

# Music Scores: Retroconversion or Recataloging?

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**ABSTRACT.** Many libraries across the country are planning projects to convert the manual records for their music scores into machine-readable form. Although the typical problems of music retrospective conversion are well documented, music librarians must also consider the quality of the paper records which will be used to find matching records in the bibliographic utilities. The paper records may not contain the kind of bibliographic information needed to determine if a matching record exists, especially if past cataloging practices with regard to music scores diverged from accepted national norms. In some libraries, what is called "music retroconversion" might be more aptly termed "music recataloging." Libraries are encouraged to do a trial project to discover the characteristics of their manual records before choosing a method for the "retroconversion" of music scores.

## INTRODUCTION

Retrospective conversion has been an issue in libraries since about 1969, the year "RECON" first appeared as a heading in *Library Literature*. Most libraries have begun retrospective conversion projects, and many have transformed large numbers of their bibliographic records into machine-readable form. In many

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cases the monographs were the first to be converted, as they generally form the bulk of a library's holdings. Music scores, along with other nonbook formats, were usually put off until later.

"Later" began to arrive in the mid-1980s, as some libraries turned their attention to the retroconversion of music scores. The first articles to appear described music retroconversion projects at Southern Illinois University<sup>1</sup> and Rice University.<sup>2</sup> A cooperative project among three libraries, funded by a grant from Title II-C, was begun in 1985; articles by Davidson<sup>3</sup> and Olson<sup>4</sup> best describe this project, while useful summaries can be found in two issues of the *MLA Newsletter*.<sup>5,6</sup> During the late 1980s, more articles appeared, describing projects at Northern Kentucky University<sup>7</sup> and the University of California at Berkeley.<sup>8</sup> The Title II-C project was expanded to allow the participation of more libraries. A discussion group concerning the retroconversion of music began meeting regularly during the annual conferences of the Music OCLC Users Group, and a paper on efforts at Oberlin College was presented at the 1987 meeting of that organization.<sup>9</sup> As the 1990s began, informal reports, conversations with colleagues, and electronic bulletin board messages have indicated that many more libraries are planning or doing a music retro project; and that only a few have managed to complete the conversion of their entire music collections. Music retrospective conversion has become an issue in many libraries across the country.

### RETROCONVERSION VS. RECATALOGING

The four articles and the 1987 paper mentioned above describe each institution's experiences in terms of music "retrospective conversion." The *ALA Glossary* defines retrospective conversion as "the process of converting to a machine-readable form the records in a manual or non-machine-readable file."<sup>10</sup> But what these articles and paper describe is something much more, akin to recataloging—as some of the authors themselves point out. To a greater or lesser extent, these five authors also explain why music "retroconver-

sion" is so difficult and time-consuming. They cite music publishing patterns, the indexing and display of music records in the bibliographic utilities, the central role of authority work, the changes in cataloging codes, the late creation of a national standard, the dearth of high-quality machine-readable records in the bibliographic utilities, and the nature of music itself as reasons for the problems encountered.

A close reading of these articles reveals another factor to consider in music retroconversion. It runs like a theme throughout the descriptions of individual projects. For example: "If there is sufficient doubt on our part about the accuracy of a match, we will pull the item from the shelf to recheck the search."<sup>11</sup> "If all else fails, one may have to retrieve the score in order to better qualify the search."<sup>12</sup> "Our manual records thus require additional information to meet current standards for even a card catalog."<sup>13</sup> The paper on Oberlin's experience stated that it was necessary to consult the item on the shelf 49 percent of the time, at least in the first phase of the project.<sup>14</sup>

From these quotations, it seems clear that the information on manual records for music titles is often found wanting. Shelflist cards simply may not contain enough data, or enough accurate data, to identify precisely what it is that the card represents. Those doing the retroconversion find they need more information, and so must retrieve the item from the stacks—anywhere from occasionally to nearly half of the time—in order to determine if a matching record exists in OCLC or RLIN. When the item itself must be consulted to add and/or correct data on the shelflist card or other manual record before it can be matched to or transformed into a machine-readable record, the process can hardly be called retrospective conversion. With music titles, any such project may well include a significant amount of recataloging.

When Wichita State University (WSU) began to consider transforming its manual records for music scores into machine-readable form, the first question was whether the collection could be retroconverted—in the narrow sense—or whether at least some of it would require recataloging. The rest of this article will discuss some aspects of manual records at WSU and how the results affected our decision on how to proceed with music retroconversion.

