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Not Just Sheet Music: Describing Print and Manuscript Music in Archives and Special Collections

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NOT JUST SHEET MUSIC: DESCRIBING PRINT AND MANUSCRIPT MUSIC IN ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

BY ADRIANA P. CUERVO AND ERIC HARBEISON

ABSTRACT: The professional literature on archives and music librarianship in the United States only tangentially addresses the management of music archival records. Archives and special collections libraries often find print and manuscript music amongst their holdings, even if they are not music-specific repositories. Because printed music material is a proxy for the work and not the work itself, adequate description of these materials may require more granularity than archivists customarily provide. Existing standards for archival description require more work before they will describe music as easily as they describe text. The article offers descriptive examples for typical manifestations of musical works.

Introduction

The professional literature on archives and music librarianship in the United States only tangentially addresses the management of music archival records. Archives and special collections libraries collect the papers and records of composers, performers, scholars, and professional musical organizations and yet, the archivist or librarian faced with acquiring, arranging, describing, and preserving these materials has little published help in overcoming the unique descriptive problems music presents. The music library community faced similar descriptive issues, and developed a significant body of literature that addresses the inherent descriptive and access needs of printed and manuscript music, yet very little has permeated through to the archives community. The development of such guidelines and best practices for describing and providing access to print and manuscript music materials in archives will enable archivists to be better stewards of an important segment of our cultural heritage.

Archives and special collections libraries often find print and manuscript music amongst their holdings, even if they are not music-specific repositories. A university archives may, for example, have papers of a retired faculty member who happened to
be a composer, or a historical society might hold the records of the town’s municipal band. Finding sections of extraneous materials within a collection or repository is a common occurrence, and when faced with the task of providing access to these, the archivist with little or no knowledge of music may find the choosing of meaningful descriptive terminology to be very difficult. In this article, we examine the nature of descriptive practice for print and manuscript music materials within current archives literature, and offer descriptive examples for typical manifestations of musical works. In doing so, we hope to create awareness of the special descriptive needs of music materials, to provide examples for future use, and to demonstrate the need for further work in this area.

Unlike textual materials, description of the music materials does not constitute a description of the work itself, but rather description of surrogates. Music is intangible: the sound waves it comprises cannot themselves be put into acid-free boxes. Any printed or manuscript music materials held by archives are proxies for the actual music. In addition to printed music materials (ultimately, nothing more than instructions for creation of the sound waves), such proxies may include sound recordings¹ (reproductions of the sound waves created in one performance) and even music instruments (tools for creating the sound waves).² But since these materials are not the music itself, they are an incomplete picture of a work. While an archivist may describe a score to a given work, she is still not describing the music directly.

Though this may seem a trifle, it is relevant to the information-seeking process: the manuscript of a book can be read and fully comprehended by anyone with knowledge of the relevant language, can be described using the text itself, and can be scanned and searched using full text searching. Even among trained musicians, the ability to fully “hear” a musical work by observing a score varies considerably. The music notation cannot itself be used to describe the work in any useful way. Though progress is being made in this area,³ even digitized music cannot yet reliably be searched in its native written language (music notation). The problem is compounded when describing recorded music, instruments, and other music materials. The metadata and descriptive terms that the archivist attaches to the material are still the only effective means by which music materials may be searched.

