

Dibdin Family:

An Inventory of Its Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Dibdin Family
Title:	Dibdin Family Papers
Dates:	1802-1970
Extent:	4.5 document boxes, 1 oversize box (osb) (2.10 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Dibdin Family Papers, 1802-1970, consist of clippings, correspondence, legal documents, manuscripts, playbills, photographs, programs, sketches, and a commonplace book that document the activities of this British artistic, literary, musical, and theatrical family.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00026
Language:	English and French
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchases, gift, 1989-1990
Processed by:	Ancelyn Krivak, 2015
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Charles Dibdin (1745-1814), composer, musician, actor, and writer, was baptized in Southampton, England in 1745, moved to Winchester as a child, and at age eleven moved to London to live with his older brother Thomas. Dibdin published his first collection of songs in 1763, and the following year his first opera, *The Shepherd's Artifice*, was staged at Covent Garden with Dibdin himself in the lead role. Dibdin's operas, many of them written in collaboration with Irish playwright Isaac Bickerstaff, were staged at Covent Garden, Drury Lane (under the direction of actor-manager David Garrick), and other English theaters in the 1760s and 1770s. Dibdin often sang character roles in these operas, including the first blackface role in British theater, the servant Mungo in Bickerstaff and Dibdin's *The Padlock*. Before 1787, he made infrequent appearances on non-operatic musical programs (most notably in 1767, when he gave the first public performance on a piano in Great Britain at Covent Garden), but after that date, the bulk of Dibdin's appearances were as a solo performer, singing his own songs and accompanying himself on the piano. Arguably the first British singer-songwriter, Dibdin went on tour across England and Scotland numerous times in the late 1700s and early 1800s, beginning with his "farewell tour" of 1787 (planned as his last series of concerts before departing for India, a voyage that was quickly abandoned after his ship encountered rough waters off the English coast). He also gave regular concerts at his theater in London, the Sans Souci. The songs Dibdin wrote and performed typically dealt with patriotic themes (some were commissioned by the British government during the Napoleonic Wars), celebrating the British sailor and soldier, and the simple life of the English countryside, mixing comedy with sentiment. A few of Dibdin's ballads continue to be performed in the present day, such as "Tom Bowling," which forms part of Henry Wood's "Fantasia on British Sea Songs," traditionally sung on the last night of the annual British classical music festival, The Proms. Dibdin attempted to protect the copyright on his songs by selling the sheet music exclusively in his own store, and further enlarged his income by writing several volumes of memoirs, a history of the British stage, and four novels. He was awarded a pension by the British government for his service during wartime, which was subsequently revoked by a later administration. Dibdin's last series of concerts in 1809 were not a success, and he had to declare bankruptcy. A charitable benefit arranged on his behalf in 1810 provided him with an annuity during the last years of his life. Charles Dibdin died of illness in London in 1814. He was survived by two illegitimate sons and a daughter from his relationship with the actress Harriet Pitt: Charles Dibdin the younger, Thomas John Dibdin, and Harriet Pitt; his wife, Anna, and their daughter Anne.

Charles Dibdin the younger (1768-1833), theater manager and writer, was born Charles Isaac Mungo Dibdin out of wedlock in London in 1768 to composer Charles Dibdin and actress Harriet Pitt. Charles Dibdin the younger and his brother, Thomas John Dibdin, saw little of their father as children and primarily grew up in the care of their uncle, Cecil Pitt. After boarding school and an apprenticeship to a pawnbroker, Dibdin the younger published his first collection of verse in 1792, and in 1797 staged his first one-man show, *Sans six sous* (a pun on the name of his father Charles Dibdin's theater, the Sans Souci). Dibdin the younger married the actress Mary Bates, who would

bear him eleven children, in 1797, and following their marriage found employment writing songs, verse, and one-act plays for pantomimes and equestrian shows. In 1800, Dibdin the younger became the manager of Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, where he staged variety shows and installed a large water tank to create a new kind of aquatic theater that recreated famous naval battles. The spectacular entertainments staged at Sadler's Wells eventually fell out of favor with the public, and in 1821 Dibdin the younger sold his shares and left the theater. He continued to write, producing songs, plays, verse, a history of the English theater, and his own memoirs, until his death in London in 1833.

