

Navigating the New Normal: Discussing Electronic Music Scores During COVID-19

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Abstract

An edited transcript of a roundtable presentation held on Thursday, June 9, 2022, at the Canadian Association of Music Libraries (CAML) 2022 virtual conference. Through a series of six questions chosen to fit in a one-hour format, music librarians from three Canadian universities discussed their experiences with the acquisition of e-score databases. Topics included motivation for acquisition, selection criteria, marketing strategies, patron responses, resource issues, and impact on print collections. This article is offered to a broad audience of library professionals in the belief that topics discussed will be applicable to collection development in subject areas apart from music.

Question One: What prompted you to consider adding e-scores to your collection? What were you hoping for? Did you have any apprehensions about adding e-scores to your collection? Did the pandemic play a part in your decision to subscribe to an e-score resource?

Trevor Deck: In March 2020, COVID-19 forced the closure of University of Toronto libraries. This meant loss of access to our print score collection. We initially hoped that the HathiTrust Emergency Library would provide us with electronic access to at least some of our print collection. However, we soon discovered that OCLC numbers from MARC records in our music score collection did not match up well against those in the HathiTrust records. Therefore, we had to augment our access to electronic scores. We already had access to Alexander Street Press' Classical Scores Library. It offers a good mix of classical music ranging from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. However, this collection still represents only a fraction of our print collection and is relatively limited in terms of publishers and editions. So, after trialling several products, including BabelScores, A-R Editions' Recent Researches in Music Online (RRIMO) and LibraryMusicScores.com, we decided to proceed with a subscription to a relatively new e-score platform called nkoda. We found it to offer the widest and most current breadth of digital music scores on the market. Additionally, we opted to subscribe to A-R Editions' A-R Music Anthology (ARMA). It offers representative vocal and instrumental compositions from many periods and has been designed for use within music history classes and consequently has been heavily utilized in the Faculty of Music's core Music History courses. We also subscribed to BabelScores, which increased our access to contemporary works, including scores by a current composition student at the University of Toronto.

We certainly had some apprehensions, including the subscription costs and limited control over content. Since we had no access to print collections, subscribing to nkoda was somewhat of a necessity. They offered us special promotional pricing during the pandemic, so the cost made sense

at the time. It still remains to be determined if we'll move forward with the platform indefinitely, but we have subscribed for a three-year term at this point. The lack of metadata for these resources and the impact on discoverability is definitely a concern. Many of these resources are fairly new and either have no MARC records available or are lacking in terms of the quality of records. We also have some data privacy concerns. For example, you need to create an account for nkoda, which is cause for some ethical concerns around privacy and user data. The potential to leverage user data in an attempt to gain individual subscribers after students graduate is one issue. Additionally, a lack of technological infrastructure within the library to support nkoda presents potential challenges from an equity and accessibility perspective, as we currently do not lend tablets through the library. There have been conversations about piloting a tablet lending program; however, we are still working out the logistics of doing so.

Brian McMillan: I have many of the same concerns as Trevor, but first let me address your question: "What prompted me to consider e-scores?" Certainly, the pandemic was a major motivator. But even before 2020 – let's say over the last 10 years – I'd seen musicians increasingly rely on tablets in rehearsal and performance. There are the occasional technical challenges – swiping too many pages over at once, the power failing, annotations not working, or something freezing – but still, musicians are beginning to shift to electronic platforms for reading music. I've always been curious how libraries would respond to this new preference. And more than just libraries, how would the whole commercial industry of music publication react? A second motivator is the increasing prioritization of electronic resources over physical in my university's library system, which I believe is the case in most academic libraries. Online resources help libraries manage their collection footprint. They can also help with accessibility issues: e-resources can facilitate simultaneous access to an item, and their convenience is unbeatable when we're all spending a lot more time in front of our computers. Third, the emergence of a commercial e-score vendor, nkoda, with very desirable content was timely. So, those were some of the more longstanding motivators for considering e-score acquisitions. Still, the pandemic definitely moved us to action.

