

# **Guide to the George Wehner Scores, 1936-1966**

**JPB 06-68**

## **Music Division**

**The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts  
New York, New York**

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Date Completed: May 2007

Processed and encoded through a gift from Robert W. Wilson.

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## Descriptive Summary

<b>Title:</b>	<b>George Wehner Scores</b>
<b>Collection ID:</b>	<b>JPB 06-68</b>
<b>Creator:</b>	<b>Wehner, George B.</b>
<b>Extent:</b>	<b>29.08 linear feet (21 boxes)</b>
<b>Repository:</b>	<b>Music Division. The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts</b>

**Abstract:** The George Wehner Scores consist of original music created by the eccentric, but prolific composer, actor, writer, painter, and spiritualist, George Benjamin Wehner (1890-1970). After achieving some fame as a professional medium during the 1920s, Wehner began to compose prolifically from the mid-1930s up until the time of his death, writing numerous songs, orchestral works, and operas.

## Administrative Information

### Access

Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required.

### Publication Rights

For permission to publish, contact the Chief, Music Division.

### Preferred Citation

George Wehner Scores, JPB 06-68, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

### Processing Information

The collection was processed and cataloged in May 2007.

## Biographical Note

As the title of his early autobiography, *A Curious Life* (1929), indicates, composer, actor, writer, painter, and spiritualist, George Benjamin Wehner (1890-1970) led an extraordinarily varied, yet strangely productive life. Indeed, it is often quite difficult to determine the validity of some of Wehner's own more extravagant assertions about his upbringing and career.

Born in Detroit, Michigan on June 30, 1890, George was the son of the sculptor Carl Herman Wehner and Annie Haslett (both of whom Wehner later maintained were descendants of European nobility). Much of his early childhood, however, was spent in Newburgh, New York, in an atmosphere he later recalled as being dominated by his mother's "lively Bohemian parties," in which young George encountered many prominent artists and writers, including naturalist John Burroughs, writer Harrier Beecher Stowe, and actress Sarah Bernhardt, as well as numerous notable opera singers.<sup>1</sup> Wehner's own musical abilities emerged early on, and, by the age of five, he had begun composing and had devised his own notational system.

Following the death of his mother in 1904, George and his younger sister, Friederike, were sent to live with their maternal grandmother in suburban Detroit. Allegedly inspired by an immersion into Native American culture forged through his interactions with a nearby encampment of Ojibway Indians, George composed a four-act opera, *The Delight of Life*.<sup>2</sup> This composition earned him a scholarship to the Michigan Conservatory of Music in 1908, where he studied composition, theory, and piano, and, later, taught harmony and piano classes. Around this same time, Wehner also began to explore more seriously those pronounced psychic abilities he already believed he possessed. He trained with local mediums and began to hold his own séances with friends and neighbors, as well as colleagues from the Conservatory.

The chronology of Wehner's activities during the following decade is not entirely clear. At some point, the Conservatory went bankrupt and Wehner was unable to find support to continue his musical training in Europe, as he once had planned, and he eventually stopped teaching at the school. He and his sister found work appearing with Jessie Bonstelle's stock company at the Garrick Theatre in character parts. Wehner was rejected for military service during the First World War, but did wartime work at the Dodge Ordnance War Plant. It was during this period that he began to accept payment for conducting séances, which initially outraged his family, particularly his father.

By the early 1920s, Wehner had starting writing popular songs and he left Detroit with a friend for New York City. He soon encountered songwriter Louis Breau, with whom he managed to collaborate on a hit, *I Want My Mammy* (1921), which was introduced by Eddie Cantor in the revue, *The Midnight Rounders*. Wehner quickly infiltrated show business circles in New York, struggling as a songwriter and sometime performer, but finding greater success in building up a portfolio of clients for his services

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<sup>1</sup> George Wehner, "My Dream World of Opera," *Music Journal* 23:7 (October 1965), 28.

