



Finding the Right Notes: An Observational Study of Score and Recording Seeking Behaviors of Music Students



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ABSTRACT

There are several complexities inherent in searching for music materials and many possible starting points both within the library and outside of it. This study uses task observation as well as interviews to determine how undergraduate and graduate music students undertake finding music scores and recordings in an academic setting. It explores what tools and search strategies music students employ, and whether they are more disposed to use YouTube or Google rather than trying to make sense of the wide array of choices and interfaces libraries offer. Results of this study show that context of the search and the end use of the materials are important factors in how and where students search.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1984 Jeannette Drone conducted an observational study of how patrons in the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign Music Library found materials via the library card catalogs. At the time the library had separate catalogs for books/music (scores) and for sound recordings, the latter of which included a manufacturers' file (arranged by recording label). She found that even though there were few access points by which patrons could search, 23% of the 200 searches observed were unsuccessful and half of those were because the user didn't know how to use the catalogs (Drone, 1984).

Thirty years later, there are no longer just a small number of controlled access points to information in an online catalog, nor does our collection only include physical items. The University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign has, at last count, two catalog interfaces (classic Voyager and the next-generation VUFind), a consortial catalog, and WorldCat. In addition to these OPAC options, our patrons have access to a commercial discovery layer (Primo),¹ a local federated search tool (Easy Search), a local federated search tool with a module specific to the Music and Performing Arts Library (MPAL Easy Search), and many subscription score and audio/video streaming resources with their own interfaces. Our catalog includes MARC records for many of the online audio tracks available in via our subscription tools. All of these can be used with varying degrees of efficiency to find physical and online scores and/or recordings in our collections. Finally, there are many sources beyond the library

for finding and accessing scores and recordings, some of which, like YouTube, students become accustomed to using well before they come to college. Given the variety of tools for finding music materials, librarians cannot assume that the library is college students' usual initial starting point.

Furthermore, searching for art music (i.e., not popular music) presents numerous challenges stemming from the presence of multiple languages, formats, generic titles, keys, and work numbers. This study uses direct observational methods in addition to interviews to investigate how undergraduate and graduate music students undertake finding music scores and recordings in an academic setting given these complexities and the plethora of starting points. It explores what tools and search strategies music students employ, and whether they are more disposed to use YouTube or Google rather than trying to make sense of the wide array of choices and interfaces libraries offer. The results of this study provide quantitative and qualitative data, which though small in scale, can be used to formulate larger-scale studies in this area. An understanding of students' information seeking behaviors will allow music librarians to improve instruction and reference services and provide input to systems librarians and vendors for building better tools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some articles have discussed music discovery through the lens of the librarian. These are useful overviews of the tools and the issues involved, but at times they have made assumptions about what users will or won't do when searching, or what they want in a search tool (Breckbill, 2012; Hooper, 2012; Majors & Mantz, 2011; Newcomer, 2011). Breckbill clearly outlined some of the shortcomings found in

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¹ Primo was just in Beta at this point and was available from the Main Library's Gateway, but was/is not linked from the MPAL website.

discovery systems when looking for music. Chief among them is the frequently inability (even by seasoned searchers) to retrieve records for all iterations and manifestations of a work in a single search (Breckbill, 666). While she equated this as a problem with discovery layers, it can be a problem with catalogs as well, especially those that don't offer a browseable author/title list as a results option.

Other music-related information seeking studies to date have relied on asking students, either via surveys or interviews, about their search habits, which tools they use, and/or which material formats they prefer. Dougan's (2012) study, "Information Seeking Behaviors of Music Students," which surveyed students about their information seeking choices, found that students use the library catalog, YouTube, and many other music-specific Internet sites. In her 2013 study examining music students' use of YouTube, Lai found that, "When preparing for lessons/rehearsals 81% of respondents indicat(ed) that they would intuitively go to YouTube first" (Lai, 2013) and only "44 percent (of the music students) preferred the library's multimedia collection to YouTube" (Lai, 2013). However, she found that when using media for assignments and papers, the students had a stronger preference for library collections (Lai, 2013). Clark's (2013) survey study examining students' format preferences found that

Performing arts students prefer to access some types of information (such as books and scores) in a traditional format, but prefer journals and audio recordings electronically. ... video material access were split, with 51% preferring print materials over 46% desiring web-based reference tools. While Kent State University does not offer wide access to streaming video in the performing arts, 55% of participants preferred to get their video online and 41% preferred DVDs (Clark, 300).

