Services

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Most public libraries offer something in the way of books and other materials relating to music and the fine arts. What materials are the most popular, and can any conclusions be reached concerning what is appropriate? What are the special problems of acquiring, organizing, housing, handling, circulating and holding on to these materials? Are they any worse than the problems associated with other types of library materials? What role do these materials play in the total picture of a public library's program?

This article will explore some of these issues, starting with a description of current collecting patterns of a cross section of public libraries, followed by discussion of some of the problems, including staffing, and concluding with some opinions regarding the future of these materials in the public library picture.

**PHONORECORDINGS**

Are phonograph records a routine item in public libraries? Apparently they are. Of 559 Illinois libraries reporting statistics in 1973, 384, or 68.4 percent, have records in collections ranging from 1 to over 12,000. Of these districts, only 165, or 29.5 percent, have populations of over 10,000.

In order to get a broader picture, the author devised a highly unscientific questionnaire which he mailed to 150 arbitrarily selected public libraries in the 48 contiguous continental United States. To his amazement 120, or 80 percent, responded. Many of the questions were perhaps over-simplistic, but this was deliberate, since it seemed that a brief, simple sort of questionnaire might elicit a better response than a long, very detailed, analytical document. Size of population served ranged from roughly 33,000 to just under 3 million. Small libraries were deliberately excluded, since it seemed likely that one might find a

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high proportion of phonorecordings, but not much else. What was wanted was a test of the range of available materials, more likely found in larger institutions.

For purposes of this article, the 120 respondents were broken down into five groups of population served:

1. 33,000–49,999
2. 50,000–99,999
3. 100,000–499,999
4. 500,000–999,999
5. 1,000,000 and above

The largest number of libraries, 114, or 95 percent, hold classical music recordings in some form (discs, tapes, or cassettes), which was not surprising. What was perhaps startling was the solid percentage of libraries with some of the materials which most librarians have traditionally considered to be ephemera: current popular music (81 percent), current jazz (75 percent), rock and country-western (72.5 percent each). Playing equipment is circulated by 14 percent.

Without going into endless statistics, it might be useful to mention at least a few additional figures. Circulating recordings of some type are held by 112 libraries (the others are reference collections). It might seem that larger libraries would offer more in the way of variety in the record collection. For example, in group 1, five out of five offer circulating records; in group 3, 63 of 64, or 98 percent, offer them. In addition to the nearly universal classical recordings, group 1 offers popular (all five of the libraries); and jazz and country-western (three out of five). In group 3, nearly all have classical; 78 percent have popular; and 70 percent have jazz and country-western. In group 5, seven out of eight have classical; six have popular and jazz; and five have country-western. Folk and ethnic materials show similar figures and relationships. It would appear, then, that size of community alone does not govern breadth of selection. There are, of course, factors which can distort the picture (e.g., financial inequalities, presence of collections in other community institutions); still, the breadth of selection would appear to be encouraging.

PRINTED MUSICAL MATERIALS

Recordings may be the glamour items which dominate the musical scene in the eyes of most public library staffs and patrons, but books on musical theory, harmony, composition, etc., are nearly universal—106
libraries, or 88.3 percent, circulate them; most of the rest have these in noncirculating collections, or do not admit to having “a substantial number”—surely they have a few. Similarly, 112, or 93 percent, circulate musical biographies; again, most of the others have noncirculating items. A substantial number—80.1 percent—offer reference books in some quantity. Musical manuscripts are limited to the larger libraries, most of them in groups 4 and 5. Miniature scores are commonest in group 3. Current sheet music is well down on the list: only 37 libraries, or 31 percent, buy it. Oral history about and examples of local folk music are almost nonexistent. A handful of libraries have tapes or cassettes in this area.

MUSIC SERVICES

Not surprisingly, the most common form of music service is that of gathering and providing information on community musical activities (94 percent); 56.7 percent claim to offer specialized reference service; 42.5 percent hold concerts, usually recorded, in the library; a scant 5 percent hold concerts outside the library, mostly in their own gardens. About 33 percent have listening rooms; most of the others have some sort of listening stations. Ten libraries have practice rooms, usually equipped with pianos.

Statistics of libraries’ holdings and services prove nothing about the state of music in public libraries today. This is clear from visiting libraries in several parts of the country; some have substantial collections with little or no visible service, while others manage to offer a great deal with small staffs and small collections. Generally speaking, the size and depth of collections seen in recent years and the visible use of these collections is impressive. It can scarcely be questioned that books on music and recordings play a major role in the borrowing habits of young adults and adults. Whether this is a permanent part of the public library scene, or a product of the prosperous 1960s that is hanging on into the sagging 1970s only to be abandoned in the face of rising costs and decreasing budgets, remains to be seen.

