

**ROBERT WATT MILLER PAPERS**

**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum  
March 1995**

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

INTRODUCTION

Provenance

The Robert Watt Miller Papers were donated to S.F. PALM in the 1980s by the Miller family. The five photograph albums in the collection were donated by Mrs. Sheldon Cooper on October 25, 1988.

Restrictions

~~Entire collection is open for research use.~~

*Sundraising, reports etc.  
Restricted for 75 years??*

Publication Rights

Vary with materials.

Collection Number

Papers, [unknown]  
Photo albums, 988.70

Size

Number of containers: 3 cartons; 2 oversize boxes  
Linear feet: 8

---

Processed by

Marianne Carden

Date completed

March 29, 1995

Related materials

San Francisco Opera Archives  
Biographical Files

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

BIOGRAPHY

Robert Watt Miller was born in 1899 in San Francisco. His family had a distinguished history of involvement in the city's development and business growth and Miller continued this tradition by becoming a noted industrialist and civic leader.

As a child, Miller developed a keen interest in musical theater after seeing a production of Lucia di Lammermoor at the Cort Theater on Ellis Street in 1912. He attended early performances of the San Francisco Opera Company and became a director of the San Francisco Opera Association in 1932. In 1937, he was elected President and held this post until 1942, when he entered the Army Air Forces. He resumed his office as President in 1951 and remained in this role through 1966.

Along with overseeing fundraising campaigns for the opera, Miller worked closely with Gaetano Merola and Kurt Herbert Adler in developing a plan to raise the company to international stature. He also contributed a great deal of informal artistic advice during rehearsals through careful readings of librettos and detailed discussions with stagehands.

Miller faced many different challenges during his term of office. Most important was the task of raising funds which would allow the company to lengthen its seasons, offset its deficit, and expand its repertoire. Through working with private, corporate, and government funders, Miller helped to continually raise the company's annual base of support. Miller also handled labor negotiations, such as the dispute between the Opera Association and the musician's union which almost led to the cancellation of the 1964 season.

In addition to working tirelessly for the opera, Miller was a leading industrialist and headed the Pacific Lighting Company. He also served on the boards of the San Francisco Symphony and the De Young Museum. He remained active in the San Francisco Opera Association after his retirement from the presidency, serving as chairman of the board from 1967 until his death in 1970.

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

SCOPE AND CONTENTS

The Robert Watt Miller papers document Miller's civic activities as President of the San Francisco Opera Association and as a board member of the San Francisco Symphony and the De Young Museum. They consist of traditional paper files, such as minutes, reports, budgets, correspondence, and clippings, as well as of several photo albums documenting SFO seasons.

The bulk of the papers relate to Miller's tenure as President of the SFO Association in the 1960s. They include information Miller collected about the opera's financial status and document the fund drives he oversaw each year between 1959 and 1969. In addition, they encompass papers regarding labor negotiations between the opera and the American Federation of Musicians and the American Guild of Musical Artists. Miller also attended meetings concerning city funding, such as the Hotel Tax Fund, and his papers contain appeals he prepared on behalf of the opera. Documentation regarding the expansion and improvements of the War Memorial Opera House is also present. Since Miller provided administrative guidance to such affiliate programs of the opera as the Spring Opera and the Los Angeles season, the papers include a few administrative files on these programs, as well.

Miller's other civic activities are less thoroughly recorded in the papers. The papers contain one file related to Miller's post on the Board of Trustees of the De Young Museum. This file encompasses minutes, meeting notices, reports, financial statements, and correspondence regarding such matters as the opening of the Avery Brundage Collection. Two files are present which relate to Miller's role on the board of the San Francisco Symphony Association. These include minutes, reports, and correspondence regarding fund drives, labor negotiations, and the improvement of the War Memorial Opera House complex. The papers also include one file of miscellaneous materials relating to Miller's management of the Pacific Lighting Corporation.

Along with keeping records on administrative matters, Miller also collected press materials and photos which document the San Francisco Opera seasons. His papers contain a clippings file on opera performances, as well as five photo albums prepared by the SFO Association which highlight performances between 1937 and 1941.

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

SERIES I. S.F. OPERA ASSOCIATION

Consists of paperwork regarding the administration of the San Francisco Opera, as well as some clippings and photos documenting the opera's performances.

Sub-series I. Finances

Contains budgets, financial statements, and investment reports collected by Miller as part of his analysis of the opera's financial status. Arranged by format and thereunder by date.

Sub-series II. Fundraising

Includes correspondence, reports, and strategic plans for the opera's fund drives between 1959 and 1969. Arranged by format and thereunder by date.

Sub-series III. Consultants

Encompasses reports and correspondence prepared by public relations and financial consultants regarding fundraising and budgeting strategies for the opera. Arranged by name of consultant and thereunder by date.