### **DEVELOPMENT OF MUSIC LIBRARY**

A sketch of the history of WSU's Music Library may help to explain the characteristics and development of its card catalog and shelflist. The Music Library's beginnings were humble, consisting of a small collection of performance and study scores and recordings housed in a small room near the offices and classrooms of the School of Music. This collection had been gradually built as the School of Music purchased and faculty members donated materials necessary to teach music courses. In 1956 the Music Library moved to its current location in the new Fine Arts building. At this time, the School of Music enrolled about 250 students, primarily music education majors, taught three music history courses, and had no significant graduate program. The School of Music continued to fund the purchase of scores, performance materials, and recordings which were selected by members of the faculty, particularly those who taught music history and piano. A grant was obtained to purchase historical and scholarly editions; these were cataloged by the University Library, which also provided continuing funding for subscriptions to them. Graduate students were hired to manage the Music Library.

Ten years later, in 1966, the School of Music hired a faculty member as a half-time music theory professor and half-time music librarian. For the next fifteen years, working part-time, he selected, acquired, cataloged, and classified all new materials for the Music Library, changed it to an open-stack collection, reclassified the existing collection from Dewey to LC, provided reference services, and supervised the student staff. This was all accomplished with virtually no prior education, training, or experience as a librarian. Cataloging in particular was entirely self-taught.

By 1981, the number of music majors at WSU was approaching 500. Courses were offered in all major periods of music history and graduate degrees were available in ten areas. In that year, the Music Library became a branch of the University Library, and the music librarian, having earned his MLS in 1978, became the full-time Music Librarian. He continued to catalog music part-time, now using AACR2 and OCLC. In mid-1985, when the Humanities Cataloger resigned, the position was redefined as the Fine Arts/Humanities

Cataloger, and a librarian with a music background was hired to catalog music, freeing the Music Librarian to concentrate on collection development, bibliographic instruction, and reference.<sup>15</sup>

For most of its existence, therefore, the Music Library functioned as a small, one-person library serving a small, specialized clientele. Cataloging and classification practices were characterized by a commonsense approach, with local solutions to the typical problems of music cataloging implemented as necessary. With a small collection and a small catalog to serve an equally small department, for many years this approach worked quite well. As the publication of scores expanded, as the collection grew, and as standards for music cataloging and classification were developed, local practices became less tenable. They began to impede the ability to tell exactly what the Music Library held in its collection. Only since 1981 have scores been cataloged according to current national codes and standards.

### ***CHARACTERISTICS OF MANUAL RECORDS***

To get a better understanding of the problems WSU might face in the retroconversion of scores, two small projects were run in 1988 and 1989. For the first, a small random sample of cards was pulled from the Music Library shelflist. OCLC was searched to find matching records, and the results of the searches were analyzed. For the second, a pilot retroconversion project was completed, converting 330 records in three classifications.

The results of these projects reveal two basic characteristics of the manual records which make using the shelflist for retroconversion of music scores problematic. The first of these is manual records with bibliographic information that is too brief; the second is records where the bibliographic information is not transcribed directly from the item.

At WSU, the first problem, that of brief bibliographic information, is most acute in the physical description and standard number areas of the bibliographic record. Some shelflist cards have no physical description at all; the bibliographic description consists

only of the title, composer, place of publication, publisher, and date. More commonly, however, there is at least some indication of physical description. Pagination is usually present for full scores. Miniature scores and vocal scores are generally indicated, sometimes with pagination but sometimes without. More difficult are the shelflist cards where the physical description consists of the word "parts." At WSU, this means that the item *includes* parts but is not necessarily *limited* to them. In many cases the bibliographic item is a score *plus* a set of parts, published together as a single bibliographic entity. In other cases, the bibliographic item is really only a set of parts. But the information on the card does not distinguish between the two, nor does it ever say how many parts. Given all the versions and formats in which a musical work may be presented, matching such shelflist cards with the proper OCLC record is difficult at best and often impossible.

In the absence of a standardized "music number," plate numbers and publisher's numbers have long been used to identify printed music. Because they are often the most unique element of the description, they are the best and easiest way to find a matching OCLC record. At WSU, 84 percent of the music carries one or more of these types of numbers. But for one-quarter of those, the number is not given as part of the description on the shelflist card and thus cannot be used as a search key in OCLC.

Other parts of the bibliographic description also suffer from a lack of information. Series statements are sometimes omitted. Although notes are generally not essential to the description of music scores, they can help explain other elements of the description that may be misleading. In addition, notes on the language(s) of the text in vocal music or on the presence of significant prefatory material can also help clinch a match on OCLC. The shelflist cards, however, carry virtually no such notes. Given the constraints of time and resources, notes of any kind were a luxury the part-time music librarian could not afford.

