ARE WE THERE YET? TOWARD A WORKABLE CONTROLLED VOCABULARY FOR MUSIC

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English Abstract

Subject access to musical works has always been problematic. The issues of whether this form of access is defined by what the item is "about" versus what the item "is", have been discussed broadly in the field of music cataloguing. The new standard for describing music materials, *Resource Description and Access* (RDA) has provided an opportunity to discuss whether a form/genre approach would be better suited for access. A brief overview of the history of these discussions and a description of the current work of the Music Library Association, in collaboration with the Music Genre/Form Project Group at the Library of Congress provides the basis for the implementation of a unified, comprehensive list of genre-headings. This would result in a thesaurus of genre and form terms, both practical to apply and easy to use. Whether a truly comprehensive music thesaurus is ever constructed—one that deals with "about-ness" as well as "is-ness"—this present genre/form project will result in a controlled vocabulary that will greatly benefit our users and go far in improving access to music.

French Abstract

L'accès par sujet aux œuvres musicales a été toujours problématique. Les questions si ce type d'accès concerne le sujet du document (ce dont il s'agit) ou sa nature (ce qu'il est), ont été largement discutées dans le domaine du catalogage de la musique. Le nouveau standard pour la description des documents musicaux, *Resource Description and Access* (RDA) a fourni l'occasion de débattre de la pertinence de l'approche par forme/genre pour l'accès. Un bref survol de l'histoire de ces discussions et une description du travail actuel de la Music Library Association, en collaboration avec le groupe du projet Music Genre/Form à la Bibliothèque du Congrès, fournit la base à l'élaboration d'une liste unifiée et compréhensive de termes de genres. Ceci pourrait se traduire par la réalisation d'un thésaurus de termes de genre et de forme, à la fois pratique à appliquer et facile à utiliser. Un tel thésaurus, qui décrirait autant l'identité que le sujet et qui serait réellement compréhensif, est-il réalisable ? Quoi qu'il en soit, le projet actuel de genre/forme produira un vocabulaire contrôlé fort utile pour nos usagers et qui améliorera grandement l'accès à la musique.

German Abstract

Die inhaltliche Erschließung von Musikwerken war schon immer problematisch. Dabei wurde unter den Katalogisierern von Musik breit diskutiert, ob sich eine inhaltliche Erschließung eher auf die Form oder den Inhalt beziehen solle. Die neuen Regeln zur Katalogisierung von Musikmaterialien, *Resource Description and Access* (RDA), bieten erneut den Anlass zur Diskussion darüber, ob die Schwerpunktsetzung auf Form und Gattung eine bessere Erschließung gewährleisten könnte. Nach einem kurzen Abriss zur Entwicklung dieser Diskussion folgt die Beschreibung

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der aktuellen Zusammenarbeit der *Music Library Association* mit der Arbeitsgruppe zu Form und Gattung der *Library of Congress*, die die Grundlage für die Inkraftsetzung einer umfassenden Liste von Gattungsbegriffen darstellt. Das Ergebnis dieser Arbeit soll schließlich ein Thesaurus zu Form- und Gattungsbegriffen sein, der einfach zu nutzen und anzuwenden ist. Ganz egal, ob jemals tatsächlich ein wirklich umfassender Musikthesaurus zur inhaltlichen Erschließung von Musik-werken unter all den gewünschten Gesichtspunkten geschaffen wird: bereits das Form- und Gattungsprojekt wird ein kontrolliertes Vokabular liefern, das die Musikrecherche deutlich verbessern und den Nutzern sehr zugute kommen wird.

Introduction

For many decades music librarians have struggled with the problems associated with pro-viding subject access to musical works. Most U.S. libraries still use the Library of Con-gress Subject Headings (LCSH) to assign subject terms for music materials, even though studies have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of these headings as well as their relative lack of use by users, who now rely primarily on keyword searching to locate music. LCSH has frequently been criticized for its inadequacies, particularly the haphazard na-ture of its syndetic structure, its many inconsistencies, and its practice of inverting some terms while using others in direct order. Another fundamental issue has centered on "about-ness"—i.e., the *topic* of any given book, which LCSH has handled very well—versus "is-ness", or what any given musical work actually is—in RDA terms, its content.

Because of the criticisms of LCSH for music, members of the U.S. music library com-munity have struggled over the years to rectify the subject-access problems associated with LCSH. This article provides a brief overview of the history of these various endeav-ors and describes the current work of the Music Library Association, which is presently collaborating with the Music Genre/Form Project Group of the Library of Congress to provide unified, a comprehensive genre-heading list, along with appropriate syndetic structures and encoding.[2] It is hoped that the work of this partnership will result in a the-saurus of genre and form terms that is both practical to apply and easy to use.