Sub-series IV. Los Angeles season

Consists of clippings, correspondence, box office reports, and financial statements relating to SFO performances held in Los Angeles between 1959 and 1965. Arranged chronologically.

Sub-series V. Spring Opera

Includes press releases, correspondence, box office reports, and clippings regarding the 1961-68 seasons of the Spring Opera. Arranged chronologically.

Sub-series VI. Opera Guild

Contains correspondence discussing the relationship between the SFO Guild and the SFO Association, as well as regarding Guild-sponsored performances and fundraising events. Arranged chronologically.

Sub-series VII. War Memorial Opera House

Encompasses correspondence, reports, clippings, and memos relating to the rehabilitation of the War Memorial Opera House during the sixties. Organized chronologically.

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

Sub-series VIII. Unions

Includes paperwork regarding labor negotiations carried out between the SFO Association and the American Federation of Musicians and the American Guild of Musical Artists during the 1960s. Arranged by union name and thereunder by date.

Sub-series IX. Government Funders

Consists of correspondence, reports, and clippings collected by Miller as he prepared appeals to such groups as the Hotel Tax Fund. Arranged by name of funder and thereunder by date.

Sub-series X. Correspondence

Contains incoming and outgoing correspondence relating to SFO Association activities, as well as to Miller's other civic duties. Arranged chronologically.

Sub-series XI. Publicity

Contains press clippings covering opera performances and SFO Association activities during the 1960s, along with five photo albums prepared by the association as mementos of the 1937-41 seasons.

SERIES II. DE YOUNG MUSEUM

Consists of paperwork Miller accumulated between 1964-65 while serving on the Board of Trustees of the De Young Museum. This file relates primarily to planning for the opening of the Avery Brundage Collection, although there are a few miscellaneous materials regarding personnel issues and security concerns. Arranged chronologically.

SERIES III. SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

Includes files of minutes, correspondence, and reports Miller maintained while serving on the Board of Governors of the San Francisco Symphony. Arranged chronologically.

SERIES IV. PACIFIC LIGHTING COMPANY

A miscellaneous file of reports relating to Miller's administration of the Pacific Lighting Company. Arranged chronologically.

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

CONTAINER LIST

SERIES I. S.F. OPERA ASSOCIATION  
 Sub-series I. Finances

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
1	1	Budgets	1958-61
	2	"	1962-64
	3	"	1965-67
	4	"	1968-69
	5	Annual Statements	1958-61
	6	" "	1958-61
	7	" "	1962-64
	8	" <i>Summary</i>	1965-67
2	1	Box Office Reports	1959-62
	2	" " <i>^</i> "	1963-64
	3	" " "	1965-66
	4	" " "	1967-69
	5	Box Office ten-yr. rpt.	1958-67

Sub-series II. Fundraising

1	9	Fund Drive	1959-60
	10	" "	1961-62
	11	" "	1964
	12-13	" "	1966
	14	" "	1967
	15	" "	1969
	16	Endowment Fund	1963
	17	Investment Fund	1960-70
	18	Ford Foundation	1959-65

Sub-series III. Consultants

1	19	Kramer Miller Report	1968
	20-21	Consultants, Inc.	1962-67

Sub-series IV. Los Angeles Season

2	6	Box Office <i>Summary</i> Reports	1 9 5 9 -
		<i>^</i>	1963
	7	" " "	1 9 6 4 -
	8	Clippings	1965
			1965

**Robert Watt Miller Papers**  
**San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum**

Sub-series V. Spring Opera

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
2	9	Correspondence/Box Office	1 9 6 1 - 1964
	10	Correspondence/Box Office	1 9 6 5 - 1968

Sub-series VI. Opera Guild

2	11	Correspondence	1 9 5 9 - 1967
---	----	----------------	-------------------

Sub-series VII. War Memorial Opera House

2	12	Annex	1964
	13	Improvements	1966-68
	14	Bond Issue	1965-68

Sub-series VIII. Unions

2	15	Metropolitan Opera labor contract	1961- 1962
	16	AGMA	1959- 1964
	17	American Fed. of Musicians	1962; 1964

Sub-series IX. Government Funders

2	18	S.F. Arts Resources Dev. Committee	1966- 1968
	19	Hotel Tax Fund	1961- 1965
	20	SFO Tax Fund Appeals	1961- 1963
	21	Congressional Sub-Committee on Federal Arts Subsidies	1962

Sub-series X. Correspondence

3	1	General Correspondence	1959
	2	" "	1960- 1962
	3	" "	1963
	4	" "	1963- 1964
	5	" "	1965

Robert Watt Miller Papers  
 San Francisco Performing Arts Library & Museum

<u>Box</u>	<u>Folder</u>	<u>Contents</u>	<u>Dates</u>
3	6-7	General Correspondence	1966
	8	" "	1967-
	9	" "	1968
			1969

