Summary

Creator: Green, Ray, 1908-1997

Title: May O'Donnell and Ray Green papers, 1890-2004 (bulk 1940-1988)

Size: 34.79 linear feet (90 boxes)

Source: Donated by Norton Owen (President of O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation), 2012

Abstract: May O'Donnell was an American modern dancer and choreographer. Her husband, Ray Green was an American composer who created works for dance companies as well as orchestral, choral, and children's pieces. The May O'Donnell and Ray Green papers contain correspondence, choreographic notes, scores, photographs, and other materials relating to the professional and personal lives of the couple.

Access: To request materials, contact the Jerome Robbins Dance Division (dance@nypl.org) in advance.

Inquiries regarding audio/visual materials in the collection may be directed to the Dance Division (dance@nypl.org). Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Copyright information: Donor retains copyright of materials. Library policy on photocopying and photography will apply.

For permission to publish, contact the Curator, Jerome Robbins Dance Division.

Preferred citation: May O'Donnell and Ray Green papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library

Processing note: This collection was partially processed by the O'Donnell-Green Music and Dance Foundation. Original order was not retained and it was split into four series: Ray Green, May O'Donnell, Photographs, and Carl Ruggles. These series were retained since the original order is unclear.

Related collections

May O'Donnell Collection, 1930-1996. University of Texas at Austin Library
May O’Donnell Papers, 1934-1996. The Newberry Library, Chicago, IL

Creator history
Ray Green (1908-1997) was an American composer who created works for dance companies as well as orchestral, choral, and children’s pieces. Green was born in Livingston Country, Missouri and began piano lessons at 14. He studied composition as a young man in California with Ernest Bloch, Albert Elkus, and E.G. Stricklen. He also traveled to Paris and studied with Darius Milhaud, Nadia Boulanger and Pierre Monteux. Green received his break after having an entire issue dedicated to his music in Henry Cowell’s New Music Quaraterly. He concentrated on creating a sound that was distinctly American.

In 1937, Green met his future wife, dancer and choreographer May O’Donnell, for whom he wrote a large number of pieces for dance. These include Of Pioneer Women (1937) and Suspension (1942). He also provided the Martha Graham Dance Company with such works as Processional Dance for Symphonic Band (1938) and American Document (1938). Green’s later compositions for dance include Dance Sonata (1953), There Is a Time for Innocence (1983) and Powers of Ten (1983).

After a creative break in the 1960s, Green returned to music and continued composing until his death in 1997. One of his last works was Concerto in D (1995) which he premiered in China with the Shanghai Philharmonic Symphony. Green died in New York City in 1997.

May O’Donnell (1906-2004) was an American modern dancer and choreographer. She began her early dance career in San Francisco studying and performing with Estelle Reed. In 1932, she moved to New York City to study with Martha Graham, and soon after became a member of her company.

Returning to California in 1939, she founded the San Francisco Dance Theatre with her husband Ray Green and Gertrude Shurr, a former Graham Dancer. In 1941, she joined the José Limón Dance Company. She worked with the Martha Graham Company again from 1944 to 1952 as a guest artist, creating roles such as the Pioneering Woman in Appalachian Spring, and Attendant in Herodiade (1944). In the mid 1940s she established the O’Donnell-Shurr Modern Dance Studio with Gertrude Shurr and continued the development of her own dance repertory. O’Donnell established her first company, The May O’Donnell Dance Company, in 1942.

Throughout her career O’Donnell created 50 works, from 1937 to 1988. Some of the most notable are Suspension, Sunday Sing Symphony, and Drift. Many of her works were choreographed for her first company in the 1950s and restaged under her second company in the 1970s and 1980s. O’Donnell retired from performing in 1961, but continued to choreograph and teach through 1988.

From 1961 to 1974, O’Donnell disbanded her dance company. She taught for seven years at the High School of Performing Arts in New York City, before restaging Suspension for the Alvin Ailey Dance Company in 1971. In 1974, she reestablished her company as the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company.