Early Efforts at Improving Access to Music

The road to a music thesaurus has included a number of initiatives throughout the years, each building on the work of previous groups and individuals. Shortly after MLA's found-ing in1931, music librarians began issuing "provisional lists" of subject heading terms for music based on the card catalogues at the Library of Congress. In 1933 the first of these lists was published, followed two years later by the updated *Subject Headings for the Literature of Music*, 3rd ed. (1935). Although these lists represented a good-faith effort by music librarians at addressing problems with retrieving music, there were complaints about their inadequacies. In a 1948 article in *Notes*, Helen E. Bush and David Judson Haykin maintained that music subject headings should focus on two fundamental con-cerns, the user's approach and the language of the heading.[3] The authors proposed, in essence, a standard vocabulary for music that would be organized in a hierarchical

2. This article only discusses the form/genre aspects of the thesaurus; a separate project dealing with medium-of-performance is currently underway by the Music Library Association Subject Access Subcommittee in collaboration with the Library of Congress.

3. Helen E. Bush and David Judson Haykin, "Music Subject Headings," *Notes* 6 (December 1948): 41.

arrangement, with a thoroughly faceted, syndetically structured list of terms. These elements, as you can see, represent the foundation for a well-designed thesaurus. Despite the foresighted principles outlined by Bush and Haykin, it would be almost forty years before the music library community turned its attention to the development of a thesaurus in any systematic fashion.

The 1980s: Music Library Association Music Thesaurus Project Working Group

I suppose we can thank J. Paul Getty, the billionaire oilman, Anglophile, and avid collector of art and antiquities, for indirectly sparking early interest in creating a thesaurus of music terms by MLA members. In 1983 the J. Paul Getty Trust, the world's wealthiest art institution, assumed editorial directorship of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus, a project that had begun a few years earlier. The AAT then moved to Los Angeles, and is now maintained by the Getty Vocabulary Program, under the aegis of the Getty Research Institute at the magnificent Getty Center. Inspired by the success of the AAT (while envious of the project's substantial funding), MLA established a working group in 1985 to investigate the feasibility of a similar project for music. In its final report, published in a June 1989 article in *Notes*, the Music Thesaurus Project Working Group outlined the various concerns with existing subject access to music. These concerns included the inadequacies of LCSH headings (some of which I've already mentioned), the limitations of the coded fields in the MARC format for music, and the intellectual burden that natural-language retrieval places on the searcher, especially when looking for musical works bearing generic titles (sonatas, concertos, symphonies, etc.). In addition to acknowledging efforts of the AAT Project, the Working Group's report also pointed to the well-constructed thesaurus of descriptors published by RILM. As the Working Group noted, however, though the RILM Thesaurus might offer a model, it clearly was not designed for the access of music itself, but rather for literature <u>on</u> music (the "about-ness" vs. the "is-ness" problem). Moreover, as the report also noted, existing LC subject headings were inadequate for addressing vernacular idioms or the field of ethnomusicology, genres that, at least at the time, twenty years ago, were not easily accommodated by structures principally designed for providing access to Western European art music.

The 1989 report of the Music Thesaurus Project Working Group called for a number of bold initiatives, including the construction of thesauri that would cover all aspects of music as well as literature on music (the "about-ness" <u>and</u> the "is-ness"). The report declared that "any research undertaken in the creation of a thesaurus of descriptors for music should be directed toward better access to music in all its various manifestations and to information on music in books, articles, dissertations, and the like." Moreover, the report recommended that the thesaurus be constructed according to accepted standards and useful with various indexing grammars (such as PRECIS or Thesaurofacet); it should support both pre- and post-coordinate use; and it should be compatible with LCSH. In other words, the Working Group saw the music thesaurus as a complement to LCSH, rather than as a replacement.

The 1990s: A Music Thesaurus Prototype and Other Endeavors

The publication of the Working Group's report in 1989 spurred interest in developing a thesaurus by a number of individuals, though the means by which actual development

and implementation of such a project remained problematic—we had no benefactor like J. Paul Getty to fund and maintain such an ambitious project, and it was clear that any endeavor would require the buy-in of many groups, especially from the Library of Congress, ALA, and other music and library organizations, not to mention the larger music library community. Many within MLA, me included, were unsure where or how to begin, how to get support, or who would do the actual work, not only to construct it, but to keep it going, since such a thesaurus would require constant "care and feeding." At the same time, several individuals and other working groups began to tackle the problem in different ways. These efforts, combined with technological innovations in thesaurus construction software and the beginnings of interest in genre headings among the larger library community, represented the next phase of development in the path to a music thesaurus.