FINE ARTS PRINTED MATERIALS

Nearly all of the sampled libraries claim to have collections of books, circulating and noncirculating, on the history of art, architecture, and related fields; individual artists; art techniques; folk crafts; costume; films and film-making, and still photography and picturetaking. The percentage range among the population groups is from 89 to 97.5.
Curiously, only about two-thirds claim to subscribe to any significant number of art, architecture, or photographic periodicals. Most have at least one, but a few have none. Museum catalogs, often the most informative publications on art topics, are to be found in less than 40 percent of the libraries surveyed. Auction catalogs are even scarcer, although both tend to be found in the larger libraries. One factor which probably has a bearing on these holdings is the presence, especially in larger cities, of art museums which have libraries of varying size which traditionally collect catalogs, making it unnecessary for the public library to do so.

FINE ARTS VISUALS

Circulating collections of framed art prints are now to be found in some 70 percent of the libraries; also, a handful have reference collections of prints. The concentration here is in the 100,000-1,000,000 population groups, with the smaller libraries presumably unable to afford them, and the larger ones being in cities with museums which offer the service. Unframed prints are also held in nearly one-half of the libraries. Slides are disappointingly scarce, with just under 40 percent circulating them, and under 6 percent having reference collections. The highest concentration is in group 3, with the smallest and largest libraries ignoring them almost entirely. This seems to be an odd and unfortunate oversight. It might be pointed out that gifts from local travelers who frequently photograph buildings, sculpture, museum treasures, etc., are probably easier to come by than most librarians have realized.

Photographic prints are held by about 15 percent, and films on art subjects are circulated in about 33 percent. Three libraries lend or sell artists' materials; one provides them for use in the library.

FINE ARTS SERVICES

More than half claim to offer specialized reference services. Only about 75 percent mount art displays of various sorts; 85 percent try to keep up on local fine arts events. One-third offer lectures on art topics, and a surprising 21 percent offer instruction of some sort in arts and crafts. One library maintains studio space for artists.

Again, the quality of service offered varies widely from community to community. A community arts center, or a museum with a strong program, can make much of a library's program supplementary at
best, and perhaps even unnecessary except in terms of collections of books, journals, etc.

PROBLEMS

Music and fine arts materials and services present a number of problems, as noted above.

Acquisitions. With so many different types of materials available, librarians responsible for their selection and acquisition are faced with the necessity of being familiar with many special suppliers, in addition to the usual list of publishers, jobbers and bookstores. In at least one area, that of phonorecords, there are jobbers, some of whom offer excellent service at good discounts, offering a wide range of domestic and imported discs and tapes.

In the other areas, slides for example, there are only one or two major suppliers, and if what is needed is not in their catalogs, a librarian must seek out specialists. This can mean hours of poring over the advertisements in journals, or much inquiry among specialists or art librarians.

Costs are another factor. Everything is going up, but prices of good reproductions of paintings, drawings, sculpture, etc., are soaring. Phonodiscs have been rising at a lower rate than some other products, but a rapidly developing shortage of polyvinal chloride is likely to shoot them up faster and farther. Journal subscriptions have skyrocketed, art books have no ceiling.

Another question concerns replacement of old, beloved books, recordings, and reproductions. How long does one keep replacing a Beatles record, or “I Can Hear It Now,” or “The Blue Boy”? Too many replacements can cut deeply into already shrinking budgets.

Organization. Arguments still range among music and art librarians concerning descriptive cataloging and classification of music, recordings, and art objects. A recent effort by a group of Canadian librarians offers some usable solutions, but one doesn’t find much acceptance of it in libraries in the United States. Instead, there are scores of schemes, ranging from pure accession numbers to Dewey decimal or more elaborate classification. Some recording collections are filed by manufacturers’ numbers, as in record shops. Holdings can then be ticked off in Schwann catalogs. Accession numbers indicate the most recent acquisitions, which is appreciated by the home tapers who prefer new, fresh discs.
Housing and Control. Whatever decisions are made about holdings, there remains the question of housing all of these disparate materials, and the increasingly irksome matter of retaining control of them.

Some institutions, mostly community colleges, put all materials in their regular Dewey or LC place on the shelf, regardless of format. This may solve the classification problem, but it raises questions concerning stack space. Certainly there is something to be said for having all materials on a topic together. In any case, some provision must be made for housing all of these special materials, and many of them call for large spaces or expensive and bulky cabinets.

Another problem with these materials is theft. One nearby public library recently took inventory of its record collection and found an appalling rate of loss. The result was a decision to buy extra large filing cabinets, put the records in specially made envelopes in the cabinets, and put only empty jackets on the open shelf. Other libraries have done essentially this, but have put the records on shelving behind a control desk. Still others have jackets and records behind the desk. In any case, some sort of special, expensive handling seems indicated.

Even large art prints can be sneaked out of libraries. Building layout, with poorly located supervisory desks, aids in thefts of all materials; small, overworked staffs don’t have time to observe everything that goes by.