<sup>2</sup> The "George Wehner Biographical Notes" included with this collection claim that Wehner first encountered Native Americans when he accompanied his father on a trip out West in 1897/98; young George was left in the care of "Annie Chasing Hawk, a descendant of Sitting Bull" for several months and joined the Chasing Hawk family when they appeared with Buffalo Bill's Wild West troupe. This episode, however, is not recounted in Wehner's autobiography.

as a professional medium. Most notable among these patrons was the actress Minnie Maddern Fiske. He was closely associated with Mrs. Fiske for several months, until the two had a falling out, but he appears to have acted more in the capacity of a spiritual advisor, rather than as a performer with her troupe.<sup>3</sup>

After the death of his father in October 1921 and a stint in vaudeville that occupied most of 1922, Wehner spent much of the rest of the decade focused on promoting his reputation as a medium; those efforts culminating in the publication of his autobiography in 1929. Perhaps Wehner's most advantageous connection became the Richard Hudnut family. Wehner had been introduced to the designer, Natacha Rambova, in 1925 by her mother (Hudnut's third wife) and he had begun leading regular weekly séances for them and their friends. He was invited to travel with Rambova and her entourage to Europe in 1926. This trip provided Wehner with numerous opportunities to further his psychic career, but he reached the apex of his fame when he foretold the death of Rambova's estranged husband, Rudolph Valentino, after the film star was hospitalized. He went on to console the grieving Rambova in a series of séances following Valentino's death, in which he enabled Rambova to communicate with the spirit of the late actor. These incidents were widely publicized by Rambova in serial installments in the *New York Graphic*, which also were published in book form.

It was Rambova who introduced Wehner to noted occult writer, Talbot Mundy, and his wife, Dawn Allen, in 1927. Mundy took an extreme interest in Wehner's work, encouraging the publication of, and providing the introduction to, Wehner's volume of memoirs in 1929. Wehner's increasingly erratic behavior, however, soon would alienate Mundy, who later repudiated his belief in Wehner's authenticity as a medium.<sup>4</sup>

By the early 1930s, Wehner appears to have abandoned "spiritual mediumship" as a profession and turned to writing fiction, as well as painting, as a career alternative. He exhibited his watercolors at galleries in New York City during the mid-1930s, alongside the work of close friends, Margrete Overbeck (who, as a high school student, had designed the official Denver city flag) and Katherine Winterburn. Wehner also began to compose music quite prolifically, turning out orchestral pieces, ballet scores and other works for the stage. Among his performed compositions from this period were songs used in concerts by Ernestine Schumann-Heink and Maria Maximovitch; ballets for Katya Sergava and Alexis Rotov; and symphonic pieces put on by the WNYC Concert Orchestra and the New York City Symphony Orchestra in 1940 and 1941.

Throughout the 1940s, Wehner maintained a feverish work pace. He also began to regularly attend the Cantonese Theatre of New York. Classical Chinese theater and music would have a profound influence on his later works for the stage, such as the opera, *The Mark of Kings* (1961). Wehner began to work on an epic novel, *The Bridge of Fire*, which apparently never was published. His financial situation was eased considerably in his later years when Winterburn left the composer a bequest of money after her death. In 1949, Wehner purchased a former rooming house at 69 Cranberry Street in Brooklyn Heights, where he would live and work for the next twenty years.

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<sup>3</sup> George Wehner, *A Curious Life* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), 204-209.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Taves, *Talbot Mundy, Philosopher of Adventure: A Critical Biography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 2006), 167-168.

Wehner's musical output became even more prodigious. During the last two decades of his life, he composed the music and wrote the librettos for fourteen operas. Several of these works, including *The Amiable Beast*, *So Sings the Bell*, and *The Wild Swan* were presented by the Heights Opera Company, under the direction of George O'Farrell, in concerts at parks throughout New York during the summer of 1961. In 1964, the same company produced *Into the Silence* at the New York World's Fair, in addition to a Central Park performance. The following year, the Amato Opera Theater staged the American premiere of *Three Days After*. Wehner also created new ballet scores later in life. *The Cockfight* (1959), with a scenario by Romana Kryzanowska, was performed at a workshop that featured her son, Paul Mejia, then a student at the School of American Ballet.

