

Featured Article

What is at Stake in the Politics of Digital Music Archive Access Policies? A Brief Look at Some Evolving Issues.

by Elizabeth Hoffman

If Jorge Luis Borges were brought back to life today, in the second decade of the 21st century, he would no doubt believe that his speculative proposition of a universal library – a library containing every work that had been, or could ever be written – was close to being accomplished in the form of crowd-sourced online libraries that purport to store and catalogue all of the world's knowledge. The cultural implications of these newly evolving structures are clearly vast, but this article seeks to understand them in terms of our collective concepts of Music History – particularly electroacoustic music history. How have crowd-sourced online libraries impacted on electroacoustic music curricula so far, and how in what new ways will they do so in the future? Most importantly, who gets access to these libraries, and how? The politics of

access management is of vital relevance to all computer music composers working with music in recorded form, and to all composers and musicologists working with notated scores - including of experimental contemporary music. It is thus issues of access that I seek to analyze in this brief essay.

Crowd (or group) created libraries (often called “public repositories”) stand in stark contrast to the many single-entity curated digital music collections that exist online, such as Ubuweb. The large number of users who upload materials do so in response to a one-time request, as per a temporally delimited archive creation process; or in response to an ongoing invite, much like Wikipedia's model. In a classic expression of the Web 2.0 paradigm, users are the content providers – albeit working in tandem with the site managers and creators. Such crowd created repositories may be conceived of as digital assemblages with historical or cultural preservation goals, or they may be community clearinghouses for sharing and exchange. Their management and access strategies therefore vary in relation to their goals.

1. Selected comparisons of curatorial strategy and maintenance

What follows is a description of three public repositories for music that each

implement different access models: the Free Music Archive, the Open Music Archive, and the International Music Score Library Project.

1) *The Free Music Archive* (<http://freemusicarchive.org/about>) is a legal charity and it accepts monetary donations in that context. A curated site, its purpose is to foster public access to high quality digital files of legally downloadable new music of all genres, but especially “experimental” music. The FMA does not, therefore, accept all submissions. Its curators include more than a dozen international open-source sound collection and distribution entities. The FMA's principles flow from those that guide its parent, a listener-supported radio station called WFMU (Jersey City, NJ) in 2009. WFMU's Board meetings are open to the public. WFMU is run by a team of publicly acknowledged individuals. FMA's download numbers for particular postings are public.

2) *The Open Music Archive* (<http://www.openmusicarchive.org/>) embodies a radically different concept. It was created by UK sound artists Eileen Simpson and Ben White in 2003 as an ongoing research project to locate, digitize and distribute out-of-copyright recordings. They specialize in archiving other contemporary archives, including installations with historic materials, or

sound documentary efforts. Differently to FMA and IMSLP, the site is fascinating as a musicological resource, offering critical meta-commentary about the nature of recording, preservation, and ownership. This site does not publicly reveal its user base; it promotes its files as knowledge and materiality for further artistic use, which typically manifests in compositional use by its user base. This archive seeks neither membership fees nor donations.

3) *The International Music Score Library Project* (<https://imslp.org/>) is a repository created in 2006 which focuses on digitized scores, although recordings and videos are meaningful components, too. In contrast to the FMA, the IMSLP is arguably more attuned to the past than the present, since it specializes in scores that are in the public domain. Yet it valuably includes 20th and 21st Century composers; Frederic Rzewski, with over a hundred self-uploaded items, is one important example. Scores for mixed music by early tape composers, including Varèse, are also present. It is thus an invaluable educational and scholarly aid – particularly for those whose school libraries may not have a physical score, or for whom properly scanning an oversized score would be a practical inconvenience.

It is worth noting that the owner of the IMSLP decided in 2015 to transform the free access forum into a two-tiered access

system. IMSLP thus now invites members for \$22.-/year; non-members can still access content, but the trade-off is banner advertisements and a 15-second per item download or viewing wait-time. As of this writing, IMSLP has at least one “non-affiliated” portal that does not impose the download wait for non-members – Canada (PML-CA). The IMSLP is now run by a company called Project Petrucci LLC, of Delaware, NJ, USA; and this corporation does encourage monetary donations.

2. A focused look at music access’ political questions

The experience of using an online platform or service for free, only to have this use subject to restrictions or controlled via managed access, is a familiar one with contemporary digital media. Such ‘bait and switch’ business models succeed on the basis that users have already invested time and resources into a particular database, and so will grudgingly accept the shift in access model – but what are the politics of this shift when the content is created by users themselves? The evolution of the IMSLP’s access policies prompt such consideration.

