



"Expanding our musical heritage" in "Music librarianship in America, Part 1: Music librarians as custodians of cultural history"

Citation

Hamm, Charles. 1991. "Expanding our musical heritage" in "Music librarianship in America, Part 1: Music librarians as custodians of cultural history". Harvard Library Bulletin 2 (1), Spring 1991: 13-17.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42661657>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Expanding Our Musical Heritage

Charles Hamm

When I arrived at Princeton many years ago to begin work on a Ph.D. in musicology, all books, monographs, editions, periodicals, and other materials considered necessary for successfully completing the degree had been collected in a large study-seminar room. I went around the entire room taking each volume off the shelf in turn and transferring onto index cards what I took to be the most relevant information about each. This preparation for general examinations was considered eccentric by my fellow students, but it proved effective. The word “canon” was never used then, but the ideology, though never articulated, could not have been clearer. The corpus of music and literature on music necessary for the pursuit of musicology was finite: it was all here in this room; and once our apprenticeship was completed and we moved out into the hard world of academia, our success would be measured by whether or not our own work would one day be brought into this room.

The Firestone Library stacks were situated just outside the door of our sanctuary, and occasionally, when none of my professors or fellow students was about, I would sneak a look at a score by John Cage or Charles Ives, or at a book about southern folk hymnody, or a bound collection of nineteenth-century sheet music. I felt like a teenager browsing through a collection of pornography.

I have no recollection of Princeton’s music librarian in those days. If there was one, that individual’s duties must have been almost completely routine: learning which bodies of music and which individual composers were part of the musicological canon, then trying to obtain all available editions of the appropriate music and the relevant literature about it.

We graduate students would sometimes speculate about where we might find jobs once we left Princeton. Would we be lucky enough to go to Berkeley or Yale or Illinois or Smith, where we would find a library comparable to the one upon which we had become dependent? Or would we have to take a job at some lesser institution, where the library would be inadequate for our continuing research and teaching? What would become of us in such a place? How could we possibly do what we then knew musicologists were supposed to do?

But all of us, musicologists and librarians alike, inhabit a different planet today. The boundaries of the subject matter of musical research have constantly expanded as a result of at least four separate but related factors:

1. Since I was a graduate student, the discipline of musicology has proliferated astronomically, producing a veritable army of scholars and graduate students and spilling over from the handful of major research universities, where it was once concentrated, into state schools, smaller private colleges, schools of music, and even conservatories. One consequence of this growth has been a demand for more and

Charles Hamm, the Arthur R. Virgin Professor of Music at Dartmouth College, is the author of *Music in the New World*.

more topics for dissertations and faculty research. The graveyard of music formerly ranked unworthy of inclusion in the musicological canon has been desecrated, and once-scorned composers and even entire repertoires have been resurrected as grist for dissertations, papers, articles, lectures, courses, even books.

2. The development of four allied disciplines has expanded the horizons of historical musicology. Though some early German scholars had suggested that the music of other cultures should be studied within the context of musicology, this attitude did not prevail in the New World, where the field of ethnomusicology had to be reinvented as a separate discipline, allied as much with the social sciences as with the humanities, and having its own organizational structure and journal. In many schools, however, ethnomusicology has been included under the general umbrella of musicology, and it has consequently redefined and enriched the subject matter, methodology, and research materials of the discipline as a whole. Likewise with the study of American music: in recent decades it has developed its own organizational structure (the Sonneck Society), its own journal (*American Music*), and to some extent its own scholarly profile. In most schools it is now part of the general program in musicology, whose horizons it has helped to expand. Music theory has a similar history; even though it too has developed its own scholarly society and publications, and a distinctive analytical and speculative methodology, it has been integrated into many programs of musicology. Most recently, popular music studies have followed a similar pattern; inventing an organizational structure (the International Association for the Study of Popular Music) a journal (*Popular Music*), and an intellectual profile quite different from that of historical musicology. Yet courses in popular music, and the people who teach them, are commonly situated in the musicology divisions of schools that have ventured into this area.