Wehner continued to compose nearly up until the time of his death. He had begun work on a new opera, inspired by Hiroshige's *The Fifty-Three Stages of the Tokaido*, and had completed the first act before being taken seriously ill. Wehner passed away at Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn on January 12, 1970.

### Scope and Content Note

The George Wehner Scores consist of original music composed by this eccentric, but prolific artist. Wehner appears to have adopted various pseudonyms (for example, "Leo" and "George Leighton") or used different forms of his name (including George Haslett-Wehner) for some of his earlier compositions. Most of the dated materials are from the mid-1930s and the early 1960s. Although undated, one of the earliest scores in the collection most likely is the manuscript score for *Summer Shower*, a work dedicated to Ethel Kennedy, who was a fellow teacher at the Michigan Conservatory of Music. Other early works represented in the collection are the song, *The Sacred Hour* (1936, dedicated to Ernestine Schumann-Heink), an untitled orchestral piece for strings (1937), and a ballet, *The Phoenix* (1937, written for Katya Sergava). The greatest strength of the collection, however, lies in its extensive, but incomplete, selection of the full and/or piano scores for many of Wehner's later operas.

While the collection contains a few probable holograph manuscripts, the majority of the manuscript scores most likely were the work of a copyist. Extant photocopy versions of many of the scores were generated from these ink manuscripts using a blueprint process. Many of the individual works include opus numbers; these numbers have been indicated in the container list whenever possible.

Aside from a few synopses included with some of the ballet and opera scores, the collection does not contain any examples of Wehner's writings. Also of note is a copy of ten pages of handwritten, uncredited biographical notes on Wehner's life and friends. Comprised almost exclusively of scores, this collection will be of most interest to those researchers who wish to investigate Wehner's music. The collection, however, may provide some additional opportunities for the study of small-scale opera productions in New York City or Brooklyn's cultural life during the post World War II period.

## Organization

The collection is organized into 2 series. They are:

Series I: Scores, 1936-1966 and undated

Series II: Oversized Materials, 1936-1959 and undated

## Series Descriptions

**Series I: Scores, 1936-1966 and undated**

**16 boxes**

**Arrangement: Alphabetical**

The Scores series contains original music scores, which have been arranged alphabetically by title, within three major groupings: Ballets/Operas, Chamber/Orchestral Works, and Songs/Vocal Works. Also filed at the end of this series is a folder containing biographical notes on Wehner by an unidentified source.

**Series II: Oversized Materials, 1936-1959 and undated**

**5 boxes**

**Arrangement: Alphabetical**

The Oversized Materials series consists of larger format scores arranged alphabetically by title. Although the bulk of this series consists of Wehner's later dramatic works, some orchestral pieces will be found here as well.

Box/Folder	Description
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**Series I. Scores, 1936-1966 and undated**

**Box 1**

Ballets/Operas, 1959-1964 and undated

F. 1-2                    *The Amiable Beast: Opera in One Act*, 1959 - Piano score (Two photocopies, bound with different covers)

*The Cockfight (Ballet in one act)*

F. 3                    Parts, undated (Manuscript)

F. 4                    Piano score, 1959 (Photocopy)

**Box 2**

*Into the Silence: An Opera in Three Acts*, undated

Full score (Pencil manuscript)

F. 1                    Pages 1-50

F. 2                    Pages 51-100

F. 3                    Pages 101-150

F. 4                    Pages 151-200

F. 5                    Pages 201-250

F. 6                    Pages 251-311

**Box 3**

Parts (Photocopy)

F. 1                    Woodwind instruments (Also list of players/instruments)

F. 2                    Brass instruments

F. 3                    Percussion instruments

F. 4                    Stringed instruments

**Box 4**

1-2                    Piano score, 1964 (Two photocopies, one with annotations and stage directions)

