Patterns of Growth in Public Music Libraries

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Music departments in public libraries grow, as all libraries do, through gifts, bequests, and purchases. Although gifts seem more plentiful than in other subject fields, the building of a good music collection is usually a slow process. Gifts like those of Joshua Bates and A. A. Brown to the Boston Public Library are rare. More often gifts merely duplicate a library’s holdings; or all too frequently, little of practical value remains after trivial and worn items are discarded. Appropriations from tax money are typically inadequate and few libraries are fortunate enough to acquire supplementary funds. The vast quantities of material, available in 1960, in this subject field which knows no national boundaries and goes back in time to preliterate man make selection difficult.

Comparison of the bibliographies in Louisa M. Hooper’s Selected List of Music and Books about Music for Public Libraries, 1909, (32 pages, 2 columns each) with those in L. R. McColvin’s Music Libraries, 1937-38, (362 pages)—and still further with the output of music and phonograph records alone for the years 1953-57 in the quinquennial cumulation of the National Union Catalog—illustrates graphically how the problem of selection has grown in the past fifty years.

At the time Miss Hooper compiled her list, music libraries were in their infancy. Growth, except in a few notable instances, was sporadic with little uniformity of purpose or pattern. Some libraries were concerned with collecting the “popular music of the day,” others with building “well rounded” collections. Other collections began, as at Brooklyn Public Library, with a modest purchase of music for circulation. The original purchase of four hundred volumes in 1882 inspired gifts and further acquisitions, from library funds, selected not by librarians but by “men of wide acquaintance with the works” of noted composers. In Chicago, in 1914, three music critics selected...
the initial collection for the public library. This was intended for "music lovers and amateur performers" rather than professional musicians.7 The librarian of the St. Louis Public Library bought good, easy music that could be read at sight with pleasure by the ordinary music lover in order to encourage reading use of music.8 A variation of these patterns occurred at Pittsburgh where a group of civic-minded citizens bought and presented to the Carnegie Library, when it opened in 1895, the library left by Karl Merz, dean of the music school at the University of Wooster.9 This scholarly collection of about 1,200 volumes consisted mainly of books, monographs, and periodicals and was intended for reference and research. The presentation of the Merz Library inspired other gifts but a circulating collection was not begun until 1912 at which time a prominent organist was asked to select, with "reference to the needs of the average music student," about one thousand volumes of music.10

Despite these somewhat haphazard methods of acquisition, music collections of varying size and quality were to be found in public libraries scattered over the country by 1917. Answers to a questionnaire, sent by the Bureau of Education to 2,849 libraries, indicated an earnest attempt to supply the kinds of materials needed by the libraries' particular publics. Most music collections were administered by general librarians as part of general collections and wide divergence was apparent in holdings. Some libraries adhered to the traditional book. Orchestral scores were available in some libraries; piano arrangements in duet, two-piano or solo form were preferred in others; some libraries stocked both. Chamber music was reported in an amazing number of libraries. Some libraries, as already suggested, included popular music; others did not add "ragtime and undesirable compositions."11 Although decisions about 65- and 88-note player piano rolls were vexatious,12 a few libraries had acquired one or the other or both. Annual budgets where they existed were small. One library spent $5.00 annually; another spent $600 and thought $10,000 would be more nearly adequate.13 From such anomalous beginnings, public music libraries were developed.

In answering the 1917 questionnaire, the majority of library administrators expressed dissatisfaction with existing collections. Dissatisfaction, no doubt, gave impetus to the trend, already started, toward reorganization of musical materials into subject divisions or departments. The appointment of librarians specifically charged with responsibility for music in turn led to formulation of selection policies to insure more systematic development.
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The question most often asked by librarians faced with the prospect of framing a feasible selection policy is how to begin. The most obvious considerations to be taken into account are: the library's musical community, its interests and needs; the library's philosophy about its function in relation to those interests and needs, and the library's budget. Space and staff limitations affect acquisitions but these are administrative problems and will not be discussed here. The music selection policy, with some modifications, usually conforms to the general principles of selection of the institution of which the music library is part.14-16 Instead of enumerating steel mills and fabricating plants and analyzing the economic and social status of the population,17 the music librarian notes the number of symphony orchestras, choral societies, opera companies, public school, college and university music departments. He attends concerts and participates in activities of musical organizations in order to gain insight into interests of nonmusicians as well as musicians. He examines the courses of study offered by the music schools in the area. He studies the inquiries and requests received at the library.