In 1974, the May O’Donnell Modern Dance Center was opened and became the basis for her revitalized dance company. She was an influential teacher who taught Robert Joffrey, Ben Vereen, and Gerald Arpino among many others. Her original dance technique influenced generations of modern dancers. O’Donnell died in Manhattan in 2004.
Scope and content note
The May O’Donnell and Ray Green papers contain correspondence, choreographic notes, scores, photographs, and other materials relating to the professional and personal lives of the couple. Green and O’Donnell collaborated throughout their career. Green wrote many compositions for some of O’Donnell's most noted works, and was also the artistic director of the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company.

The collection also holds papers relating to the composer Carl Ruggles, for whom Green was a friend and business representative.

The collection was grouped into its current series by the O’Donnell-Green Music and Dance foundation, and for continuity these series were retained.

Arrangement
The May O’Donnell and Ray Green papers are organized into the following series:

Series I: Green, Ray, 1933-1997
Series II: O'Donnell, May, 1935-2004
Series III: Photographs, 1890-1990
Series IV: Ruggles, Carl, 1927-1991

Key terms
Subjects
Choreographers -- United States
Dance -- Study and teaching
Dance -- United States
Music -- Instruction and study
Music -- United States -- 20th century

Names
Green, Ray, 1908-1997
O'Donnell, May, 1906-2004
Ruggles, Carl, 1876-1971

Special formats
Correspondence
Notes
Photographs
Scores
Series I: Green, Ray, 1933-1997
Ray Green’s papers hold personal and professional materials spanning his 50 year career as a pianist, composer, and music publisher. The bulk of the papers are composed of correspondence, scores, and American Music Edition materials.

The American Music Edition was a publishing and rights holding institution founded by Green in 1951 to document and disseminate new American music. Green published his own works through the company and represented Carl Ruggles, Halsey Stephens, Eugene Hemmer, and many others. Materials consist of general files, address lists, contracts, correspondence, copyright agreements, and royalties information. There are four records and two tapes of music related to the American Music Edition’s holdings. Inquiries regarding audio/visual materials in the collection may be directed to the Dance Division (dance@nypl.org). Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Green’s correspondence is a mix of personal and professional – often within the same letter. Of note are exchanges with his sister, Anne Green Jacobson, who funded many of his ventures, as well as his correspondence with wife May O’Donnell while they were separated during various travels as well as during World War II. The couple writes of creative difficulties and often bounced ideas off each other through letters when war or work necessitated time apart. Their close working relationship is evident throughout their correspondence.

Programs, files relating to various professional organizations, military correspondence, reviews, and the drafts and correspondence relating to his children’s teaching books, The Ray Green Piano Course, are also here.

Greens’ scores comprise the bulk of this series, and are arranged by composition type and title. The scores range from early pencil drafts in notebooks with many revisions to carefully edited printer’s copies. Most of his scores are undated, and there are often multiple drafts of each piece with no indication of which is the final product. For example, one should check each folder containing portions of Sunday Sing Symphony to see the progression of the work. Untitled, unidentified, and fragmented work are filed under “untitled sketches.”

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<td>f.2-4</td>
<td>Symphony in Bb, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.82</td>
<td>f.7</td>
<td>Symphony in Bb, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.68</td>
<td>f.5-7</td>
<td>Symphony in C, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.82</td>
<td>f.8-10</td>
<td>Symphony in C, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.69</td>
<td>f.1</td>
<td>Symphony in Db, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.69</td>
<td>f.2</td>
<td>Symphony in E, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.83</td>
<td>f.1-3</td>
<td>Symphony in E, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.69</td>
<td>f.3-4</td>
<td>Symphony in Eb, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.69</td>
<td>f.5-6</td>
<td>Symphony in F, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.83</td>
<td>f.4-11</td>
<td>Symphony in F, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b.88</td>
<td>f.2</td>
<td>Symphony in F, undated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Series I: Green, Ray, 1933-1997 (cont.)

Scores (cont.)

Symphonies (cont.)

b.69 f.7  Symphony in Gb, undated
b.67 f.6-7  Symphony No. 1, undated
b.83 f.12  Symphony No. 1, undated
b.24 f.2  Shanghai Festival of the Arts, 1995
b.24 f.3-4  Teaching Materials, undated
b.24 f.5-8  Workshops, 1955-1975
b.24 f.9  Writings, undated
Series II: O'Donnell, May, 1935-2004

May O’Donnell’s papers hold choreographic notes, correspondence, dance company records, family papers, interviews, programs, and papers relating to the May O’Donnell Modern Dance Center.