**Box 5**

*The Mark of Kings: Opera in One Act, Four Scenes*, 1961, undated

Full score, undated (Manuscript)

F. 1                    Prelude and prologue

F. 2                    Scene One

F. 3                    Scene Two

F. 4                    Scene Three

F. 5                    Scene Four

F. 6                    Piano score, 1961 (Photocopy)

Box/Folder	Description
<b>Box 6</b>	
F. 1	<i>So Sings the Bell: Opera in One Act</i> , 1960 - Piano score (Photocopy)
	<i>Star of Granada: Opera in Four Acts</i> , undated - Full score (Manuscript; orchestration by Lee Goldstein)
F. 2	Act One
F. 3	Act Two
<b>Box 7</b>	
F. 1	Act Three
F. 2	Act Four
F. 3-4	<i>Three Days After: Opera in One Act</i> , 1964 - Piano score (Photocopy, two copies)
<b>Box 8</b>	
	<i>The Wild Swan: An Opera in Three Acts</i> Full score, undated (Manuscript)
F. 1	Act One
F. 2	Act Two (Not identified on manuscript as Act Two, but includes new pagination sequence)
F. 3	Act Three
<b>Box 9</b>	
1-2	Piano score, 1959 (Two photocopies, one with extensive annotations in pencil)
<b>Box 10</b>	
	Chamber/Orchestral Works, 1937-1946 and undated <i>Andante ma non Troppo (For Piano and Strings)</i> , undated (On cover: George Leighton)
F. 1	Full score (Manuscript)
F. 2	Piano score (Manuscript)
F. 3	<i>Ave Maria (Opus 75)</i> , undated – Piano score and violin solo part (Photocopy)
	<i>Calo Chant (from Gypsy Suite)</i> , undated (Manuscript and photocopies)
F. 4	Full score
F. 5	Parts
F. 6	Sketch
F. 7	<i>Il Canto Andante (Opus 53)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 8	<i>Caverns (Opus 60)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 9	<i>Chippewa Lullaby</i> , undated – Full score (Manuscript; from <i>In Eden's Fields</i> )
	<i>Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (Opus 42)</i> , undated (Also known as <i>Concerto No. 1</i> )
	Manuscript
F. 10	Piano score



Box/Folder	Description
F. 11	Violin parts Photocopy
F. 12	Piano score
F. 13	Violin parts <i>Concerto No. 3 (Opus 41)</i> , undated (Manuscript)
F. 14	Full score
F. 15	String parts
F. 16	Two piano score
<b>Box 11</b>	
	Photocopy
F. 1	Full score (Two copies)
F. 2	String parts (Two sets)
F. 3	Two piano score (Two copies) <i>Concerto on American Indian Themes for Violin and Piano</i> , undated (Also known as <i>Violin Concerto on American Indian Themes</i> )
F. 4	Piano score
F. 5	Violin parts
F. 6	<i>Concerto with Strings and Drums</i> , undated – Sketch (Manuscript)
<b>Box 12</b>	
F. 1	<i>Gypsy Night (Violin and piano)</i> , undated – Full score (Manuscript; same title as section of <i>Nomadic Suite</i> )
F. 2	<i>I, Yi</i> , undated – Full score (Manuscript)
F. 3	<i>In Eden's Fields (Suite for Orchestra with or without Voice)</i> , undated –Parts (Photocopy)
F. 4	<i>The Journey</i> , undated – Piano score (Manuscript)
F. 5	<i>Love Song, 1938</i> – Piano score (Manuscript; dedicated to Herbert S. Whitman)
F. 6	<i>Melody in A Minor for Flute, 1937</i> – Piano score (Manuscript; dedicated to Herbert S. Whitman)
F. 7	<i>Morning Bird for Violin (Opus 70)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 8	<i>Moto Perpetuo (Opus 48)</i> , undated – Parts (Photocopy)
F. 9	<i>Musical Discourse: Suite for Piano (Opus 65)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy; also titled <i>Waltz Fantasy</i> )
F. 10	<i>My Native Land (Four Pianos)</i> , undated - Parts (Photocopy)
F. 11	<i>Night Bird</i> , undated – Sketch (Photocopy)
F. 12	<i>Nomadic Suite</i> , undated – Piano score (Manuscript)
F. 13	<i>Noon Sky (Opus 71)</i> , 1943 – Sketch (Manuscript in pencil)
F. 14	<i>Persephone (Opus 76)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
<b>Box 13</b>	
F. 1	<i>Piano Quartet No. 1 (Opus 47)</i> , undated – Full score (Photocopy)

