

The Weakest Link:
Subject Access to Music in Online Catalogues
by Alastair Boyd, Cataloguing Department,
Robarts Library, University of Toronto

When we talk about “Subject” access to music, what do we actually mean? For books and textual material, subject cataloguing means adding terms to represent the topic of an item. Library users looking for material on a topic can then use these assigned subject terms to find what is available. Since music (printed music or sound recordings) is not *about* anything in the way a book is about something, subject access to music has nothing to do with topics. Instead, the assumption is made that catalogue users will want to find musical works in a certain *form*, for a certain *medium*, and perhaps fulfilling a certain *function*. For instance, a Library of Congress heading such as *Sonatas (Violin and piano)* describes both form and medium; *Waltzes* refers to the form only; *Piano trios* refers to the medium; *Wedding music* refers to the function. Music cataloguers assign form and genre terms so that people can find music based on what it *is*, not what it is *about*.

Confusion can arise when these form and genre headings co-exist with topical headings under the collective label of “subject headings”, as they do in the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*. LCSH is a general list, created by LC’s literary warrant over many years, and originally designed to produce convenient alphabetical arrangements in card catalogues. This warrant—creation of headings specifically for items catalogued by LC—together with the physical constraints of searching in cabinets full of cards, has given rise to fluidly constructed, “precoordinated”

headings. In other words, LCSH headings often combine a number of distinct terms denoting different concepts, to produce single phrases that describe topics: *Communism and music*, *Women concentration camp guards*, *Composers in literature*, and so on. The choice and order of terms in such phrases is often arbitrary, so filing additional cards with cross-references helps steer library patrons in the right direction: e.g. from *Music and communism* to *Communism and music*. Where it has been considered useful to create a hierarchical, consecutive sequence of related headings, these headings are inverted to bring them into alphabetical compliance: *Choruses, Sacred (Mixed voices, 4 parts), Unaccompanied* is a particularly twisted example familiar to all music cataloguers. In this case, the broadest heading *Choruses* can be followed immediately in the subject catalogue by the narrower heading *Choruses, Sacred*, which can be further sub-arranged according to vocal medium and accompaniment. The more natural form of the heading—*Unaccompanied sacred choruses*—would push the material so described to the far end of the alphabet, and thus into a cabinet conceivably several yards away from *Choruses* in general.

As computer catalogues (OPACs) have increasingly replaced cards, problems inherent in the structure and principles of LCSH have become more and more apparent. Examinations and criticisms of LCSH have been proliferating since the late 1980s, both in

general terms and from the standpoint of music cataloguing. One such document even emanates from the Library of Congress itself—a proposal from the LC Music Subject Group on improving music subject access. In the preamble there is no mincing of words: the “current system of music subject headings, developed for a card catalog, is antiquated and unsuitable [for] the online catalog.... Headings are a combination of form and medium. Application of headings involves subtle practices which are difficult for catalogers to master and confusing to users.”¹

The fundamental problem is the inconsistency with which LCSH includes terminology for medium and form. Sometimes these terms are stated specifically, sometimes only generally, and sometimes they are omitted altogether. Also, there is a different treatment for music featuring solo instruments or voices. Some examples:

1. *Concertos (Violin)* versus *Concertos (Violin with string orchestra)*. The first implies a full orchestral accompaniment, the second explicitly indicates the string orchestra.

2. *Violin with instrumental ensemble*. Here there is a solo instrument with an accompaniment only broadly indicated. To include the names of accompanying instruments requires instead a heading such as:

3. *Octets (Piano, bassoon, flute, percussion, violin, viola, violoncello)*. Now all the instruments are named, but the relationship of solo violin to ensemble accompaniment is lost. Also, few users can see the logic behind the order of elements and browse accordingly. The instruments don't even appear to add up to

eight, because “percussion” is used collectively here.

4. *Piano quintets*. Here the heading alone stands for piano, two violins, viola, cello. Compare this with *String quintets (Violins (2), viola, violoncellos (2))*, where the heading indicates broad medium and ensemble size, with instrumental details given in score order.

5. *Instrumental ensembles*. This is the only valid chamber music heading as soon as more than nine instruments are involved. Suddenly no instrument names at all can be specified; we know only that there are ten or more instruments, involving two or more families (e.g., winds and strings).

6. *Sonatas (Bass clarinet and piano)*. Because this is a duet, the specific member of the clarinet family is named here, and the piano, regarded as accompaniment, comes second. If a cello is added to this ensemble, then we must use *Trios (Piano, clarinet, violoncello)* instead. The clarinet loses its “bass” designation, and even if the composer calls the piece a “sonata,” the heading no longer describes it as such. Note that the piano is now named first.

Once vocal works enter the picture, things become still more inconsistent. Consider the heading:

7. *Songs (High voice) with instrumental ensemble*. “Instrumental ensemble” in this context (accompanying a vocal piece) now stands for only two or more instruments, which must remain unnamed.

8. *Choruses, Sacred (Mixed voices, 4 parts), Unaccompanied*. Does this imply SATB chorus? Probably—but headings for choral works specify only the number of choral parts, not the specific voices involved. Moreover, the number is indicated only when there are eight or fewer parts, and only for a cappella works,

¹Library of Congress Music Subject Group, “Improving Subject Access for Music Materials: A Proposal.” April 28, 1993. Published in *Music Cataloging Bulletin* 24 no. 7 (1993): 3-6.

or those with keyboard accompaniment. In addition, all solo voices are entirely ignored.