The choreographic notes consist of sketches, written direction and occasionally photographs that correspond to specific works. The notes are often just ideas and brainstorming and do not include labanotation. Much of O’Donnell’s choreography is set to the work of Ray Green.

O’Donnell’s correspondence is primarily personal. The bulk of the letters are from her husband, Ray Green, documenting their close working and emotional relationship. Other correspondents include Nancy Lang and Gertrude Shurr, O’Donnell’s studio partner and close friend.

O’Donnell worked with many dance companies throughout her career, including her own, the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company. The files for her personal company include photographs, administrative correspondence, mailing lists, programs, reviews, and workshop materials. There are 48 slide filmstrips and 13 reel tapes of the May O’Donnell Dance Company. Inquiries regarding audio/visual materials in the collection may be directed to the Dance Division (dance@nypl.org). Audio/visual materials may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

Other companies represented include the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Houston Ballet, and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

The May O’Donnell Modern Dance Center was founded in 1974 to teach the O’Donnell technique. The center became the support and base for her already existent dance company. O’Donnell taught there until the studio was sold in the mid-1980s. These files hold correspondence, flyers, press releases, and other materials relating to the day to day business of running a dance studio.

This series has an extensive collection of programs, often listing both O’Donnell and Green as their work was extremely collaborative. Programs are arranged by date and cover the years 1930 to 1985. The programs trace O’Donnell’s career as a dancer, then as a choreographer and soloist, and finally to owning her own company and concentrating solely on choreography.

Alphabetical by subject or name.

b.25 f.1 Address Book, undated
b.25 f.2-3 Awards, 1990-2002
b.25 f.4-5 General, undated
b.25 f.6 Bartok, undated
Series II: O'Donnell, May, 1935-2004 (cont.)

Choreographic Notes (cont.)

b.25 f.7  "Dance Energies", undated
b.25 f.8  "Dance Sonata", undated
b.25 f.9  "Drift", undated
b.26 f.1  "Early Dance Forms", undated
b.26 f.2  "From the Book of Esther", 1969
b.26 f.3  "Legendary Forest", undated
b.26 f.4  "March Sonatina", undated
b.26 f.5  "Polka Sonatina", undated
b.26 f.6  "Sunday Sing Symphony", undated
b.26 f.7-10  "Suspension", undated
b.26 f.11  "Transition", undated (photographs only)

Correspondence

General

b.27 f.1-6  1935-1989
b.28 f.1-5  1990-2004
b.29 f.3-4  Falkenstein, Claire, 1944-1991
b.29 f.5  1936-1939
b.30 f.1-6  1943-1978
b.30 f.7  Jacobson, Ann, 1944-1960
b.30 f.8  Kaans, Adrian, undated
b.31 f.1  Lang, Nancy, 1967-1970
b.31 f.2-3  Shurr, Gertrude, 1944-1992

Dance Companies

b.31 f.4  Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, 1971
b.31 f.5  Estelle Reed Company, 1928-1930
b.31 f.6  Houston Ballet, 1973
b.31 f.7  Hunter College, undated
b.31 f.8-10  Martha Graham Dance Company, 1933-1945

May O'Donnell Concert Dance Company

General

b.32 f.1-6  1951-1969
b.33 f.1-5  1976-1981
b.34 f.1-4  1981-1988
b.35 f.1-2  1981-1988
Series II: O'Donnell, May, 1935-2004 (cont.)
Dance Companies (cont.)
May O'Donnell Concert Dance Company (cont.)

b.35 f.3  Amsterdam, 1985
b.35 f.4  Incorporation, 1975
b.35 f.5-6  Joyce Theatre, 1983
b.36 f.1-3  Mailing Lists, undated
b.36 f.4-5  New York State Council on the Arts, 1983

Photographs
b.36 f.6  Undated
b.37 f.1-2  Undated
b.37 f.3-7  1950-1986
b.38 f.1-4  1970-1986
b.38 f.5-6  Potential Sponsors, undated