Box/Folder	Description
	<i>Piano Symphony</i> , undated (Called variously <i>Concerto No. 1</i> , <i>Symphony No. 1</i> )
	Parts
F. 2	New (Incomplete manuscript set of “new original sheets for <i>Piano Concerto</i> that Marion Harned (?) copied”)
F. 3	Old (Complete manuscript set and incomplete photocopies)
F. 4-5	Piano score (Two bound photocopies)
<b>Box 14</b>	
	<i>The Prairies (Tone-Poem for Orchestra)</i> , undated (By Leo)
F. 1	Full score (Bound photocopy)
F. 2	Piano score (Bound photocopy)
	<i>Quintet for Strings and French Horn (Opus 39)</i> , undated (Also called <i>Quintette Number 1</i> )
F. 3	Full score (Bound photocopy)
	Parts
F. 4	Manuscript
F. 5	Photocopy
<b>Box 15</b>	
F. 1	<i>The Rain-Song (To Margaret Mannebach)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 2	<i>Scenes from the Chinese Opera (Chinese Suite)</i> , 1946 - Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 3	<i>Scherzo (For Piano)</i> , undated – Sketch (Manuscript)
F. 4	<i>Serenade</i> , undated – Piano score (Manuscript of two versions, for violin and piano, piano and for violoncello and piano.)
F. 5	<i>Song of the Brook (Opus 74)</i> , undated – Piano score and violin part
F. 6	<i>Song of the Brook for Piano (Opus 50)</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy, two copies.)
F. 7	<i>String Quartet (Horn in F)</i> , undated – Full score (Manuscript of three movements, corrected; also called, <i>Quintet no. 1, op. 39.</i> )
F. 8	<i>Summer Shower (Violin and Piano)</i> , undated – Piano score (Manuscript, two copies; dedicated to Ethel Kennedy)
	<i>Symphony No. 1 (Opus 34)</i> , undated (Also titled, <i>Piano Symphony</i> )
F. 9	Full score (Manuscript; largo, second movement only)
F. 10	Piano score (Manuscript)
F. 11	<i>Symphony No. 2 (Opus 35)</i> , undated – Complete piano score and incomplete full score (Manuscript)
F. 12	<i>Tone Poem (Violin and Piano)</i> , undated – Piano score and violin part (Photocopy)
	Untitled orchestral composition for strings, 1937 (Manuscript in pencil; George Leighton on cover)
F. 13	Piano score
F. 14	String orchestral score
F. 15	<i>A Wanderer Looks Back</i> , 1941 – Piano score (Photocopy)
<b>Box 16</b>	