To adjust the diversity of requests to usual library budgets is not easy. The orchestral conductor wants to examine scores of works ranging in period of time from Gabrieli's *Sonata pian' e forte* to Shostakovich's *Symphony no. 11*. The weekend "organist" wants music for the chord organ. The professional "antiqua players" in residence at the university are content with modern reprints of old music but an undergraduate student demands to know why a microfilm copy of William Ballet's manuscript collection of lute music has not been acquired. A violinist about to make an expensive investment asks for all available information on Montagnana violins. The local educational television station needs a recorded version of Copland's *Cat and the Mouse*. A little padding in the string chamber music section brings accusations of favoritism from the wind players.

In determining selection policy, the public music librarian must decide which of such requests can be filled within library objectives and budget. The request for information on Montagnana violins falls within the objective, common to all libraries, of supplying accurate and authoritative information. But few librarians would think that music for chord organ would fill a significant need; anyway the chord organist will go away happy with a song collection that includes chord symbols above the melodic line. A public library in a city where there are a number of orchestras—professional, amateur or school—would expect to supply the conductor's request. Not only
conductors but other musicians, students and audience use orchestral scores. On the other hand, orchestral parts (also multiple copies of choral works) are eliminated from buying programs of most libraries. Apart from the fact that the cost of providing an adequate representation of works would be prohibitive, performing organizations tend to buy works which they repeat frequently and can easily obtain those scheduled for occasional performance from commercial rental agencies.

Besides commercial sources of supply, holdings of other libraries are considered in formulating selection policies. The older practice of developing collections individually has given way to cooperation to avoid wasteful duplication. Pittsburgh, for example, gives scant attention to hymns and hymnology because of the excellent collection at the Western Theological Seminary, and to Foster material because of the Josiah K. Lilly collection of Fosteriana in the University of Pittsburgh. Conversely, because none of the five college and university music departments have substantial music libraries, the public library has agreed, within limits, to assume responsibility for research materials. Informal consultation by telephone prevents duplication of costly items. However, duplication even on an intra-library basis may be deliberate if circumstances warrant it, as in New York City, where saturation with musical materials is impossible. Almost all items in the circulating Music Library at Fifty-Eighth Street are duplicated in the reference Music Division at Forty-Second Street.14

Most public libraries agree that the collecting of incunabula, books before 1800, original manuscripts, letters and documents except those of local significance can best be left to those libraries whose main function is research. Facsimiles of manuscripts where they are needed are within the range of smaller budgets, are just as useful to most practicing musicians and students, and can be used without restrictions.

The majority of public librarians do not collect popular songs or sheet music in quantity. The tendency is to confine purchases in this area to vocal scores of musical comedies and volumes of songs, e.g., The Rodgers and Hammerstein Song Book, and inexpensive compilations such as those published by Harms, Remick, Witmark, and others. Lester Asheim18 suggests a kind of musical Farmington plan for substandard musical materials because of their potential value for future research but as far as popular music is concerned a number of large collections are preserved in libraries in various locations. The
collection at Grosvenor Library in Buffalo, New York, is well known. The public libraries at Indianapolis and Minneapolis also have large collections.\textsuperscript{19}

The aim in building a public music library, in 1960, is not likely to be, as in 1917, the well rounded collection. The result may well be something resembling that somewhat amorphous concept because the public librarian tends to build around a core of basic repertory—a nucleus of works that have withstood the test of time.\textsuperscript{14-16} In effect, the framework around which a public library is developed is essentially the same as that for the college or university music library. The difference is primarily one of emphasis related to the differences in publics. Emphasis in circulating collections in public libraries is usually on practical editions of music since 1700. This includes music for solo instruments; chamber music combinations; miniature scores for orchestral works; for voice and combinations of voices; and for combinations of voices and instruments. Particular attention is paid in some libraries to contemporary and American composers. Reprints of representative examples of music written before 1700 are bought.\textsuperscript{14,20}

Importance of the work, potential usefulness and quality of the edition are the main criteria by which decisions on individual works are made. Importance alone, as McColvin\textsuperscript{21} points out, is not sufficient reason for adding a title—even within the limits of basic repertory. For instance, the Brahms cello and piano sonatas are among staples in the cellist’s repertory but if no one in a library’s public can play or read them it would be futile to add them.