Thomas John Dibdin (1771-1841), playwright and actor, was born in London in 1771, the second son born out of wedlock to Charles Dibdin and actress Harriet Pitt. Like his brother, Charles Dibdin the younger, he was sent to boarding school and then apprenticed to a shopkeeper, but he soon ran away to become an actor, singer, and songwriter in various theater troupes across England. He married an actress, Ann Hilliar, in 1793, who, upon their return to London the following year, was engaged with him at Sadler's Wells Theatre and then, in 1798, Covent Garden. In addition to acting, Dibdin was a prolific writer of plays and pantomimes, and eventually became stage manager of the Surrey Theater in 1810 and Theater Royal, Drury Lane in 1822, employed by theater manager R. W. Elliston. Dibdin's final engagement as stage manager was once again at Sadler's Wells from 1825 to 1828. Following his retirement from the stage, Dibdin continued to publish plays, songs, essays, and verse until his death from asthma in London in 1841. He was survived by his second wife, Catherine, and five children.

Thomas Frognall Dibdin (1776-1847), bibliographer and writer, was born in Calcutta, India in 1776 to naval captain Thomas Dibdin, older brother of Charles Dibdin (1745-1814). Educated at St. John's College, University of Oxford, Dibdin pursued a legal career for a few years, then was ordained as a priest by the Church of England in 1805. Dibdin published his first bibliography of Greek and Latin classics in 1802 and is perhaps best known for his work *Bibliomania, or, Book-madness, containing some account of the history, symptoms and cure of this fatal disease* (1809), which discussed the hobby of book collecting and contained biographies of famous collectors of his era. Thomas Frognall Dibdin died in London in 1847, survived by his wife and two daughters.

Henry Edward Dibdin (1813-1866), musician and composer, was born in London in 1813, the youngest son of Charles Dibdin the younger and actress Mary Bates. Dibdin learned to play the harp from his older sister Mary Anne Tonna, a teacher at the Royal Academy of Music. His first appearance on the harp was at Covent Garden in 1832, as part of a program that included violinist Niccolò Paganini, billed as Paganini's last concert. In 1833, Henry Edward Dibdin moved to Edinburgh, where he was appointed as organist of Trinity Chapel, taught music, and composed and compiled hymns. In 1846, he married Isabella Perkins Palmer, who bore him three sons and at least one daughter. Henry Edward Dibdin died in Edinburgh in 1866.

Edward Rimbault Dibdin (1853-1941), curator and writer, was born in Edinburgh in 1853 to Henry Edward Dibdin and Isabella Perkins Palmer. E. R. Dibdin studied art at Edinburgh College of Art (known at that time as the Royal Institution) and worked as the art critic for the *Liverpool Courier* newspaper from 1887 to 1904. He was appointed as curator of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool in 1904 and served in that position until

1918. E. R. Dibdin published several books on art, photography, and music. Keenly interested in the history of his family, E. R. Dibdin collected materials about the Dibdins, gave lectures on their history, and published works about his ancestors, notably *A Charles Dibdin Bibliography*, published in 1938. He was married three times and had six children. Edward Rimbault Dibdin died of illness in 1941.

Thomas James Rimbault Dibdin (1895-1987) was the son of Edward Rimbault Dibdin and his second wife, Charlotte. He was an engineer who resided in the Liverpool region. T. J. R. Dibdin shared his father's interest in the history of the Dibdin family and retained his father's collection of Dibdin-related materials after his death.