Descriptive Practice of Music Archival Materials: A Review of the Literature

Music catalogers in libraries can count on a myriad of resources on the description of music materials⁴ that span from localized practice to the latest developments on resource description for metadata standards, but these focus on the efficiency and widespread adoption of machine-readable cataloging (MARC) for describing their holdings. Archivists, on the other hand, do not have the breadth of specialized literature that can aid in the description of printed and manuscript music materials, let alone rely on the descriptions created at other repositories. They can, however, start by correctly identifying the types of materials held in their collections and assigning more specific terms than just “sheet music.”
Where does the archival profession stand and how has the literature in this subject documented best practices for managing and providing access to music collections? While there are a few articles that address particular concerns of music collections in an archival setting, the existing archives and music librarianship literature does not adequately support the work of archivists and music librarians that are working with these types of materials. The existing literature can be divided, roughly, into four broad categories: collection descriptions, project-based reports, archival theory and practice, and music-specific explorations of archival practice. Oftentimes there is overlap between two categories: a project-based report that also announces a newly created digital archive, for example. The most useful category for this article, music-specific theory and practice, had by far the least significant coverage.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of articles studying music archives are collection descriptions, where a repository might announce a “newly opened” collection, describing its contents, its potential for wide impact on scholarship, and very often placing the collection in the context of the creator’s life and works. Although these articles are common in both library and archival literature and often are important in generating scholarly interest in the creator of the collection, they are rarely useful in addressing the descriptive process beyond identifying the location of an archivist who might have dealt with similar problems. Project-based reports and case studies, illustrating specific ventures undertaken by different institutions, can be more useful in that they are more likely to describe specific tools or techniques used. They report on specific projects carried out by the institution (digitization, preservation treatment, etc.) and how the archivist or librarian overseeing the project addressed problems and solved unforeseen obstacles to the project’s completion.

The articles in the third category, introduction to archival theory and practice, are written as introductory pieces that outline these core issues for nonpractitioners. Heather MacNeil’s article in *Fontes Artis Musicae* takes a closer look at archival description, starting out by defining the concepts of provenance, respect des fonds, and original order before delving into the particulars of subject indexing and archival description. Although it is archival in nature, it is written for an audience of librarians, and spends more time explaining concepts that archivists already understand, than it does exploring the complexities of describing and providing access to music collections.

Studies in the final category, exploration of archival problems in the context of a music collection, are the most valuable for the purposes of this project—these articles discuss the archival enterprise (appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and access) for music and performing arts collections, with an audience of archivists in mind. Richard Smiraglia’s influential book on music cataloging is, so far, the only work in our literature search that is relevant to description of print and manuscript music in archives. In this book, he crosswalks music cataloging best practices to content standards such as the *Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition* (AACR2) and *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (APPM). The latter is, by far, the most comprehensive work on the description of music materials; however, Smiraglia’s discussion of archival materials is limited to collection-level description, and so is more useful to librarians writing MARC records that point to collections than it is for archivists writing finding aids for those collections. The literature in archives
management, when combined with writings on music librarianship, is not enough to
guide a non-expert in the process of acquiring, arranging, describing, and preserving
music materials, and much remains to be done.

The dearth of published discussion has a direct impact on the ability of music
archives to provide access to their materials. Published discourse fuels the drive to
develop technologies for the description and access of specialized archival materials;
conversely, lack of discussion either masks a need, or creates a perception that such
tools are not needed. It is, of course, expected that new tools would be developed first
for mainstream collections (records, personal papers, etc.), since they are typically
the low-hanging fruit and have the largest user base. Meanwhile, support for more
complicated and problematic niche groups lags behind, as is the case with music and
performing arts materials. Lack of specialized standards affects the development of
metadata standards, which has a corresponding impact on both preservation efforts
and repositories' ability to provide description that is well matched with the materi-
als. Better descriptive standards and practices for music materials will help archivists
provide better care for their collections and likely will lead to increased scholarly
interest in the materials.

**Describing Printed and Manuscript Music**

The problem of managing music materials begins with the difficulties in defining
them. Music collections have been defined by Judith Brimmer as "records of the dif-
ferent stages of musical composition prior to publication, although they are commonly
defined simply by their format—music written by hand, not printed." This definition is
too limiting, since many pre-publication manuscripts are printed (especially, though not
exclusively, music written since the advent of computer engraving software), and post-
publication materials may, at times, form an important part of a musician's manuscript
collection. Music collections include all materials—paper-based, electronic records,
recordings, and artifacts such as musical instruments—that share the same provenance
and that document the creator's music-making activities. These can be the papers of
composers, performers, teachers, scholars, professional organizations, and advocacy
groups, whose day-to-day activities focus on the creation, performance, or production
of music in any genre. In addition to printed and manuscript music, materials such as
ephemera, concert programs, business records, photographs, correspondence, official
records, etc. contextualize the music-making activities of such persons or organizations,
and provide a snapshot of their relationship to others and their profession as a whole.

