

## Going With the Flow: Music Streaming Services for Libraries

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In September 2004 the CD “holdings” at the Sound and Moving Image Library at York were increased by sixty-six percent in one fell swoop, or, more accurately, through two big invoices. A subscription to Naxos Music Library (NML) added about 5,500 CDs or 80,000 tracks and Classical Music Library (CML) added 2,300 CDs or 35,000 tracks to our collection, which means that students and faculty at York now have access to a total of 295,000 tracks (our hard-copy holdings are about 12,000 CDs which, at fifteen tracks per CD, amounts to 180,000 tracks).

We’re not used to thinking about our collections in terms of individual tracks and, although it can be useful for teaching, it can also be illogical and cumbersome. In the old pre-streaming days, if you were to search for, say, Stockhausen’s *Stimmung*, you would expect to find one piece or track on a CD. But under the new rules you will be presented with a whopping fifty-one tracks with an average duration of one minute. In CML, where there is a performance of *Stimmung*, tracks can be selected as a group if they are part of the same work. Unfortunately, however, due to the somewhat unpredictable nature of the streaming technology involved in delivering them, they will not play seamlessly from one track to the next. There are clearly audible clips at the end of each of track because the decay has been truncated prematurely. NML adds an extra irritant by requiring you to click the checkbox beside each track before being able to listen to them as a group (but don’t look for Stockhausen in

NML). The alternative, which is lumping the tracks together into one track, as is done with, for example, Bartók’s *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* in CML, is by far a more pleasant listening experience, but allows for less flexibility in using the tracks for teaching and research.

“Content is king,” or so Bill Gates proclaimed back in 1996 when the Internet was beginning to take off commercially (recall, however, that Gates initially dismissed the Internet in 1994 when the NCSA Mosaic browser first appeared and he directed his efforts towards creating a Microsoft-controlled network). Content unquestionably is the overriding criterion by which we should evaluate online music streaming services, but, given the fact that the state of content is in constant flux, it is perhaps also the most fleeting criterion. Reviews of both CML and NML in *Notes* (June and December 2004) already seem dated in terms of their discussions about content; and, indeed, at MLA in Vancouver in February, both companies announced the addition of significant new collections to their libraries, indicating that we may be at the beginning of a period of rapid expansion of content—at an extra cost, of course. NML claims it will mount the entire collection of jazz reissues available on the Fantasy label, which would presumably include the massive *Original Jazz Classics* series. This will be a vast improvement over what’s currently available under the categories “Jazz Contemporary,” which amounts to about 110 CDs of mostly unknown jazz artists from Europe, and

“Jazz/Folk/Blues Legends,” which seems to be a grab-bag of recordings for which it was easy to get copyright clearance. CML will be offering *Smithsonian Global Sounds*, which includes almost the entire Folkways and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings collections, the International Library of African Music, and the Archives and Research Center for Ethnomusicology in India. If the announcements materialize, then these online collections will indeed begin to rival what we have on CD.

In some ways the CML collection is more interesting than NML’s, both in terms of the repertoire and performers, since it is a collection of smaller, more specialized labels. Where else would you be able to find two different performances of Elliott Carter’s solo guitar piece, *Changes*, played by the same guitarist, David Starobin, for the same label, Bridge? Or nineteen works by Xenakis, in this case presented as nineteen separate tracks, thanks to the composer’s decision to write pieces without movements? NML, the underdog of classical music labels, has received awards for a number of its recordings, but many of their non-awarded performances have elicited less than favourable responses. CML has performers whose names you will recognize while NML has specialized in signing unknown artists and groups, some of whom should probably remain unknown. I’ve had one faculty member tell me that she thought the NML performance of a particular piece might be instructive for her students to hear how the piece should not be played. Would you rather hear the *Goldberg Variations* played by Naxos’s “house pianist” Jenő Jandó, who happens to suffer from the same involuntary vocalizations as Glenn Gould (but that is where the comparison ends) or by Hyperion’s Tatiana Nikolayeva in CML? I’m not an expert when it comes to distinguishing

between performances of prescriptively notated music, but I do get the sense that the diversity in caliber and interpretive style of the NML stable of performers can be irksome to some. To be fair, though, the Naxos catalogue is extensive and there are some unusual gems to be found in it (although one particularly interesting title, *Introduction to Canadian Music*, doesn’t seem to be available online). And for breadth of repertoire NML certainly will appeal to the average undergraduate student who needs to listen to a version of Beethoven’s Fifth and be able to recognize it at a listening test, however bad or unorthodox the performance may be. In fact, the *Great Orchestral Classics* series, prominently displayed on the homepage, provides a good starting point for any listening test covering the “classics.” It certainly helped me to remember the names of pieces and composers long forgotten.