One of those leading the way was Harriette Hemmasi, at the time music librarian at Rutgers University. In 1991 Hemmasi started working on a prototype thesaurus with funding from the Council on Library Resources (CLR), in collaboration with Dr. James Anderson and Fred Rowley, creators of the ARIS thesaurus construction program. Hemmasi began by deconstructing the LCSH terms for music, using Perry Bratcher and Jennifer Smith's 1988 book, *Music Subject Headings: Compiled from Library of Congress Subject Headings*, to identify terms, eventually gathering some 12,000 headings. In addition, she designed an overall hierarchical structure, which included 1) Agents, 2) Forms/genres, 3) Geo-cultural attributes, 4) Sound devices, and 5) Other topics. Using vocal music as a model, she tested her initial structure, realizing that she also needed to add two other facets, Events and Texts. This faceted approach accommodated post-coordination of terms, providing greater specificity and precision for both the indexer and the searcher. In addition, perhaps most importantly, Hemmasi's hierarchical structure allowed users to identify the semantic relationships among various terms. As she noted in a 1993 report, the goal was for the Music Thesaurus to become a "tracking facility for the discipline of music and for finding materials about music", rather than a controlled vocabulary in and of itself.

As Hemmasi continued work on her prototype thesaurus, the topic of faceted access to music also garnered interest by others in the music library community, including Jerry McBride, who offered well-considered solutions to the problem by using the 04x MARC fields, and Kevin Freeman, whose paper on faceted access using 04x and 658 MARC tags at a 1993 annual meeting of MLA resulted in the creation of the Working Group on Faceted Access to Music to complement the work Hemmasi was carrying on. Subsequently, MLA authorized in 1996 the formation of the Task Force to Advise the Music Thesaurus Project to work closely with Hemmasi as she continued the project, which had turned to one of the most pressing problems, that of form and genre. In 1998 MLA formed another working group within the Task Force, the Form/Genre Terminology Working Group, specifically to assist Hemmasi in identifying and researching form/genre terms for inclusion in the music thesaurus, beginning with terms associated with Western art music—once again using LCSH as the source for the identification of terms. As the working group set about its duties, its members wrestled with a number of issues, such as what to do with bound terms ("button accordions," for example), qualifiers, and headings consisting solely of medium of performance. Deconstruction of thousands of terms resulted in a list of around 730 unique genre and form terms, 550 instrument headings, and more than 400 languages.

The 2000s: Further Developments—Form and Genre Take Center Stage

Following the completion of work by the Form/Genre Terminology Working Group in 2002, MLA's involvement with music thesaurus development went on an extended hiatus, as members' attentions turned to other, more pressing concerns, including the new, bur- geoning field of "meta-data" and the beginnings of digitization initiatives such as the Variations project at Indiana University, the institution to which, coincidentally, Harriette Hemmasi had recently moved to become Associate Dean and Director of Technical Services. Hemmasi became involved with the development of vocabularies used with IU's Variations2, part of that institution's Digital Music Library, building on her earlier activi- ties with the Music Thesaurus Project. Following the completion of Variations2 in 2006, despite early successes and much promise, further activity in the Music Thesaurus Project all but ceased, for various reasons. It was clear to many within MLA that without the support of the Library of Congress, no comprehensive thesaurus could be developed or implemented.

As luck would have it however, LC <u>did</u> begin to turn its interest to the improvement of subject access, particularly in the area of form and genre headings. As early as the 1980s, in fact, various units with LC had begun compiling lists of subject-specific thesaurus terms for various disciplines, such as the *Thesaurus for Graphic Materials*, the *Radio Form-Genre Guide* and *Moving Image Genre-Form Guide*, and Martha Yee's *Moving Image Materials: Genre Terms*, among others. More significantly, in 2007 LC's Cataloging Policy and Support Office (now the Policy and Standards Division) began plans to develop LC- authorized form and genre terms for various disciplines, including cartographic images, law, literature, and religion, in addition to film and music. In the beginning, LC's plan was primarily practical—the main goal initially was to create sets of genre/form authority records—retagging MARC 150 authority records to 155s. It soon became apparent, how- ever, that this would be just the first step; the terms themselves could be used to form actual hierarchical thesauri. In June 2010 LC announced the creation of the Library of Congress Genre/Form thesaurus, which would be formally separate from LCSH, and published as a supplemental volume to the 32nd edition of LCSH as *The Library of Congress Genre/Form Terms for Library and Archival Materials* (or LCGFT).

This important development provided the entrée music librarians had long been look- ing for. In 2009, MLA once again leapt in, following a proposal by LC's Geraldine Ostrove for the establishment of a project in which the Policy and Support Division (PSD) would collaborate with MLA to compile the music portion of LC's genre/form project. Thus was born the MLA Genre/Form Task Force, which has begun working in close collaboration with LC's Music Genre/Form Project Group, headed by Ostrove, in the nitty-gritty details of the endeavor.