Print music, chiefly written in musical notation, forms the core of music collections.
These may be published editions, printed, or handwritten music from any point in the
composition and publication process, from composers' sketches and manuscript frag-
ments to pre-publication proofs. Even within a given work, scores may vary consider-
ably, so it is crucial for the user to be able to identify what type of score is available,
since they are not interchangeable and serve completely different purposes. Examples
of the kinds of scores one might find include:
• Full scores: all the individual instrument’s parts are printed together on the same page,
• Miniature scores: full scores, reduced in size for study purposes,
• Condensed scores: written such that the important melodic and harmonic elements are condensed into two or three staves, often with important instrumental cues,
• Piano scores: similar to condensed scores, but where the work is arranged for piano with a view toward playability,
• Vocal scores: all vocal and choral parts on a page, often with piano accompaniment, and
• Instrumental parts: an instrumentalist’s part, normally without any other instruments’ parts present.

In addition, creators of music materials are rarely just composers: they may be performers and educators, contractors, publicists, theorists, or musicologists, and often perform many roles within music and the allied arts. Besides printed music, these creators’ records might contain articles concerning music, programs and publicity materials, and other related materials. It is not uncommon to find fragments, sketches, or engraved music among these supporting materials.

The nature of music materials, especially print materials, means that they may require more granularity in their description than what archivists generally provide. In cases where multiple scores and sets of parts exist, and each of those versions needs to be retained, it is not uncommon for a finding aid to require item-level description merely to keep the different scores separate.

The nature of the medium is such that the kinds of searching that might be conducted, and the kinds of research being conducted, may be quite different from comparable research in text materials. One important difference between music and textual materials, for example, is the ease with which unpublished works can be widely distributed without ever being published. It is not uncommon for musical works to be performed publicly or recorded commercially without being published. For example, motion picture music frequently remains unpublished. Because of this, it is likely more often the case with music than with text searches that a researcher will be seeking an unpublished work by name. When a specific title is sought, discovery will be made easier when the titles are listed in the finding aid than if they are lumped together in a folder with other works with no title access.

Another reason music materials may, in some cases, deserve more granularity in description is that they are used in ways that sometimes differ from common text uses, and some of these uses may not be obvious to those outside the music field. Aside from history and criticism, scholars use music archives to research the compositional process, performance practice, and notation used by the creator of the records. The materials may be used to create critical editions of works, or even to recreate scores that have been destroyed or lost. In other cases, the researcher also may be a performer who may need to perform the work, or even create a new arrangement of the original work for instruments other than those for which the work was originally scored. The diverse user group that relies on archival music materials makes catering to their individual needs a formidable challenge.
These additional uses may affect collection management throughout the process, especially in the appraisal and description. When multiple, different, printed versions of a work are available, it is not enough merely to retain the full orchestra score, even if the other versions of the score contain no additional information, because the requirements of a performance might include all of the different forms of a score. It should be said, however, that the lack of new information in other score forms should not be taken for granted: it is not uncommon for instrumental parts and piano vocal scores to have markings not present in the full score. This information might shed light on the intentions of the conductor (sometimes the composer herself) in performing a work, which might otherwise be absent from a published version, as well as historical performance practice, where certain accommodations were made in order to meet stylistic trends.

Adequate description of music often requires, at the very least, title access to works, especially works for which the copy of the work is complete. However, nearly as important, from the researcher’s point of view, is knowledge of what forms of the score are present. A researcher wishing to perform a work will not find a composer’s sketches useful. The piano-vocal score to an opera will not be useful for performance if the researcher wishes to use an orchestra.

As a result of the need to keep different versions of a score, parts, and other print versions of a work, housing multiple works in one folder becomes a recipe for confusion. Separating works and keeping them in separate folders creates, if not an item-level description, de facto description, at least at the work level. Local practice will vary, of course, as will the needs of each individual fonds, but the benefits to the researcher in the finer level of detail and better-quality metadata provided are immeasurable.