One very obvious and disappointing gap is the representation of opera in both CML and NML (could it be the length of the pieces that has made them shy away from offering them?). NML conveniently provides a comprehensive collection of synopses and libretti, but its selection of recordings is limited to an average of one unknown performance per well-known opera and CML’s selection consists mostly of opera excerpts. Having complete operas online, with multiple performances, is what would immediately make these services more useful for students since they simply cannot afford to buy the box sets. There is, of course, no end to the number of historical performances of the standard repertoire available, and without doubt this will continue to be a source for expansion. NML has already made several forays into reissuing historical performances, sometimes with interesting legal ramifications (Capitol Records is currently reclaiming from

Naxos performances by Menuhin and Casals originally recorded in the 1930s.)

NML and CML do seem to be staking out their own territories with respect to each other, unlike the more mainstream or commercially oriented music streaming services such as eMusic, Rhapsody, Puretracks, iTunes, and Napster (the reincarnated commercial service), which mostly seem to have access to largely overlapping sets of recordings, all in the range of 750,000 tracks. It's certainly clear that the commercial services use the same metadata with the same mistakes, supplied by Gracenote CDDB, the industry standard for "music recognition services." As an aside, Gracenote's sprawling and largely uncontrolled database contains information on over 3.5 million CDs or 45 million tracks, so there are still at least 44 million tracks that could be digitized and offered up for streaming. (But you still will not be able to get music performed by the Beatles due to licensing restrictions.) The popular music services differentiate themselves from each other primarily by offering different potential uses for their proprietary file formats and by the branding and lifestyle associations they offer (you can't have an iPod without iTunes). Subscriptions, at least for now, are only offered to individuals, but Napster has paved the way by negotiating a campus-wide license with the administration of Penn State, a remarkable development if only for the disheartening fact the library was bypassed altogether. We should at least be thankful that NML and CML are approaching libraries rather than university administrations. But then again, the purpose of the Napster deal was more to stem illegal downloading, verified by the fact that the top two songs downloaded by students at Penn State during January 2004 were from Outkast's latest album, *Speakerboxxx*.

It may well be that within a few years the lack of repertoire in the classical music segment of the online streaming market will no longer be an issue, and that product differentiation is achieved through value-added components, such as the historical and biographical information we are already seeing. These components, like the opera libretti mentioned earlier, the historical and biographical material (so-called metadata), flexible search interfaces that rival library systems interfaces and novel un-library-like means of organization, will ultimately ensure that libraries buy subscriptions. (Although I can certainly do without the "moods" provided by CML, with such utterly useless labels as "Bombastic Beethoven," "Classical Chillout," or "Music for a Relaxing Bath.") The true potential of the format, however, will be realized with a full integration into online catalogues (OCLC will soon be selling MARC records for the Naxos collection) and courseware such as WebCT, enhanced with links to third-party, text-based subscriptions such as Grove Music and Wilson (available in CML).

Remember the mid-1990s Variations Project at Indiana University's Music Library, a pilot venture with IBM for networked distribution of sound files? The idea was to have workstations in the music library at which students could listen to selected pieces and view the accompanying score. Because of the network technology at the time it could only happen in the library itself. Now, ten years later, we're experiencing the Variations Project on a world-wide scale: Naxos servers are housed in Hong Kong (annoyingly so for librarians since this is the default time zone for statistical reports) that can be comfortably accessed world-wide. Aside from the occasional slow-loading screen, particularly in NML, streaming is reliable but still untested in situations where hundreds of students may

be accessing the same piece within a short period of time, which is what typically happens just before an exam.

But most people are still listening through the distinctly un-hi-fi-like “multimedia” sound systems that come with computers, hardly comparable to even an entry-level stereo system, whether at home or in the car. Computer sound systems are designed for computer games, with surround sound and other effects used to enhance the gaming experience, all of which are decidedly unmusical in their applications. The next step in the migration from CD to online streaming will likely to be the use of networked streaming devices or network players such as NAD’s NetCap or Turtle Beach’s Audiotron, which allow you to play the files through your stereo system by means of an Ethernet or Wi-Fi (wireless) connection without having to go through a gaming soundcard and without having to relocate your computer to the living room. Even better would be a slim laptop styled like a coffee-table book, with Wi-Fi connection. NML actually provides a bit rate that is CD quality (128 kbps), which I haven’t heard, but the near-CD quality bit rate (64 kbps) we get through both NML and CML sounds crystal clear when played through a proper amplifier and set of speakers. We are

witnessing yet another change of format, perhaps the final change, since the concept of format as a container (78, LP, CD) has now been rendered obsolete with sound files flowing through the ether from one piece of hardware to the next.

One last issue: What will music librarians who are responsible for collection development be doing in the future? Once you’ve bought a few subscriptions, there really isn’t any need to tend to them since the companies will need to continuously update their collections to compete with each other. My guess is we will be roaming the used record and CD shops in search of unusual or out-of-print recordings that will never make it into the streaming services, but for which there will still be a need, particularly amongst researchers. And this brings us full circle to something that resembles the golden era of music librarianship in the 1960s. To quote Ruth Watanabe, the recently deceased and much admired music librarian who spent her summers rummaging through the rare-book stores and auctions of Europe: “I bought and bought and bought. There were riches to be had and it was simply delightful beyond words to spend the University’s money for such a magnificent cause.”