Public libraries that make some provision for research buy for the reference collection historical, scholarly, and critical editions, monumental sets and collected works of at least the major composers as funds permit. Pittsburgh buys such materials from special funds, not from tax appropriations.

Practice varies considerably in the provision of phonograph records. Pittsburgh, for example, provides both a reference and circulating collection. In the reference collection, intended for serious study and research and supported entirely by income from endowment funds, representation of all periods, forms and media is the general aim. The circulating collection, intended and used mainly by non-musicians and partially supported by tax funds, is less comprehensive and includes solo, chamber, symphonic choral, operatic and folk music, a small amount of musical comedy and jazz, and a few histori-
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cal anthologies. As in printed music, some emphasis is given contemporary and American music in an effort to broaden the musical interests of library users. In the public library of Des Moines, Iowa, the circulating collection of records is the comprehensive one; the reference collection consists of 78 rpm recordings and is enlarged only by gift.22

As for literature—at Pittsburgh—musical bibliographies, thematic catalogs, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and indexes in English and foreign languages which are used extensively in reference work, selection and cataloging are added as they become available. Materials of local historical value are added indiscriminately—the aim being inclusive rather than critical. To the circulating collection, analytical, critical, historical, and theoretical material, biographies, opera plot books, the better appreciation books are added as they are published if needed and if they meet library standards. Files of 230 periodicals begin with the year 1798 and include a notable number of early American journals. Currently, sixty periodicals including scholarly and foreign journals and some of the more popular ones such as Musical America and Down Beat are received.

At Pittsburgh, when possible, an attempt has been made in building the collection to establish and maintain correlation among the different kinds of materials. For example, a member of the staff was able to give a lecturer preparing a talk on African music descriptive discussion in books, examples of primitive melodies in notation, and authentic recordings made on location to illustrate her lecture. A young violinist preparing for a major performance of a modern concerto studied critical analyses of the work found in books, and listened with score before him to a recording made by a recognized artist, to reassure himself on matters of tempi and interpretation. The problem of Pythagorean intervals was solved for a young student by combining book explanation with a phonograph record demonstrating the size of such intervals.

The majority of public librarians consider flexibility an essential characteristic of a selection policy. Changing interests of the library’s community and widening horizons of the parent institution are usually reflected in the emphases in the music library’s buying program. A music library may have begun, as in Pittsburgh, with the purpose of serving mainly that segment of the population within its immediate vicinity. Even before free service was formally extended to county residents, musical resources were being used by many suburbanites
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who came to the library. Since 1956, books about music and scores have been available through bookmobile service and through interlibrary loan to small libraries in the county. This extension of service was absorbed relatively easily by adding copies of books and music already in the collection. At the moment, though the possibility of formal state organization in Pennsylvania seems remote, the music library finds itself serving many users who come from various points of Southwestern Pennsylvania. A good illustration of the implications of cooperation within a state system is furnished by the cosponsorship of the North Carolina State Library and the Randolph Public Library of an interlibrary loan collection of music, books, and recordings for the use of all libraries of North Carolina. A practicable long range selection policy takes into account the possibility of such extensions of service.

As for finances, these are not necessarily the responsibility of the director or the board of trustees. Where the music library has become an integral part of its community, aid from the outside can be stimulated. Even in the Pacific Northwest, an area in which endowment funds are said to be rare, the Music Department of the Library Association of Portland has inspired several grants and bequests. Friends of the Library groups are fairly common but Friends of a particular department of a library seem to be less usual. Pittsburgh has a Friends of the Music Library who, in the twenty-one years of their existence, have contributed almost $15,000 for the purchase of new materials for the music library. Organized originally for the purpose of raising funds to buy for the music division, the library left by C. N. Boyd, Pittsburgh scholar and organist, the group has continued to work in the interests of the division. More recently, the library received a bequest of $114,495 from the estate of E. C. Bald, Jr., a library borrower who was interested in all phases of the music division's work. Income from this bequest has enabled the library to purchase collected editions, monumental sets and other expensive items, and to enlarge both the reference and circulating collections of phonograph records.

Finally, a traditional objective of libraries—that of providing the right book, and in this case, also the right score and the right recording at the right time for the right user—cannot be achieved without adequate funds. A sympathetic director will stretch the music library's budget as best he can if he is convinced that the library and its public will gain thereby.
References

9. Documents pertaining to the purchase of the Karl Merz Musical Library, including subscription list, bill of sale, etc. Pittsburgh [1890].
17. Ibid., p. 1.
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