There are some shelflist cards which have no bibliographic description at all. These cards were generated when OCR labels were attached to all music and its corresponding shelflist cards, in order to utilize an automated circulation system. If a shelflist card was missing, a temporary card was made, showing just the OCR acces-

sion number and the call number. Though they make up a tiny percentage of the total shelflist, each must be replaced by a suitable card from the catalog before a search on OCLC can be made. Overall, 30 percent of the Music Library shelflist cards contain too little information to determine if a matching record exists on OCLC.

The second characteristic that makes retroconversion difficult is manual records where various parts of the bibliographic description are synthesized by the cataloger rather than transcribed from the item. This situation is most common in the title area of the record but examples can be found in other areas of the description as well.

In any collection of Western art music,<sup>16</sup> items commonly have titles in European languages. At WSU, these titles sometimes appear on shelflist cards translated into English; thus "Trio für Klavier, Violine und Violoncello über irländische Volkslieder" is rendered on the shelflist card as "Trio for piano, violin and violoncello on Irish folksongs." Another common problem is that elements or words in the title are moved around, added, or deleted; thus "Trio, B-flat major for pianoforte, violin and violoncello, op. 97" becomes "Trio, op. 97 in B-flat major for violin, violoncello and piano." And sometimes, when the title on the title page is fairly brief, title information from the cover is added to it, making the shelflist title a conflation of title page and cover. In all of these situations, a search in OCLC by title is useless, and deciding whether a record retrieved by other search keys matches the shelflist card amounts to little more than educated guessing.

Variations in transcription also affect publication information, especially if the publisher operates in more than one country. In one example, an item and the matching record on OCLC both show Leipzig as the place of publication and Edition Peters as the publisher. But the shelflist card shows New York and C. F. Peters. The problem extends to plate and publisher's numbers. Sometimes, letters representing the publisher are added to the number—for instance, the publisher's number Edition Peters 6371 appears on the shelflist card as EP 6371. Or letters associated with the number are left out—for instance, the plate number S.2660 appears on the shelflist card as 2660. Pagination is affected as well. Unnumbered preliminary pages are often subtracted from the numeral on the last

numbered page; rather than transcribe that numeral, the actual page count is given on the shelflist card. Thus a score that begins on page 4 and ends on page 84 is shown as having 81 pages; and a short song, consisting of pages numbered 2 and 3 is shown as having 2 pages. These various kinds of synthesis impede searching and often preclude determining with any degree of certainty if a given OCLC record is a match.

Overall, 57 percent of the Music Library shelflist cards contain enough synthetic information that it is impossible to determine if a matching record exists in OCLC.

It must be remembered that WSU's Music Library was created by musicians for musicians; more specifically, it functioned as a resource center for materials needed to train undergraduate music students. The twin problems of brief and synthetic bibliographic information must be approached with this purpose in mind. With insufficient time and resources, shortcuts were taken in cataloging to put the music on the shelves and make it available for use. Cataloging emphasis was placed on the identification of the composer and the musical work, without much regard for its specific bibliographic incarnation. Most undergraduate music students, then and now, do not much care what language the title is in, nor where the piece is published, nor exactly how many pages it has. Finding a particular musical work by a particular composer, in more or less the format desired, usually meets their needs. The music librarian *does* need somewhat more information, and information with a greater degree of precision, but a knowledge of music literature, a basic understanding of music publishing, and simple human reasoning power can make up for bibliographic information that is omitted or synthetic. Any human being can tell that Edition Peters 6371 and EP 6371 almost certainly represent the same item. Any music librarian knows that distinguishing between Edition Peters and C. F. Peters is not likely to be important in identifying a piece for selection or replacement, especially if small variations in editions are acceptable to users. Anyone with a graduate degree in music literature has acquired a basic working vocabulary of musical terms in foreign languages, so he or she can recognize a specific piece regardless of the language of its title or the order of the title elements.

### **NEED FOR RECATALOGING**

The brief, nonstandard cataloging that music received prior to 1981 worked rather well as long as the collection was small, the users' needs were general, and the bibliographer's subject knowledge and human ability to conceptualize and understand were assumed to be the only processes by which music editions were compared to bibliographic descriptions. As mentioned above, as more versions and editions of musical works were published, as the collection and the number of users grew, and as the users' needs became more sophisticated, the local practices were abandoned and standard, full cataloging was implemented in the Music Library for all new acquisitions. Unfortunately for WSU's retroconversion of music scores, machine algorithms—defined by the capabilities and limitations of the MARC format and the databases and search mechanisms of the bibliographic utilities—became the only way to match machine-readable bibliographic descriptions with the items they represent.