3. The contextual perspective of recent European thought has modified traditional approaches to musicology. The dominant character of American historical musicology, described variously as positivist, empirical, and humanistic, was shaped primarily by the work of certain German scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But much European musicology has taken quite different directions in the postwar decades. The writings of the Frankfurt School, chiefly those of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, have proved to be seminal for many younger Europeans, particularly in France, Great Britain, Scandinavia, and Germany itself. Socialist countries, at times isolated intellectually from the West and subjected to quite different ideological climates, have produced individual scholars of brilliance and originality, such as Bence Szabolcsi, János Maróthy, and László Somfai. Jacques Attali, John Blacking, and other contemporary Europeans, approaching music from perspectives that could be loosely labeled neo-Marxist, have had considerable impact on the latest generation of students on the Continent. These various trends all stress contextual study rather than analysis of music as an autonomous object. As Clifford Geertz wrote recently, "It is perhaps only in the modern age and in the West that some people have managed to convince themselves that technical talk about art, however developed, is sufficient to a complete understanding of it; that the whole secret of aesthetic power is located in the formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes, or gestures."¹ These

¹ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interface Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 96.

approaches, which tend to resonate with gender studies, semiology, deconstruction, and other recent trends in interdisciplinary scholarship and literary criticism, have thus far had more impact on younger American scholars than on their elders.

4. Much recent musical scholarship has drawn on methodologies and types of discourse from other academic disciplines. At the same time, scholars from other disciplines are increasingly involved in research and writing on music. Recent contributors to the journal *American Music* come from American studies, musical performance, sociology, composition, English, folklore, and music librarianship; the latest issues of Cambridge University Press's journal *Popular Music* have included articles by authors identifying their primary fields as American cultural history, information technology, ethnomusicology, film studies, linguistics, communications research, criticism and interpretive theory, experimental psychology, English, philosophy, architecture, sociology, music criticism, journalism, Spanish, and, of course, musicology.

Each of these four trends has brought with it a demand for different materials needed for scholarship, and taken together they have expanded almost beyond belief the range and quantity of the reference and research materials that the music librarian might be asked to acquire or provide access to in support of such scholarship.

A bit reluctantly at times, but inexorably, we are being dragged into the electronic global village of the late twentieth century. With microfilming, international computer cataloging of musicological literature, computerized databases, computer scanning of documents, faxing, and similar marvels, musicologists in every part of the country have the possibility of equal access to a growing repository of materials. And it is not difficult to guess where all this is leading. Fifteen years ago I could not have conceived of a library such as the one we now have at Dartmouth, one with a computerized on-line catalog that provides the sole access to information about the collection with far greater detail and flexibility than was possible with the old card catalog. Today it may be difficult to imagine a library where computers provide instant access to a single copy of a book or a piece of music held in a central location such as the Library of Congress—the entire document, not just the title or abbreviated information—but the technology already exists to bring this about. It seems clear that eventually the chief concern of librarians will no longer be with acquisition, but with access.

The study-seminar room at Princeton is still there, but I cannot imagine students preparing for general examinations or selecting dissertation topics today by using only the material contained in that room. It would take a hundred such rooms to house the material that students might need, depending on the directions of their research.

A recent study commissioned and published by The Research Libraries Group in an effort to “obtain a broad view of the shape of each [of eight] disciplines—how its dominant concerns have evolved over the last 15–20 years, and what its new frontiers are—and to determine the relationship between these trends and the data requirements of the discipline”² concludes:

Undoubtedly the most striking trend in the humanities is the spread of interdisciplinary work into the corners of virtually every discipline . . . [appearing] to signal

² Constance C. Gould, principal author, *Information Needs in the Humanities* (Stanford, Cal.: Research Libraries Group, 1988), p. 1.

a re-evaluation of the 19th-century German model on which the present departmental structure is based. A related phenomenon is the increased interest in all aspects of culture, from popular to elite.³