<b>Box/Folder</b>	<b>Description</b>
	Songs/Vocal Works, 1936-1966 and undated
F. 1	<i>Ave Maria</i> (Aria from the opera, <i>Light House on the Reef</i> ), 1966 - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 2	<i>Il Canto Andante</i> (Opus 54), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy; dedicated to Maria Maximovitch)
F. 3	<i>Chung Kua, Native Land</i> , undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 4	<i>Dusk</i> (Opus 52), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 5	<i>Five American Indian Songs</i> , undated - Piano vocal score (Also called, <i>Suite of Indian Songs</i> ; photocopy)
F. 6	<i>From Manitou</i> (Opus 59), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy, with annotations in pencil)
F. 7	<i>Gypsy</i> (Opus 23), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 8	<i>Gypsy Dirge</i> (Opus 21), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 9	<i>Gypsy Wagon Song</i> , 1938 – Piano vocal score (Self-published edition)
F. 10	<i>In Eden's Fields: A Song</i> , undated – Piano vocal score (Photocopy; Transcribed for violin by Sybla Rarrows)
F. 11	<i>Indian Mother's Even Song</i> , undated – Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 12	<i>Indian Mother's Song</i> (From the Opera, <i>The Wild Swan</i> ), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy, dedicated to Madame Schumann-Heink)
F. 13	<i>The Lord's Prayer: A Musical Setting</i> (From the Opera <i>Three Days After</i> ), 1964 - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 14	<i>My Native Land</i> (Opus 51), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy; dedicated to Maria Maximovitch)
F. 15	<i>Persephone</i> (Opus 63), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 16	<i>The Rider: A Song</i> , undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 17	<i>The Sacred Hour</i> , 1936 - Piano vocal score (Self-published edition; "Dedicated and sung by Ernestine Schumann-Heink")
F. 18	<i>Song of the Brook</i> , undated- Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 19	<i>Song of the Nightingale</i> (Opus 25), undated - Piano vocal score (Photocopy)
F. 20	<i>Wild Geese</i> (Opus 57), undated (Piano vocal score, photocopy)
F. 21	Wehner biographical notes, undated (Photocopy of ten pages of handwritten biography and timeline of George Wehner)
	<b><u>Series II: Oversized Materials, 1936-1959 and undated</u></b>
<b>Box 17</b>	
F. 1	<i>The Amiable Beast: Opera in One Act</i> (For Children Little and Big), undated - Full score (Photocopy bound with synopsis; orchestrations by Lee Goldstein)
F. 2	<i>The Cockfight</i> (Ballet in One Act), 1959 – Full score (Photocopy bound with synopsis; story by Romana Kryzanowsky; orchestration by Scott O'Neal)
F. 3	<i>Episode of the Sea: Ballet in One Act</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)

<b>Box/Folder</b>	<b>Description</b>
	<i>In Eden's Fields</i> , undated (Manuscript)
F. 4	Full score
F. 5	Parts
<b>Box 18</b>	
	<i>Into the Silence: An Opera in Three Acts</i> , undated - Full score (Photocopy, with annotations in pencil; orchestrated by George Wehner and Scott O'Neal)
F. 1	Act One
F. 2	Act Two
F. 3	Act Three
F. 4	<i>Magician of Nature</i> , undated – Full score and parts (Manuscript)
<b>Box 19</b>	
F. 1	<i>Musical Discourse: Suite for Ballet</i> , undated - Piano score (Photocopy)
	<i>The Phoenix (Opus 33)</i> , 1937 (Photocopy; “this ballet was written for Katia Sergava”)
F. 2	Full score
F. 3	Piano score
F. 4	<i>Piano Symphony</i> , undated – Full score (Photocopy; also known as <i>Concerto No. 1</i> )
<b>Box 20</b>	
F. 1	<i>So Sings the Bell: Opera in One Act</i> , undated – Full score (Photocopy)
F. 2	<i>Star of Granada: Opera in Four Acts</i> , undated – Piano score (Photocopy)
F. 3	<i>The Sun Comes Up</i> , undated – Full score (Manuscript found with that of <i>Magician of Nature</i> , includes some untitled sections)
F. 4	<i>Three Days After: Opera in One Act</i> , undated – Full score (Photocopy)
F. 5	Two solos for ballets, 1936 and undated – Piano score (Photocopy; <i>Minister of Propaganda and Refugee</i> )
<b>Box 21</b>	
	<i>The Wild Swan: An Opera in Three Acts</i> , undated – Full score (Photocopy)
F. 1	Act One
F. 2	Act Two
F. 3	Act Three