Sources:

In addition to materials found within the collection, the following sources were used:

"Dibdin, Thomas James Rimbault." *The Gazette, Wills and Probate*, online edition, accessed July 14, 2015,

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Fiske, Roger and Cholij, Irena. "Dibdin, Charles." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed July 2, 2015,

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/07733>.

Gillaspie, Jon A. "Dibdin, Charles (bap. 1745, d. 1814)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, online edition, accessed July 2, 2015,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7585>.

James, R. J. "DIBDIN, Edward Rimbault, Curator, Liverpool Corporation Art Gallery." In *Lancashire: Biographies, Rolls of Honour*. London: Richard J. James, 1917.

Kavanagh, Gaynor. *Museums and the First World War: A Social History*. London: Leicester University Press, 1994.

Kilburn, Matthew. "Dibdin, Charles Isaac Mungo (1768–1833)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, online edition, accessed July 3, 2015,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7586>.

Richardson, John V., Jr. "Dibdin, Thomas Frognall (1776–1847)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, online edition, accessed July 8, 2015,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7588>.

Squire, W. B. "Dibdin, Henry Edward (1813–1866)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, online edition, accessed July 9, 2015,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7587>.

Stephens, John Russell. "Dibdin, Thomas John (1771–1841)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford University Press, online edition, accessed July 7, 2015,

<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7589>.

Scope and Contents

The Dibdin Family Papers, 1802-1970, consist of clippings, correspondence, legal documents, manuscripts, playbills, photographs, programs, sketches, and a commonplace book that document the activities of this British artistic, literary, musical, and theatrical family. The papers were collected by art critic and museum curator Edward Rimbault (E. R.) Dibdin and passed on to his son, engineer Thomas James Rimbault (T. J. R.) Dibdin. They are organized into two series: Series I. Edward Rimbault Dibdin, 1802-1941 and Series II. Thomas James Rimbault Dibdin, 1895-1970.

Series I. is further divided into two subseries, Subseries A. Dibdin Family Research Materials, 1802-1941, and Subseries B. Personal Materials, 1807-1941. Subseries A is primarily made up of materials collected by E. R. Dibdin, and manuscripts written by him, about various members of the Dibdin family. Materials related to specific individuals are grouped together, beginning with Charles Dibdin and continuing in chronological order through his descendants. The bulk of the materials pertain to Charles Dibdin, including clippings and correspondence regarding specific works and performances of Charles Dibdin, and lectures given about him during E. R. Dibdin's lifetime; extensive correspondence between E. R. Dibdin and music collector Julian Marshall regarding Charles Dibdin's works; and manuscripts of E. R. Dibdin's own essays and lectures on Charles Dibdin and his employer at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, actor-manager David Garrick. The subseries also contains materials related to Dibdin's sons Charles Dibdin the younger and Thomas John Dibdin, including original manuscripts and correspondence, and his nephew, Thomas Frognall Dibdin. E. R. Dibdin collected numerous materials related to his father, musician and composer Henry Edward (H. E.) Dibdin, including correspondence, playbills, fragments of music manuscripts, plans and sketches of his house in Edinburgh, and a family commonplace book containing verse, hymns, artworks, and photographs, created primarily between 1858 and 1869. Other materials in this subseries include clippings about and correspondence with people named Dibdin who were not directly related to E. R. Dibdin, and correspondence and manuscript notes about the Dibdin surname and the village of Dibden in Hampshire, England.

Although most of the materials in Subseries A were collected by E. R. Dibdin and passed on to T. J. R. Dibdin, there are a few items of uncertain provenance: the original letters of Charles Dibdin the younger, Thomas John Dibdin, and Robert William (R. W.) Elliston, and a manuscript of a "Farewell Address" written by Thomas John Dibdin. The collector and date of acquisition of these materials is unknown.