Early on in the project it was agreed upon by both groups that form/genre was only part of the work that needed to be carried out—medium of performance was the other vi- tal component. In fact, it was perhaps just as important, if not more so. As Gerry Ostrove had rightly observed in an earlier article, "the basic structure of most headings for musi- cal works—form first, followed by medium of performance—isn't the way musicians think: medium of performance is typically the point of departure".[4] Separating the two con-

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4. Geraldine Ostrove, "Music Subject Cataloging and Form/Genre Implementation at the Library of Con- gress," *Cataloging and Classification Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2001): 102.

cepts, so often intertwined in existing LC subject headings, had been a vexing issue since the beginnings of the thesaurus project more than a decade earlier, and it was imperative that some solution be found before any meaningful work could move forward.

As Task Force chair Beth Iseminger has noted, the current efforts of the LC/MLA collaboration are in many ways similar to those of the previous Music Thesaurus Project: in the deconstruction of subject heading strings into various component facets; dealing with the problem of medium-of-performance-only terms (what to do with Orchestral music, e.g.); removing some terms with non-music facets (a religion, ethnicity, or language facet, e.g.); and broadening the list of genres to include more popular and vernacular musical styles as well as music of non-Western cultures.[5] Two fundamental differences from the earlier project, however, are much more likely to ensure the success of the current venture—whereas the Music Thesaurus Project's intention was to include the entire vocabulary for music, including topical terms (the "about-ness" and the "is-ness"), the current endeavor is much more limited in scope, only the "is-ness"—musical form, genre, type, and style. In addition, the support from LC offers, as Iseminger has noted, "the weight of national policy behind it. The ability of LC staff, processes and systems to take on such a large project and handle the amounts of data involved is a benefit as well".

The Genre/Form Project for music has been a model of cooperation—between the two collaborating groups as well among task force members. In addition, the way in which the project has been carried out has thus far demonstrated how clear, detailed, and concrete planning can achieve successful results. The goal of LCGFT for music terms is direct and simple—to create a structured vocabulary of terms for genre/form and medium of performance. Once the goals were clearly established, the following steps were put in place by members of MLA's task force: 1) work through LC-compiled lists of form/genre terms, weeding out those it felt did not belong; 2) add any LCSH terms that had been overlooked; 3) scan through reference sources for other terms; 4) vet these lists of new, non-LCSH terms; 5) collaborate on creating a syndetic structure for the terms in each list; 6) devise training module and usage guidelines for the sets of terms; 7) prepare MARC21 genre/form authority records for music terms.[6]

In addition to laying out the steps needed to carry out the project, basic terms had to be defined—what, for example is a genre, and how does it differ from a form? It was decided to use for working definitions the New Grove description of both terms: genre, "a class, type, or category, sanctioned by convention," including, the task force added, styles of music;[7] form, "the constructive or organizing element in music".[8] It was also decided that in order to identify the widest array of genres and forms, we would also comb through other vocabularies, such as the metadata lists from the Variations project; the Types of Composition for Use in Uniform Titles, a list created several years earlier; and the lists of genre/form terms prepared by IAML.

5. Beth Iseminger, "The Music Genre/Form Project: History, Accomplishments, and Future Directions," in *Directions in Music Cataloging*, ed. Peter H. Lisius and Richard Griscom, Music Library Association Technical Reports Series, 32 (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2012), 64.

6. Beth Iseminger, "The Music Genre/Form Project: History, Accomplishments, and Future Directions," in *Directions in Music Cataloging*, ed. Peter H. Lisius and Richard Griscom, Music Library Association Technical Reports Series, 32 (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2012), 66.

7. Grove Music Online, "Genre," <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

8. Grove Music Online, "Form," <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

One of the advantages the current project has had over previous attempts is in new technologies that have expedited and simplified the task force's work. In addition to implementing a public wiki to solicit suggestions from the public on the project, the task force has made extensive use of a private wiki on which to post its work; as the twelve members of the task force complete their respective assigned sections, they then post the lists on the wiki for review. The wiki also provides a forum for comments and for sharing information simply and quickly in ways that older technologies (such as e-mail) could not.

In conclusion, to answer the question posed in the title of this article, "are we there yet?" perhaps the answer is "not yet—but we are getting pretty close, and it appears that we will make it this time". Of course, there are still some very thorny issues to work out— how do we handle Psalms (Music) (which is not actually a genre or form); or how do we winnow down the initial lists of terms to a more manageable size? Such questions may be complicated, but they are not beyond the capabilities of our respective groups to resolve. As someone who has been involved with these various endeavors for more than twenty years, I for one am extremely encouraged by these latest efforts, and I am confident that, regardless of whether a truly comprehensive music thesaurus is ever constructed—one that deals with "about-ness" as well as "is-ness"—the present genre/form project will result in a controlled vocabulary that will greatly benefit our users and go far in improving access to music.