The IMSLP’s maintainance itself is communally based, or ‘bottom up’. Since there is no centralized curation it is arguably the most democratic repository

of these three archives. Anyone may contribute virtually anything so long as the site maintainance specialists do not object on the grounds of intellectual property transgressions, and so long as the item is Music. However, the IMSLP is also the least transparent: no statistics regarding number of item-by-item downloads are available from its undeniably massive archive. In other words, balanced atop the bottom-up processes of curation is an evolving top-down political philosophy and practice. Despite being wholly dependent upon its user base, the site does not advertise its board meetings externally, nor does it reveal any other information about its long term (and recently devised) financial plan to which the IMSLP ties the membership implementation (and, implicitly perhaps, the incorporation). Looking into the future, a researcher of models for community repositories might reasonably ask the following: Does a Digital Music site initiator or manager have an obligation to the user community to ensure perpetuation of the site beyond some theoretical point of the initiator’s personal interest or capacity? And is such an obligation based on: the length of time that the site has been in operation? The size of the user base? The nature of the content in relation to cultural or scientific knowledge? Finally, what are the implications of a public repository becoming privatized?

In December 2015, a comment piece by Norman Lebrecht initiated a long discussion concerning this issue. Two recurring discussion criticisms seem particularly significant to me in relation to the questions posed in this article. The first is the assertion that a co-op has been monetized after the fact, and without offering compensation to those who played a role in the database creation. The second is that the monetization makes use not only of others’ manual labor, but also of their intellectual and private property – in the latter case this was done without their authorization for it to be sold.

Consider a fuller explanation of the second point. While for public domain components the contributions by volunteers are 1) their time and 2) their property, i.e., their digital files; for new music, the contributions are intellectual property that has been ceded to IMSLP “to use ... in a manner similar to a work in the public domain.” (This is the IMSLP’s stipulation for any contributions.)

New music on IMSLP, including the category of arrangements, is often tagged with greater license specificity than is the public domain repertoire. For instance, a “Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial No Derivatives 3.0” provision is common. Monetizing these

uploads after the fact would thus seem to disregard original wishes, the license still applying after the download but not to the download itself.

As a reader of the blogpost will note, there are also numerous comments that are not critical at all. Two focus points are a defense of the “reasonable” nature of a mere 15-second wait time, and an interpretation of the monetization itself as a creative idea. “Let [the initiator] reap the benefit of it.” In sum, a more fine grained analysis of feedback would be required to analyze the demographics of negative, neutral, and positive responders regarding IMSLP’s new access policies.

3. Conclusion

This article has sought to ponder the politics and philosophy of preservation goals and access in public repositories, beyond the explicit or implicit social and economic choices that regulate them. These choices contribute to the shaping of our contemporary digital life – they impact us as a professional community, as individual composers, and as non-specialist users. Through the mediation of public repositories, new notions of authorship, ownership, authenticity, access, canonisation, and value systems are being imagined and implemented. Can privatized sites retain their commitment to the ideologies of openness

and knowledge sharing that characterised the sites when they were public, or are they being fundamentally transformed?

Digital music archives now reach millions of diverse users across the globe. How users respond to particular digital archive models will have profound impacts on how the archives persist and evolve. This in turn will impact on how we teach music courses, how we program concerts, and how we define and tell our histories (as well as Herstories!) Music repositories can contribute to the redefinition of expertise, as less advantaged individuals are granted access to resources that were previously reserved for the wealthy or those with institutional affiliations. Do private access models undo some of the good work achieved by peer-produced models like Wikipedia, or do they improve these services?

Communal archives offer remarkable opportunities for musicians. They have the potential both to educate and to encourage independent thought, cultivating users as cultural participants, social activists, and consumers. What better way to reactivate concert audiences than to encourage online outreach, participation, and cultural engagement?

Footnotes

1. A discussion thread at this link

appeared last year: <http://imslpforums.org/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=8187> [site accessed 2/6/16 - 6/7/16].

2. “Musicians are made to wait as free score site goes pay-for”, attracted a large number of comments early on (the article and its discussion thread may be read in full, here: <http://slippedisc.com/?s=musicians+are+made+to+wait&submit=search>