The Music Library at WSU contains about eighteen thousand music score titles that need to be converted to machine-readable form. Given the characteristics of the shelflist cards, "retroconversion" in the usual sense is not possible. There is little to be gained by taking a stack of shelflist cards to an OCLC terminal and searching for matches. For most of the scores, insufficient or inaccurate information on the shelflist cards will impede searching for a match and/or determining if a given record is in fact a match. With regard to bibliographic description, the local practices used at the Music Library and the national standards espoused by the bibliographic utilities are too divergent.

Music scores at WSU, therefore, will not be retroconverted. They will be recataloged. The items themselves will be used to search OCLC for matches. This will require careful planning and a rapid turnaround time to ensure that the music remains essentially available to users. To achieve these ends, the Cataloging Department has redefined an open professional position in the department in order to hire an additional music specialist, who will be responsible for the music recataloging project.

### CONCLUSION

Retrospective conversion of music scores—or at least planning for it—is becoming a common activity in music libraries across the country. Vendors are offering retroconversion services for all types of library materials. The Title II-C project has been an unqualified success, with participating libraries adding or upgrading tens of thousands of records in the bibliographic utilities. For music librarians, a higher-quality database in the utilities and a vendor capable of retroconverting a music score collection in a matter of months is like a dream come true. And for some libraries, it is: with careful planning and consultation, the music score shelflist can be shipped to a vendor and returned in a few months along with a tape of matching machine-readable records.<sup>17</sup> Not all music libraries, however, can avail themselves of this method. The characteristics of WSU's shelflist for music scores are such that contracting the services of a vendor is not a viable option. Records cannot be retroconverted unless they can be matched to bibliographic descriptions in a machine-readable database. If the trained, experienced music cataloger in the library finds searching for and matching records difficult to impossible, a vendor is not likely to have more success.

Thus a word of caution is in order. Before beginning a retroconversion project for music scores, do not fail to consider the quality of the manual records. Investigate how and when the music score collection was established and how it developed, particularly with regard to cataloging standards and practices. What standards, if any, were followed? For example, has the title and composer information been transcribed correctly? Does the publication information, both publisher and place of publication, reflect the information on the item? Do the records have physical descriptions sufficient to distinguish among formats? Have plate and publisher's numbers been recorded accurately, or recorded at all?

These were the particular problems encountered in the shelflist at WSU, but any local cataloging practices carry the potential for other problems. It is worthwhile to take a sample of the collection and complete a pilot project. This "practice run" should point up any irregularities peculiar to a given database. It may show that for

at least some portions of the collection, music "retroconversion" is only a euphemism for what must actually be done: music recataloging.

## NOTES

1. Richard B. Wursten and James S. Chervinko, "Music Goes On-line: Retrospective Conversion of Card Catalog Records for Music Scores at Morris Library (SIU-C)," *Illinois Libraries* 65, no. 5 (May 1983):346-48.
2. Donald T. Green and Dean W. Corwin, "Retrospective Conversion of Music Materials," in *Retrospective Conversion: From Cards to Computer*, ed. Anne G. Adler and Elizabeth A. Baber (Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1984),247-91.
3. Mary W. Davidson, "Towards a National Program for the Retrospective Conversion of Music Records," *Fontes Artis Musicae* 33, no. 1 (January-March 1986):52-59.
4. Vivian Olson, "Three Research Libraries Convert Music Materials," *Research Libraries in OCLC: A Quarterly*, no. 23 (summer 1987):1-7.
5. "The National Plan for Retrospective Conversion in Music," *MLA Newsletter*, no. 60 (March-April 1985):10-11.
6. Vivian Olson, "Cooperative Retrospective Conversion Project," *MLA Newsletter*, no. 70 (September-October 1987):6-7.
7. Perry Bratcher, "Music OCLC Recon: The Practical Approach," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1987/88):41-48.
8. Ruth W. Tucker, "Music Retrospective Conversion at the University of California at Berkeley," *Technical Services Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1989):13-28.
9. Laura M. Snyder, "Retrospective Conversion for an Online Catalog" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Music OCLC Users Group, Eugene, Oregon, 10 February 1987).
10. Heartsill Young, ed., *The ALA Glossary of Library and Information Science* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1983),194.
11. Green and Corwin, "Retrospective Conversion," p. 286.
12. Bratcher, "Music OCLC Recon," p. 46.
13. Tucker, "Music Retrospective Conversion," p. 21.
14. Snyder, "Retrospective Conversion."
15. I am indebted to the memories of James Eller, Howard Ellis, William Mathis, and especially David Austin for information on the development of WSU's Music Library.
16. As opposed to "popular" music and the musics of non-Western cultures.
17. Some that have chosen this method are the music libraries at Arizona State University, Brown University, Michigan State University, and the University of Washington.