Subseries B contains clippings collected by E. R. Dibdin and personal correspondence. Correspondents in this subseries include Dibdin's friend, theater critic and writer William Archer, Dibdin's second wife, Charlotte ("Lottie"), his mother, Isabella Palmer Perkins, son T. J. R. Dibdin, and other family members. Much of the correspondence from E. R. Dibdin to T. J. R. Dibdin deals with their shared interest in Dibdin family history and therefore overlaps in subject matter with Subseries A. The subseries also contains third-party correspondence between organist, composer, and collector Edward

Francis (E. F.) Rimbault, a family friend, and music historian William Henry Husk.

Series II. contains clippings, correspondence, photographs, and printed materials collected by Thomas James Rimbault. As in Subseries B. of Series I., much of the correspondence from T. J. R. Dibdin to E. R. Dibdin deals with Dibdin family history and therefore overlaps in subject matter with Subseries A. of Series I. The photographs in this series generally depict unidentified subjects and locations; some of them appear to have inscriptions in T. J. R. Dibdin's hand, but others may have originally been collected by E. R. Dibdin rather than T. J. R. Dibdin.

All correspondence in the collection is listed in this guide's Index of Correspondents.

Related Material

The Ransom Center holds numerous other materials related to the Dibdin family, including letters of Thomas Frognall Dibdin in the Little Alphabet, an autograph of Charles Dibdin in Theater Arts uncataloged materials, and printed portraits of Charles Dibdin the younger, Thomas John Dibdin, and other Dibdins in the Theater Biography Collection and Prints Collection.

Separated Material

Published books were transferred to the Ransom Center Library.

Index Terms

People

- Dibdin, Charles, 1745-1814.
- Dibdin, Charles, 1768-1833.
- Dibdin, E. Rimbault (Edward Rimbault), 1853-1941.
- Dibdin, Henry Edward, 1813-1866.
- Dibdin, Thomas, 1771-1841.
- Dibdin, Thomas Frognall, 1776-1847.
- Dibdin, Thomas James Rimbault, 1895-1987.

Subjects

- Actors--Great Britain--18th century.

Art critics--England.

Art museum curators--Great Britain.

Authors, English--18th century.

Authors, English--19th century.

Authors, English--20th century.

Bibliographers--England.

Composers--Great Britain--18th century.

Composers--Great Britain--19th century.

Dramatists, English--18th century.

Dramatists, English--19th century.

Musicians--Great Britain--18th century.

Musicians--Great Britain--19th century.

Theatrical managers--Great Britain--19th century.

Document Types

Clippings.

Commonplace books.

Correspondence.

Legal documents.

Manuscripts.

Playbills.

Programs.

Photographs.

Sketches.

Series I. Edward Rimbault Dibdin, 1802-1941

Subseries A. Dibdin Family Research Materials, 1802-1941

Charles Dibdin

Clippings and Other Collected Materials

Aquatint plate, The Ochil Hills, from Dibdin's Observations on a tour through almost the whole of England, and a considerable part of Scotland, Vol. II, 1802 **Container**
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Clippings, advertising leaflet, and notes re revival production of comic opera Lionel and Clarissa by Isaac Bickerstaffe, with music and lyrics by Charles Dibdin, 1925 **Container**
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Clippings, correspondence, notes, and programs, 1841-1938, undated **Container**
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Clippings, correspondence, and photograph of Theatre Royal, Covent Garden playbill advertising the first public performance on a piano in England (Charles Dibdin accompanying Miss Brickler, 1767), 1900-1924 **Container**
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Clippings, correspondence, and programs re W. A. (William Alexander) Barrett's lecture on the life and works of Charles Dibdin, 1886 **Container**
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- Stead, Hiram--3.18
- Strong, A. G.--1.10
- "Stumiano, Valentino" (?)--3.18
- Town Clerk's Office, Civic Centre, Southampton--1.10
- Watts, Mary S.--3.18
- Whitfield King & Co.--4.9
- William George's Sons--3.18

- Yorke, Ernest--1.11
- _____“E. M. R.” (?)--3.18
- _____“H. E. D.” (?)--3.18
- _____“Varwell”--3.18