It is important to clarify that describing a collection at the item level is a decision that should be made in accordance with the repository’s policies. The notion of treating music materials differently, of investing the extra time and money into finer levels of description, may alarm many archivists, but the value of item-level description to the user remains undiminished.

**Examples of Different Music Materials**

The following excerpts from the Herbert L. Clarke Music and Personal Papers help illustrate different manifestations of printed and manuscript music in a composer’s papers. Aside from being a gifted performer and internationally recognized cornetist, Herbert L. Clarke also had a successful career as a composer and conductor. His works for cornet or trumpet solo are still played today, and his writings and technical exercises for aspiring trumpet and cornet players are a rite of passage in a performer’s training process. These examples illustrate the differences between a full score, a conductor’s score, instrumental parts, and a piano score, which are most commonly found in libraries and archives.

**Full Score**

This is the full-score manuscript of Herbert L. Clarke’s “Memories: My Story of Life” (Image 1). The main characteristic of a full score is the presence of all of the instruments’ lines on the same sheet of paper. The names of the instruments are normally
spelled out on the left-hand side at the beginning of the work, with abbreviated names on subsequent pages. In the compositional timeline, full scores normally appear toward the end, being the most complete written account of the work. However, they are typically created prior to generating individual instruments' parts. While this example is a
full score for symphonic band, the same principles apply for different ensembles, from a string quartet to a full orchestra: all of the instruments’ lines will appear on the page.

**Condensed Score**

Sometimes the full score can be difficult to handle on a small conductor’s podium. Turning pages can be unwieldy and can even become a hazard to the performance if they fall off the stand mid-performance. In these cases, conductors and band directors often rely on the condensed or conductor’s score—a smaller version of the musical work, where the leading melodic lines and the instruments in charge of these are written down for ready reference. In this example of the same Clarke piece, there are small annotations at the beginning of major sections, indicating what instrument or group of instruments is taking the lead at that time (Image 2).

**Instrumental Parts**

In works for ensembles of performers, these are the individual sheets of paper that each performer uses to perform their specific part of the work. This example shows the part for the B-flat cornet for Clarke’s “Memoirs” (Image 3). Instrumental parts usually indicate what instrument or instruments they are written for at the top of the page. In some cases, there may be more than one part for each class of instrument. In the case of symphonic bands, for example, when there are multiple clarinetists, it is not uncommon to find several clarinet parts numbered according to their position (e.g. Clarinet I, Clarinet II, Clarinet III, etc); sometimes, each will have individual parts; other times, all three will be printed together. Even for the smaller groups (like piano-vocal duets), the part at hand will indicate for what instrument it is written.

**Piano Score**

Piano scores are scores of ensemble works reduced to a piano part for rehearsal or performance purposes. This usually occurs for solo concertos, choruses, or operas, where rehearsals with the full orchestra are at a premium and the singers need to hear the accompaniment in order to learn their parts. This example is from another work by Herbert L. Clarke, titled “The Three Aces,” a cornet trio composed for the three most famous cornetists of the time, Del Staigers, Frank Simon, and Walter Smith (Image 4). The music starts with the piano, as noted by the key signature and ligature in the first measure. In the second staff, there is an indication of where the soloist starts. Piano scores are usually smaller in size, so that they can fit comfortably at the piano, but large enough for the performers to be able to read the music.

**Describing Different Music Materials**

It is clear that all of these examples serve different purposes in the area of music performance. While it is not within the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning the fact that there are many other uses for manuscript and printed music; therefore, the need for accurate description of such materials is something that the archivist should bear in mind during the arrangement and description process. It is crucial to be able to discern if the music is an instrumental part, a piano score, or a full score, since these are not always interchangeable with one another. A trumpet student might not find
Image 4—Original Piano Manuscript Score of *The Three Aces*, Herbert L. Clarke Music and Personal Papers, RS 12/9/54, Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
much practical use for the full score of Clarke’s “The Three Aces” if she wants music to hand to an accompanist, whereas the piano score would be useless if the student were studying the orchestration of the work. It is important to clearly identify such information in the finding aid, or at least be able to convey to the user this information in a reference transaction.

