

Opera costume

IN 1909, 22-year-old Minneapolis native Beatrice Gjertsen made her debut as the prima donna, or lead female singer, of the Grand Ducal Opera House in Weimar, Germany, playing the role of Elizabeth in the opera *Tannhäuser* by Richard Wagner. Gjertsen was a dramatic soprano who studied voice at the University of Minnesota, then spent years training with various tutors in Europe. During her *Tannhäuser* entrance scene, she donned this gold-and-white brocaded satin cloak and a gold-colored crown with glass jewels over her court dress. Gjertsen used these costume pieces many times during her tenure

performing for the German court, including Emperor Wilhelm II.

Gjertsen left Germany in July 1914, mere weeks before the outbreak of World War I. She moved back to Minnesota, bringing several of her costume pieces with her, and continued performing around the country. In 1915, she married physician William Bessesen of Albert Lea. A year later, William had the Beatrice Bessesen Theater built in Albert Lea as a place for his wife and others to perform. Beatrice organized a conservatory on the second floor, where she taught music and drama. She also established a conservatory in Min-

neapolis. The French classical-style building is part of the Albert Lea Commercial Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

After Beatrice's death in 1935, William donated his wife's costume pieces to the Minnesota Historical Society, along with a scrapbook of newspaper clippings and photographs documenting her prestigious career. The items, including those from *Tannhäuser*, were recently digitized and can be viewed in MNHS Collections Online.

—Stephanie Olson,
curatorial associate



Beatrice Gjertsen Bessesen photographed in Germany, around 1909. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society, and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or users or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission: [contact us](#).

Individuals may print or download articles for personal use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#). Include the author's name and article title in the body of your message. But first--

If you think you may need permission, here are some guidelines:

Students and researchers

- You **do not** need permission to quote or paraphrase portions of an article, as long as your work falls within the fair use provision of copyright law. Using information from an article to develop an argument is fair use. Quoting brief pieces of text in an unpublished paper or thesis is fair use. Even quoting in a work to be published can be fair use, depending on the amount quoted. Read about fair use here: <http://www.copyright.gov/fls/fl102.html>
- You **should**, however, always credit the article as a source for your work.

Teachers

- You **do not** need permission to incorporate parts of an article into a lesson.
- You **do** need permission to assign an article, either by downloading multiple copies or by sending students to the online pdf. There is a small per-copy use fee for assigned reading. [Contact us](#) for more information.

About Illustrations

- **Minnesota History** credits the sources for illustrations at the end of each article. **Minnesota History** itself does not hold copyright on images and therefore cannot grant permission to reproduce them.
- For information on using illustrations owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, see [MHS Library FAQ](#).