Programs
b.39 f.4-6  1940-1988
b.50 f.3-4  1970-1988
b.39 f.7  Riverside Dance Festival, 1981
b.40 f.1  Workshops, 1975-1988
b.50 f.5  Workshops, 1975-1988
b.40 f.2  Oakland Ballet, 1987-1989
b.40 f.3  Shawl-Anderson Dance Company, 1973
b.40 f.4  Diary, 1993-1997

Family Papers
b.40 f.5-6  Ada Brown Estate, 1976
b.40 f.7-8  Charles Herbert Estate, 1969-1973

Interviews
b.41 f.1-2  Ballet Review, 1980
b.41 f.3-4  CBS Cable, 1981
b.41 f.5-7  May O'Donnell: American Modern Dance Pioneer, undated
b.42 f.1  May O'Donnell: American Modern Dance Pioneer, undated

May O'Donnell Modern Dance Center
b.42 f.2-5  1973-1976
Series II: O'Donnell, May, 1935-2004 (cont.)
May O’Donnell Modern Dance Center (cont.)

b.43 f.1-4  1977-1979
b.44 f.1  National Federation of Music Clubs, 1959
b.44 f.2-3  Notes, undated
b.44 f.4  Oral History Project, 1979

Posters
   t.1  Oversize, undated

b.44 f.1  National Federation of Music Clubs, 1959
b.44 f.2-3  Notes, undated
b.44 f.4  Oral History Project, 1979

Programs
b.44 f.6-8  1930-1939
b.45 f.1-13  1940-1985
b.46 f.1  Resumes, 1950-1980
b.46 f.2  Scrapbook, 1940
b.46 f.3-8  Teaching Materials, 1970-1988
b.46 f.9  Writings, undated

Series III: Photographs, 1890-1990

Series III holds personal and professional photographs of Ray Green, May O’Donnell, and their friends and family. Headshots and promotional photographs of Green and O’Donnell make up the bulk of the series. There are also photographs of Green’s sister Ann Jacobson, Gertrude Shurr, and family portraits dating back to the 1890s. Photographs of the May O’Donnell Concert Dance Company can be found with those materials in Series II.

Alphabetical by subject or name.

b.47 f.1-2  General, 1940-1990
b.47 f.3-7  Green, Ray, 1930-1970
b.47 f.8  Jacobson, Ann, undated
b.47 f.9-10  O’Donnell Family, 1890-1940
b.48 f.1-2  O’Donnell Family, 1890-1940
b.90 f.3  O’Donnell Family, 1890-1940

O’Donnell, May
b.89 f.10  1916
b.85 f.3-8  1925-1990
b.90 f.2  1940-1980
b.85 f.2-5  undated
b.48 f.9  Norman Walker Company, undated
b.48 f.10  Shurr, Gertrude, undated
Series IV: Ruggles, Carl, 1927-1991

Carl Ruggles's papers consist of material collected by Green in his role as Ruggles's representative as well as as a close friend. Green handled all requests for Ruggles’s music, publication permissions, and interviews. The series holds contracts, correspondence (primarily to Green), copyright materials, photographs, and programs. There are published scores with edits, as well as some original drafts. This series also documents the posthumous rights transfers after Ruggles’s death in 1971.

Alphabetical by subject.

- **b.70 f.1** Contracts, 1955-1968
- **b.49 f.1** Correspondence, 1958-1971
- **b.70 f.2-3** Correspondence, 1958-1971
- **b.49 f.2** Copyrights, 1960-1991
- **b.49 f.3** Photographs, undated
- **b.84 f.12** Photographs, undated (oversize)

Programs
- **b.70 f.4** 1927-1957
- **b.49 f.4** 1958-1971
- **b.49 f.5** Posthumous Concerts, 1971-1991
- **b.70 f.5** Published Music, undated

Scores
- **b.70 f.6** General Sketches, undated
- **b.89 f.1** *A Clear Midnight*, undated
  Handwritten manuscript inscribed “To Charlotte”
- **b.84 f.6** *Evocations*, 1953 (revisions)
- **b.84 f.7** *Men and Mountains*, undated
- **b.84 f.8** *Portals*, 1949 (revisions)
- **b.84 f.9** *Sun Treader*, undated (revisions)
  *Vox Clamans In Deserto*, undated
- **b.84 f.10** 1923
- **b.84 f.11** Transcription by Ray Green, undated