One method for succinctly making this information known, as will be discussed later, is to designate a series of abbreviations either at the collection level or, preferably, at the institutional level to be used in the finding aid to indicate different kinds of scores. In such cases, a key to these abbreviations should be included in the finding aid to assist the researcher. This method is used at the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music, the repository for the Clarke examples, as follows:

Box 55
Folder 4: “My Story of Life” (FS, CS, P), 2A25, 1936
Composer/Arranger: Clarke

This information tells the researcher that the archives holdings include a full score, a conductor’s score, and instrumental parts for Clarke’s 1936 work, “My Story of Life,” identified by the abbreviations FS, CS, and P in parenthesis next to the title. The number 2A25 refers to an internal arrangement structure devised by the creator and preserved in the descriptive information to maintain the original order. In addition, it can sometimes be necessary to identify the version of the work present. Composers sometimes produce many versions of the same work (Anton Bruckner was notorious for this) and in such cases, the researcher needs to know which version or versions are available. Because this information is frequently most easily obtained upon transfer of a collection, it is best to include this information (if known) in a finding aid, rather than waiting until a researcher calls to inquire.

**Adapting Current Standards**

More work is required before existing standards will support description of music as easily as they describe text. In the library community, the longtime standards for description, the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd edition (AACR2) and, more recently, Resource Description and Access (RDA), typically encoded using the MARC metadata schema, do a very plausible job at providing collection-level description for music collections. But these standards are not designed, nor suitable, for the creation of container lists and finding aids. Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS), when combined with the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) schema, is clearly better suited to the task of archival description, but seems best designed for textual materials. Additional standards—most likely as an addendum to DACS—are needed before it will be as easily applicable to music as to text.

Including basic information, such as the existence of a full score or parts, in a finding aid will save the researcher trouble and time and can be done with relatively little extra effort on the part of the archivist, though here is another case where existing archival practice may need adjustment to allow for music. While DACS prescribes that all abbreviations be spelled out when possible, a standardized set of abbreviations, indicating
which form of a score is present, would allow more information to be conveyed more easily. Furthermore, while DACS addresses general archival description, rules governing supplied titles can be applied to naming music materials: “when supplying title information, compose a brief title that uniquely identifies the material, normally consisting of a name segment, a term indicating the nature of the unit being described, and optionally a topical segment as instructed in the following rules.” This should open the door for the archivist to utilize the correct and most appropriate terminology and controlled vocabularies to describe the material at hand.

Even if print or manuscript music is described at the series or collection level, the use of correct terminology will make a difference to the users. Terminology in the description of music can vary by person, region, and circumstance. In some cases, “sheet music” is used as a catch-all phrase to refer to any printed music materials, whether they are published or unpublished, full orchestra scores or lead sheets. In other cases, the term “sheet music” refers to a particular variety of published printed music epitomized by the sheet music distributed during the Tin Pan Alley years: unbound individual songs, normally with piano, guitar, and/or ukulele accompaniment, and often with elaborate and beautiful covers. Because of this variation in terminology, the development of a thesaurus of music description would be invaluable. The best extant thesauri for this purpose are the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) and the Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), but both are intended for broader use and so do not achieve a level of detail that would be useful here. Among many possible benefits, the creation of such a thesaurus could facilitate the creation of standardized abbreviations. In other cases, existing standards are more than adequate to the task and may certainly be used. Aside from traditional bibliographic data, such as author name and publication information, music-specific metadata often are useful in helping the researcher to identify the required material. Such metadata may include catalogue numbers (such as the Köchel catalogue for Mozart), phase of composition (i.e., “blue period”), instrumentation and voicing, and the work’s key. Current library content standards and best practices for the description of music materials would be appropriate, because catalogers and metadata librarians have relied on these to overcome the obstacles posed by multiple representations of the same work. DACS and EAD support this quite easily, as do AACR2 and RDA; however, this information often takes more time and research to provide and can reasonably be omitted. The companion standards suggested in DACS are a good place to start, especially the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) Cataloguing Rules and the Music Library Association’s Music Classification Systems.