Many of the materials discussed require not only special storage facilities, but at least minimal humidity and heat controls. In addition, almost all of them require cleaning or inspection for damage.

Equipment. Record players frequently burn out, or lose their styli. Sometimes whole players disappear. In addition to problems of maintenance and the popularity of the item making it vulnerable to theft, there is the basic problem of selection. A glance at an audio magazine or a catalog of an equipment vendor or a visit to a sound equipment showroom can make the uninitiated librarian gasp. Even with the assistance of the Library Technology Program and other guides to audiovisual equipment, there is too much to choose from, and much of what is available lacks the durability that public library usage demands. Slide and film projectors, tape recorders and cassette players, still and motion picture cameras each have their own problems, including lack of standardization. The fine arts librarian of today needs to know something about them all.

Staffing. Who takes care of these special areas in the public libraries
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questioned? Nine, or 7.5 percent, have separate music departments; nine have separate fine arts departments. Fifty-nine, or 49 percent, have combined music and fine arts departments. Fifty-two, or 43 percent, are separately staffed. These are staffed by various combinations of professionals (0 to 8) and nonprofessionals (0 to 10). Of the libraries which do not have separate or separately staffed departments, 19 have from 1 to 6 FTE professionals and/or 1 to 3 nonprofessionals assigned to work particularly with these materials.

Size of library seems to have little to do with whether there is a separate department, or whether there is a separate professional or nonprofessional staff, except in the smallest size group.

The large amount of clerical detail, cleaning and inspection of materials, and circulation routine would seem to dictate that much should be done by clerical or student personnel. But selection and reference assistance remain professional activities which should be assigned to staff with special training if at all possible. The fact is that most public library fine arts and music staff have little or no special training and bring only their own interest and enthusiasm to the work. Deplorable as this may seem, it would seem to be a permanent part of the picture.

THE FUTURE

The problems summarized above lead naturally to some consideration of the future of music and fine arts activities in public libraries. Here one immediately trips over one of the most sacred of all cows in the sector: public library services traditionally have been free. When phonodiscs first appeared in public libraries, most charged modest fees. There was always a nagging feeling that this was somehow not quite the right thing, and nearly all gave up fees after records became a commonplace. Similarly, most charged for art prints in the early days. During the years of increased library funding, rental fees for the most part were greatly reduced or completely abandoned.

Now many boards and directors are wondering about the wisdom or even the propriety of this. Some argue that all materials, in whatever physical form, are useful to the public, and that all should be free. Others argue that books, periodicals, newspapers, etc., are the basic library materials, that recordings, prints, slides, etc., are expensive luxuries, and of interest to a smaller proportion of the population, and that they should be lent on a fee basis. Some libraries report that their collections of musical and fine arts materials are self-supporting, at
least in terms of the cost of the materials. Even so, fees would at least
make some contribution toward the added staff and equipment
charges and to their share of the total overhead.

In the face of rising costs and declining, stabilized, or insufficiently
increased budgets, the fee idea becomes more attractive, and a number
of libraries have recently reinstituted or increased fees. Sometimes
there is a clamor that the charging of a fee will seriously deprive some
patrons of the use of collections; no doubt some will be deprived. In
one situation where this has recently taken place, the only comment
from patrons has been favorable; they feel that this is a responsible
measure to meet the problem without attempting to get additional tax
support. There would seem to be a degree of smugness by the library
indicated here. That position is bolstered by the observation that
one must pay—and much more—for other forms of entertainment
(concerts, theatre, sports events, CATV), and that the library is
justified in joining those groups. A month’s loan of a handsome
reproduction of a great painting for $0.50 would appear to be a
bargain, especially if held up against the now-routine $2 for a grade B
movie.

In viewing the future, one must also look to the quality of the
offerings. Certainly one can see no decline in the number of available
fine musical and other recorded performances. The quality of art
reproductions seems to improve constantly. If libraries can attract and
encourage staff members with specialist backgrounds in the arts to
select and service the collections, the future will be bright indeed,
although there is again the matter of budgets.

In viewing the future, then, one is inclined to believe that public
libraries will continue to offer specialized as well as general materials in
all of the arts, and may even increase the breadth and depth of their
holdings. But it is probable that as prices soar, salaries rise, and other
costs of operation increase, more and more libraries will charge fees or
higher fees. This will be done with reluctance, it will create hardships
for some borrowers, and it will create real public relations problems in
some situations.

It would seem obvious that public libraries must get more involved
with their local arts groups than most presently are. The support of the
real enthusiasts may be the deciding factor in whether or not budget
lines for arts materials and programs will survive. Libraries and arts
groups are usually friendly, and in some cities they work closely
together in developing community programs. But in all too many
communities, all of these groups tend to go in their own directions,
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seemingly oblivious to the need to unite in a common cause. It will take
more than rapidly rising circulation rates to convince city councils and
other funding bodies of the need for continuing support of arts
materials.

References