Sub-series XI. Publicity

3	14	Press clips file	1960s
SI H/C <	OV1	SFOA photo albums	1937;1939
	OV2	SFOA photo albums	1938;1940-
			1941

SERIES II. DE YOUNG MUSEUM

3	10	Museum Board	1 9 6 4 - 1965
---	----	--------------	-------------------

SERIES III. SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY

3	11	Symphony Board	1 9 6 2 - 1964
	12	" "	1965- 1968

SERIES IV. PACIFIC LIGHTING COMPANY

3	13	Board of Directors	1 9 6 0 - 1969
---	----	--------------------	-------------------

## MR. ROBERT WATT MILLER



For devotees of the San Francisco Opera, 1962 signifies the 40th anniversary of the Company and the thirtieth birthday of its permanent home, the War Memorial Opera House. For the tall, distinguished president of the San Francisco Opera Association, 1962 is also a year of personal opera anniversaries.

It was in 1932—a full 30 years ago—that Robert Watt Miller became a director of the Opera Association, and 25 years have passed since he was first elected its president. He held this position from 1937 until 1941. Following four years of service with the Army Air Force, and having attained the rank of Colonel, he returned to civilian life and resumed his place on the Association's board of directors. He was re-elected president in 1951, succeeding Kenneth Monteagle.

1962 also marks a 50th opera anniversary for Mr. Miller. It was in 1912 that a performance of "Lucia di Lammermoor" was presented at the old Cort Theater on Ellis Street, a performance now long forgotten by all but the lanky, blonde-haired boy who had watched, transfixed, as the story of the lovely Lucia moved toward its tragic end. It was the first musical drama he had ever seen, and when young Bob Miller left the theater that day, grand opera had won a devoted, lifelong friend.

"Actually, my first exposure to opera came earlier that year," he explained. "I had come down with scarlet fever just before my sister Marion was to be married in a ceremony at home. For the protection of the guests I was evacuated to the contagion ward of German Hospital.

"My mother was quite upset. She thought it was cruel and heartless to banish me, so she and father visited me daily, and each time they brought a Red Seal opera record. Since I was the only patient in the ward, I cranked up the talking machine and spent hours every day listening to Caruso, Destinn, Scotti, Melba, DeLuca and other great singers of the day."

As his enthusiasm for the musical theater grew, so did his desire to study and understand more about it. To this day, Mr. Miller remains a keen student of opera. Not only has he seen almost every performance ever given in the Opera House, but he has attended many of the run-throughs as well. By following the rehearsals with a scored libretto, he continually gains fresh insight into the works to be performed. And during repeat performances, Mr. Miller is frequently seen backstage, watching the action from his chair in the wings.

Perhaps it is his ability to see opera from the performer's point of view that has led to many close friendships with members of the Company—friendships that are shared by his wife, Betty, a devout opera fan herself.

Last year the Robert Watt Millers, at a surprise party given by their children, celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. A guest at the party was heard to remark that the increasing number of opera enthusiasts in San Francisco may be traced to the Millers' expanding family. In addition to three sons and a daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Miller now have 18 grandchildren, many of whom are already confirmed opera goers.

Mr. Miller's executive talents, which have helped lead the San Francisco Opera to a place of international prominence, have also gained him distinction in the world of business. As chairman of the board of Pacific Lighting Corporation, he is carrying on a family tradition of business leadership.

His grandfather, Albert Miller, was a founder of the first savings bank here in 1854. Eight years later he helped to establish the San Francisco Savings Union, a predecessor of the Wells Fargo Bank. Albert Miller also co-founded with Senator William Sharon and Lloyd Tevis, the Pacific Gas Improvement Co., which later became the Pacific Gas and Electric Company.

In 1886 Robert Watt Miller's father, the late C. O. G. Miller, joined with W. B. Cline to found the Pacific Lighting Company, which R. W. Miller has headed since 1956.

In a brief but memorable departure from his role of industrialist and civic leader, Mr. Miller served as a star performer in last year's *Foi de Roi*. The president of the Opera Association teamed up with J. D. Zellerbach, his counterpart in the San Francisco Symphony Association, for an unexpected operatic debut. The two men who have so long played a leading part behind the scenes took the stage with a pantomimed rendition of "Solenne in quest' ora" that brought down the house.

In one of his more serious and familiar opera-season roles, Mr. Miller each year is involved in raising funds to offset the annual opera deficit. This season, he and other members of the Opera Fund Drive Committee are striving to reach a goal of \$150,000.

"A successful drive does more than keep the company solvent," he explained. "It represents approval of our policies by our public—a vote of confidence that assures us that we are operating in their best interests."

Robert Watt Miller, who has guided the course of the San Francisco Opera Association longer than any other man, has proved that this confidence is well deserved.