Conclusion

Description of print and manuscript music materials in archives and special collections libraries poses an interesting challenge, since these are fundamentally different from other materials collected by these types of repositories. There are no clear descriptive guidelines for describing archival music materials and little has been done to
crosswalk music cataloging practices to current archival descriptive standards. With the changing landscape of bibliographic and archival description (e.g., development and deployment of RDF and its implications for libraries and archives, or the application of DACS to nontraditional archival holdings), more attention should be devoted to how these standards are shaping the descriptive needs of distinct materials. Unfortunately, the description of music materials draws from non-music standards, and it will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

This article has addressed the most common occurrences of print and manuscript music in archives, but these largely focus on concert (or “classical”) music. The myriad of formats found in other genres is worth exploring in a separate study. In the case of jazz and popular music, one might also find lead sheets (a single line of music with chords to guide the musician’s improvisations) or chord charts. If the creator spent time outside the western tradition, then the field expands even further, perhaps to include such things as ethnographic notes, lead sheets, or tablatures. Print and manuscript music outside the western concert music tradition is another underrepresented area in the existing literature, and shifting the discussion to focus on other musical traditions would be beneficial.

In the case of printed and manuscript music, the lack of subject expertise poses an additional barrier when describing music materials that oftentimes make their way into nonspecialized repositories (college and university archives and historical societies, to name a few). Recruiting volunteer help from the community might help the non-expert archivist. For example, there are local chapters of music sororities and fraternities that usually carry out volunteer projects with local organizations. Subject expertise, in many cases, is something that can be easily recruited, although it will require some creativity from the archivist in charge.

In addition, music materials often require a more detailed description than non-musical materials, sometimes to the item level, which might seem contrary to recent developments in archival practice, especially the “more product, less processing” (MPLP) guidelines proposed by Meissner and Greene. Unfortunately, primary users of these materials rely on the granularity of the description to identify the adequate source, making MPLP guidelines less adequate. The same applies to print and/or manuscript music series of institutional records (such as publishing companies and professional organizations), where the need for detail warrants the extra time and resources invested in an adequate description.

Tools and guidelines are needed that nonspecialists can implement in order to provide a better service both to the collections and the users. However it is done, such descriptive standards for music and performing arts collections would allow more repositories to provide greater use and increased traffic to these collections, which would ultimately generate interest, support, and further use of the collections.

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Eric Harbeson is the music special collections librarian at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He holds master’s degrees in music history (Cleveland State University, 2004) and library and information science (University of Illinois, 2008), as well as a bachelor’s degree in percussion performance (The College of Wooster, 1995). In addition to the present topic, his research interests include the application of intellectual property law to libraries and archives.

NOTES

1. The numerous formats in which sound recordings may present themselves is in itself highly problematic for archives, but this is outside the scope of this study. For our purposes, sound recordings are considered together as one aspect of a musical work.

2. This study only concerns itself with music materials that consist of music notation (whether in print or electronic). While outside of the scope of this study, further work is needed to examine description of other music materials, such as recorded sound and music instruments.

3. cf. various XML encoding schemes such as the Music Encoding Initiative at the University of Virginia, and the MusicXML schema developed by Recordare, LLC.


9. In the absence of an agreed upon set of abbreviations, a well-defined local practice could also be very effective.

10. See DACS Rule 2.3.3, General Rules for formatting title information. Italics not in the original.


12. Mark McKnight, Music Classification Systems (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002).

13. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing” American Archivist 68:2 (2005): 208–263. This minimal processing approach to processing large contemporary collections has sparked a reevaluation of other aspects of archival practice, such as reference, acquisitions, and appraisal, and it continues to generate different reactions from practitioners in specialized repositories.