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Recollections Concerning the Isham Memorial Library

Lowell Lindgren

WHEN I ARRIVED AS A GRADUATE STUDENT AT HARVARD in autumn 1965, the Isham collection was not clearly a component of the Loeb Music Library, since it constituted an entity by itself, within the room above the lobby of Memorial Church. I do not remember entering it during my first year at Harvard, but I remember hearing upon several occasions in the Notation class taught by A. Tillman Merritt that it contained the only extant facsimiles of some valuable treasures that were destroyed during the Second World War. I also heard in John Milton Ward's Medieval and Renaissance Instrumental Music class that Isham was methodically acquiring all the prints listed in the newly published *Instrumental Music Printed before 1600: A Bibliography*, which Ward had begun and Howard Mayer Brown had continued and completed.

When I was a second year graduate student, I took a year-long seminar from Nino Pirrotta, whose focal point was Italian popular music composed around 1500, most notably *canzone*, *frottole* and *ode*. During each week, class members became acquainted with the repertory by transcribing works within the manuscript and printed part-books held on microfilms in Isham. The Isham Librarian was then the diminutive Larry Mowers, who always had a twinkle in his eye and a tale to tell. One concerned the huge Venetian Renaissance painting of Isham's guardian angel (which is now in Widener Library). A second concerned the humble "forgiveness" he had to beg from European librarians, especially those in monasteries, when the microfilms they sent were totally unreadable, undoubtedly because a devilish force had intervened. A third concerned his one and only trip to the Salzburg music festival, when he had processed proudly past the hundreds of onlookers who held fistfuls of money, which they would have gladly exchanged for his ticket. And whenever we needed cheering up he let us peruse his secret card file, which contained the hilarious names he had found within the realm of musical scholarship.

After my third year of graduate study, I assisted Gustave Reese during a Harvard Summer Session. He was in his seventieth year and obviously relished teaching, since it inspired him to work the rest of each day (and seemingly all night as well) on a great project, which was at that time a revision of his *Music in the Middle Ages* (which he, alas, never completed). He introduced Renaissance Vocal Music to the members of his morning class, while those in his afternoon seminar were diligently working in Isham on the report they would give in class that day. Each student was assigned a

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different Renaissance manuscript available on film in Isham. Since these sources were exceedingly well known to Reese, we all learned very much from his fine observations on the source material.

When I taught at Harvard from 1972 to 1979, my graduate seminars customarily edited music found on films in Isham. The culmination for me was the seminar concerning Alessandro Scarlatti, whose operas Harvard University Press was publishing at the time. On May 4, 1979, the seven members of my seminar performed a severely reduced version of Scarlatti's *La Statira* (Rome, 1690), which was the focus of their research during the term. The production was dedicated in rhapsodic terms to Nino and Lea Pirrotta, who were our special guests from Rome.

Virtually each of the scholarly projects I have done is a "bibliographic scrutiny," and I have returned to Isham time and again, for it has always "sustained" me with films of scores and librettos that I have needed to consult. Virtually all of my articles have sprung from the well of "nourishment" found in Isham. That remains true of two that I have now been working on for more than twenty years. The first is a catalog of the Barberini music manuscripts in the Vatican Library, upon which I made significant progress during the summer of 2006, when I worked in Isham several times a week, viewing films of complete scores, aria collections and librettos from Rome. The second is a catalog of the Baillie manuscripts in the Edinburgh University Library. John Howard, the Isham Librarian after Larry Mowers and before Sarah Adams, kindly bought the films of all the Baillie manuscripts that I did not already own. Both of these projects are now nearing completion, thanks to the riches of Isham.

During the fifty years since the Loeb Music Library was founded, musicological scrutinizers who do not live close to Isham have greatly envied those who do, and they continue to make "pilgrimages" to view its treasures. We who scrutinize are deeply grateful to the Isham and Loeb librarians for continuing to augment this great collection.

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