While there is useful information to be gleaned from both librarian perspectives and survey studies, it is also beneficial to see whether what music students say they do is any different from what they actually do and whether it at all differs from what non-music students do (i.e., is music really so special after all?). Articles such as Barrett (2005) and Nicholas, Huntington, Jamali, Rowlands, and Fieldhouse (2009) present findings of information seeking studies done with graduate and undergraduate students, respectively.

Both catalogers (Leazer, 1992) and users (Hume, 1995) agree that music often benefits from keyword searches because the information needed is often in a contents note (or sometimes an added entry), or another field that may not be included in subject searches. In addition, given the frequency with which musical works have informal nicknames, titles in foreign languages, and/or generic titles like "Sonata No. 1," successful music searches frequently combine elements from the composer name and title. Although librarians understand the advantages of using more complex search techniques, college students (whether music majors or not) generally do not approach searching this way, as observed by Asher, Duke, and Wilson (2013). "Students treated almost every search box like a Google search box, utilizing simple keyword searches in 81.5% (679/829) of the searches observed. This did not vary much by the search tool the student used..." (Asher & Wilson, 473). This is also witnessed in a music-specific study by Snyder (2010), who when looking at how graduate students and faculty approached their library's new next-generation OPAC found,

To the surprise of the interviewer, participants did not immediately attempt to determine the uniform title of Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition in order to generate an exhaustive list of manifestations of that work. However, when asked subsequently if they were familiar with the term "uniform title," all of them responded affirmatively and gave succinct and fairly accurate descriptions of the purpose of uniform titles (Snyder, 75).

This finding is worth noting because it illustrates the fact that searchers will often not use all of the information available to them

when searching. At times this can be because librarians have counseled users to "keep it simple," but graduates students should know when more specific information might improve their searches. Thomas's (2011) user task study revealed, "two of the participants independently mentioned that when searching for recordings of music works, they normally search YouTube first, and only search in the library catalog if they are unable to find what they need on YouTube" (Thomas, 253).

Matson and Shelley (2013) analyzed how non-music major students in a history of rock music class searched for, found, and purchased a popular music recording in the context of a class assignment. 83% of the students began online, and 40% of these started not at a music-retailer site but instead started with sites like search engines, Pandora, or Spotify (Matson & Shelley, 221). In the end, 28% used a physical store (Matson & Shelley, 223). Students also stated that their behavior would have been very different, with YouTube as a primary tool, if they had only been looking to listen to the recording and not purchase it (Matson & Shelley, 225).

METHODOLOGY

Ten undergraduate and five graduate students majoring in music were recruited via signs posted in the Music Building. Tweets asking for volunteers were sent from the MPAL Twitter account, which displays on our homepage—the default screen on MPAL's computers. Participants received a \$20 coffee shop gift card for their time. A student from the local graduate program in library science was hired and trained to moderate the user tests and interviews so that students were not intimidated by being observed by a librarian.² This study received approval from the campus IRB office and was conducted in the spring of 2013. The five graduate level participants included one Masters student in performance, one student in the musicology PhD program, and three in the DMA performance program. The ten undergraduate participants included four juniors (three in music education and one doubling in music education and performance), and six sophomores (four in music education, one in music performance, and one doubling in music education and performance). A small participant group allowed the data collected to be fully analyzed, which would not have been possible with a large participant group. And although this is not a usability test, the principle of only needing to test with a certain number of users (Nielsen, 2000) before patterns begin to emerge can also be applied here, as seen in user tests like Novotny (2004).

The first part of the study involved observation of task-based user tests in which participants were encouraged to use whatever tools and processes they would normally use to find scores and recordings for school. The tests were recorded via Camtasia so as to track mouse clicks and typing, as well as to capture "think aloud" commentary that participants were encouraged to share. Students received a printed list of the items they were to find, and were not told where to begin, what tools they could use, or what specific format they had to find (e.g., they were directed to find a recording, but not that it had to be a CD or couldn't be online). They could choose which browser to open and on which site to start. Students were encouraged to search until they found an item that would be acceptable to them for use in a class assignment or for their performance studio, if applicable. They were not restricted in the amount of time they could take. The questions ranged across types of music (classical, jazz, world, and musical theater), and included five known-item searches and one broader search (folk music of Thailand), and included requests to find audio, video, audio or video, instrumental parts, and vocal scores.

The session recordings were analyzed to determine 1) which tools students chose to use and in what order they used these tools (i.e., was the library catalog a last resort, or did students start there, but abandon it in frustration?), 2) how many searches/steps they

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