 Concert program, December 10, 1888.
1.9.7 Untitled memorial to Mrs. Viola Thompson by Mrs. May Graves, June 1959, 1 index card.
1.9.8 “In Memory of Anna Hamlow” by Mrs. May Graves, November 1960, 1 page handwritten.
1.9.9 “The Maria Litta Commemorative Recital, Starring Soprano Morgan Harrington as Litta with Pianist Piotr Wisniewski” Sunday May 15, 2011. Duncan Hall, Lafayette, Indiana. (2 programs)
1.9.10 “Litta,” Durley Hall 27 June 1879. Featuring Litta and her sisters.

Folder 10: Charles Morgan’s Remarks on Litta

- 1.10.1 Copy of original, “Maria—Litta”, by Charles Morgan, January 1940.

Folder 11: Handwritten Notes from/for News Articles

- 1.11.1 Original handwritten notes, n.d., no authors, 10 pgs.

Folder 12: Handwritten Notes about Marie Litta

1.12.1 Original handwritten notes, n.d., no authors, 3 pgs.

Folder 13: Scrapbook Regarding Marie Litta—Newspaper clippings

1.13.1 Scrapbook, owner unknown, n.d.

Folder 14: Newspaper Articles about Marie Litta

1.14.1 Newspaper articles compiled by Pam Covington about Marie Litta
(approximately 60 pages)

Folder 15: Marie Litta Monument Sketch

1.15.1 Sketch and photocopy of sketch of Marie Litta's cemetery monument