And so on. The point is these inconsistencies stem from the card catalogue, when such headings were a pragmatic, even creative, method of providing subject access while constrained by an alphabetical, card-based list. In our brave new online world, however, keywords are the instinctive search strategy, especially when the terminology and heading structure are unfamiliar. In a music library these days, most OPAC users treat these carefully formed LCSH headings as no more than a quarry to be mined for keywords, disregarding the structure and logic behind them. This is not only sad for the cataloguers who have patiently learned how to build and apply them, but, far more to the point, the strategy does not work well for the catalogue user. As we see in the examples above, LCSH headings cannot be relied on for keyword searching by form and medium since they do not consistently contain the necessary terms.

Imagine that a user is looking for works like Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen," by searching with the keywords soprano, piano and clarinet. Because the LCSH heading for this work is simply *Songs (High voice) with instrumental ensemble*, there is no reliable way to search an LCSH catalogue for this work or others using the same instruments. Nor will the LC classification scheme provide much help, beyond enabling users to restrict the search to songs with piano and one other instrument. Anyone attempting such apparently simple searches will have to throw in title- and note-field keywords as well, and hope for the best. This sacrifice of precision, and the uncertainty of outcome, means that the catalogue fails in one of its basic functions: to inform users reliably of all library holdings that meet their search criteria.

"Clearly what is needed is a new and simplified system for listing forms and media, stripping away the intricate practices developed over past years," says the previously-quoted LC Music Subject Group 1993 manifesto. In fact, one such system has been around for nearly thirty years—but not the one the Group has in mind. Another solution for filling in the gaps left by LCSH was inspired by the advent of the MARC music format and the prospect of computerized catalogues: the MARC control fields for form and medium. First of all, the control fields 008 and 047 in music records have been defined to carry information about musical forms to supplement LCSH. Cataloguers can choose from a list of sixty-five two-character codes representing common musical forms or genres, such as "fg" for fugues, "sy" for symphonies, "tc" for toccatas, etc.

Second, and even more useful, the precise medium of performance can be coded in field 048, again using a two-character code. Each code may be followed by a two-digit number (01-99) to indicate the number of parts or performers, if applicable. Subfield codes distinguish between soloists and other performers or ensembles. For example, a piano trio is represented by the 048 string "\$a ka01 \$a sa01 \$a sc01"; a song such as Schubert's "Der Hirt auf dem Felsen" by "\$b va01 \$a wc01 \$a ka01".

These codes are conspicuously unhelpful to catalogue users in this opaque form. However, once indexed they need only be linked to drop-down lists of genres/forms and instruments (voices, ensembles) in the OPAC. Searchers could then select from these natural language lists (this would help cataloguers in applying the codes too). Of course, 048 coding has to be consistently applied to all music records of the same level within a catalogue, if

this form of access is to be useful and reliable. Regrettably, in the early 1990s the Library of Congress discontinued this form-and-medium coding, and many libraries have followed suit. This decision was made on the grounds that although “the 048 field of the USMARC format was created specifically to provide access via instrumentation ... this field is not used by many libraries because 1) it requires time-consuming coding instead of natural language, 2) the codes are not comprehensive (for example, no code exists for contrabassoon), and 3) many library catalogs do not index this field.”² These arguments are rather circular, and, ten years too late, these objections seem rather easy to answer. After all, to abandon such coding is to render useless all the labour ever spent in providing it, since its value as an access point depends on consistency. However, history has moved in another direction, based on keyword indexing of natural language fields. Libraries that have discontinued 048 field coding will probably be reluctant to resume the practice.

This is where the Music Thesaurus Project could come to the rescue. For ten years Harriette Hemassi of Rutgers University has been leading the work in developing a dedicated thesaurus for the discipline of music. Inspired by the success and methodology of the *Art & Architecture Thesaurus*, and using terminology primarily from LCSH, it will permit faceted access to music, by means of a standard vocabulary in a systematic hierarchy. Music Library Association members were able to read all about the underlying principles in MLA’s *Notes* (March 1994), with updates

²Working Group on Faceted Access to Music, “Discussion Paper, Faceted Access to Music: Possibilities and Ramifications”, MLA Web site 22 Oct. 2002: <<http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/BCC/BCC-Historical/BCC94/94WGFAM1.html>>

presented at the annual MLA Conferences.³ A comprehensive bibliography relating to the project is available online through the MLA Web site, along with online versions of proposals and working documents, so I will give only a very brief summary.⁴

Hemassi and the MLA Working Group on Faceted Access to Music have been sorting and converting around 14,000 LCSH music headings into seven facets or provisional categories: Agents, Events, Forms/ Genres, Geocultural Attributes, Sound Devices, Texts, and Other. The idea is to break apart the multiple-concept, “pre-coordinated” style of LCSH subject strings into thesaurus-style single concept terms. For example, the LCSH heading *Suites (Recorder and harpsichord)* combines a form-genre term (*Suites*) with terms for sound devices; *Folk songs, Russian* combines geo-cultural and form-genre terms. We can use the online *Art & Architecture Thesaurus* browser to see the possibilities for contextual searching provided by a properly structured thesaurus.⁵ It demonstrates the features we could expect in the Music Thesaurus: a comprehensive vocabulary, arranged in a hierarchy that reflects the discipline rather than the alphabet, with a complete cross-reference structure to link broader, narrower, and related terms.

Such a thesaurus would be a widely useful addition to the reference resources for the field

³ Harriette Hemassi, “The Music Thesaurus: Function and Foundation,” *Notes* 50, no. 3 (March 1994): 875-882.

⁴Music Thesaurus Project Advisory Task Force, “Music Thesaurus Project Bibliography,” MLA Web site 22 Oct. 2002: <<http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/BCC/MTP/mtp-bib.html>>

⁵Getty Research Institute, *Art & Architecture Thesaurus Browser*, 22 Oct. 2002: <<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/aat/>>