[Although the] focus of musicology has been on “early” music, particularly that of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, later composers and music [are] now receiving more attention . . . [and] the study of . . . American music and the music of other non-European cultures is “beginning to penetrate the musicological establishment.”⁴

The interest in “low” culture as well as “high” is evident in virtually all of the disciplines, and has a decided effect on the types of information researchers seek. In history, scholars seek information about popular culture through materials ranging from comic almanacs to radio shows. In the history of art, the culture producing the art has come under scrutiny. In literature, the “canon” is no longer confined to standard literary works.⁵

Because most ethnic music does not have written scores, ethnomusicologists are wholly dependent on sound recordings. The contemporary genres of film music, jazz, and rock music are increasingly the subject of study; here, too, sound recordings are essential. Videotechnology, applicable to research on both contemporary music and traditional genres such as opera, will be relied upon more in the future.⁶

This institutional reaffirmation of my own observations makes it possible for me to offer the following comments with more conviction.

Relationships among scholarship, librarianship, and technology are far more complex today than they were when I began my schooling, and will become even more complex and interdependent in the future. No longer do scholars define the character and scope of musical research, and librarians then acquire what is necessary to satisfy these needs, with technology helping in this acquisition. Today, instead, music librarians and technology itself are playing an increasingly active role in determining the directions and character of musical research. For one thing, more and more music librarians are themselves trained and practicing scholars, with degrees in musicology or related fields and membership in scholarly societies in addition to the MLA. Furthermore, music librarians have tended to be more concerned with evolving technology than have musicologists, and they have taken important initiatives in adapting this technology to the acquisition of materials in order to provide access to an ever-broadening range of information.

Music librarians also help shape the direction of musical research in the mere assembly and organization of collections, particularly when this is done in the teeth of musicological opinion. Charles Ives lay outside the canon when I was a student, and John Kirkpatrick must have been a lonely figure for many years as he worked his way through the Ives Collection at Yale; but the judgment on Ives has been reversed, and these days one can sometimes find as many musicologists gathered at the Ives Collection as in the reading room of the New York Public Library. It was librarians who first gathered collections of American sheet music, tunebooks, and hymnals of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, and it was music librarians who brought up from basements and other storage areas these materials that were earlier unwanted and unused by musicologists and theorists.

Furthermore, I would argue that certain new modes of musicological research, and even specific projects, have resulted from the available technology itself, rather than from the abstract theorizing of musicologists concerning the discipline’s

³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴ Ibid., p. 40.

⁵ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶ Ibid., p. 44.

development. For example, the vast cataloging project of Renaissance manuscripts at the University of Illinois would have been unthinkable without the technology of microfilming. The recent comprehensive computer cataloging and indexing of American theatre materials held in Baker Library at Dartmouth College—a project initiated by the library staff and supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities—has generated types of research that before would have been inconceivable. Joel Whitburn's various computer-produced compilation-indexes of *Billboard* charts over the years have substantially altered some popular music research agendas in the 1980s. In my own case, I wouldn't have dared to embark on one of my present research projects without having available the databases of several large sheet music collections (including the one at Dartmouth College). Using a small number of keywords, I can search through tens of thousands of American popular songs to identify a large collection of songs belonging to the particular genre that is the focus of my research.

Though the idea did not originate with John Cage, he said it as well as anyone else: "Only the present is fixed; the past is always changing." By the middle of the twentieth century, historical musicology, in league with other academic disciplines, had constructed an impressively reasoned image of the past that *was* in fact relatively fixed, at least in broad outline, with only details to be filled in. Now, at century's end, we are somewhere quite different, much more aware of how little we still know about the past, much more aware of how many additional dimensions and how much more material must be brought to our study of music and musical life.

To sum up, the past ain't what it used to be, and it never was. In order to understand and preserve our musical heritage, scholars and librarians, working together, need to identify every possible source of information pertaining to our musical life, and then use all available technology to acquire or gain access to it—all of it. It's far more complicated and difficult this way, but it's also more fun. And I think if I were beginning my career these days I might choose to be a music librarian.