In the summer of 2020, Western Libraries started a trial with nkoda. I hadn't heard the same desire or interest in BabelScores or ARMA from Western's Don Wright Faculty of Music. I did take up A-R Editions' offer to trial their Recent Researches in Music Online collection, but user demand didn't justify the expense of a subscription.

My apprehensions include the impact of an e-score subscription on my acquisitions budget. Would a subscription to an online platform mean I would have to take money away from the purchase of print scores? Also, it's the lack of ownership over the e-scores; that is, we have no guarantee of perpetual access. What happens if a publisher like Bärenreiter decides to withdraw its scores from nkoda? Will I have to repurchase some or all of that content on top of continuing subscription costs? Moreover, will I have to start multiple e-score platform subscriptions? My current acquisitions budget can't support this potential cost. Finally, I have the same ethical concern that

Trevor raised: am I creating future generations of subscribers for nkoda or other third-party vendors? Do I want to be an enabler of a lifelong dependency?

Kevin: Ditto to everything my colleagues said. In addition, I was already looking at e-scores prior to COVID because of the closure of UBC's branch music library inside the UBC School of Music and the move of the music collection to the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, a 15-minute walk away. With its move, usage of the collection dropped. I turned to electronic resources as a means of reconnecting the patron base to the collection, since library resources would be accessible without leaving the School. I could see the success of our e-book packages through their popularity. So, I felt there was precedent for moving the score collection to include 'e.' As well, musicians were asking for them. Regardless of their attractiveness in my situation, I have concerns about e-scores, not just the damage to the collection if subscriptions are cut, but the implication for use of the collection by local music organizations and performers unaffiliated with UBC whose access would be restricted under licensing agreements. I also agree that the cost of e-scores is a worry. Where would the money come from to introduce and sustain these resources? Would funding for an e-score database be taken out of my print score budget?

Question Two: Were you seeking specific content (e.g. parts and scores, Canadian content, Urtext editions, etc.)? How did issues of findability on the databases (i.e., database search engine) and usability (i.e., score reader) impact resource selection? Were there issues around vendor compatibility (e.g., ability to link a vendor's resource to an institutional login and access management system, openness of the vendor to accommodating an academic library and its patron base as opposed to individual consumers, etc.)?

Trevor: We were certainly seeking some specific content. We were sort of looking for a little bit of everything. We support a large music program (around 1000 full-time students). We required access to scores for teaching, research, and performance (both small and large ensembles). In trialling these various resources, faculty also shared specific needs. For example, a composition professor in the Faculty of Music noted that nkoda brings a large collection of scores and parts, including rare 20th- and 21st-century repertoire, with the click of a button, and felt that it would perfectly complement Naxos Music Library during the closures. Specifically, the instructor noted, "I'll be teaching a course in the Fall about post-1950 Polish School of Modern Composers. We have the materials in our library, but they're mostly unwieldy, oversized scores. While I could probably arrange for curbside pickup myself, getting copies of these scores to the whole class would be a real challenge." Typically, he would place these scores on course reserve, but of course that wasn't an option at the time.

Content discoverability and user interface considerations definitely played a role in our decisions around e-score platforms. Had COVID-19 not been a factor, I think we likely would have held off on subscribing to nkoda until the resource was more in line with the needs of libraries in terms of access and discoverability. Some of these concerns have been addressed in the most recent nkoda

update. For example, you can now search for a specific score and it will return different editions of the same work. However, when it comes to the metadata for nkoda, BabelScores, and ARMA, there remains a lot to be desired. BabelScores and ARMA have yet to provide title-level MARC records, while nkoda has provided some test records that contain numerous issues and will require a lot of work before they'll be usable. Nkoda is committed to improving its records and has been working with our Special Formats Librarian to better understand the needs of libraries from a metadata perspective. I also was invited to participate in a library advisory committee by nkoda's Head of Sales to share feedback on the platform.

Another consideration around usability is the fact that nkoda locks its content down to within its proprietary app, with no ability to print or screenshare. This is less than ideal from a teaching perspective, though I can appreciate the company's desire to appease the publishers that they represent.

In the case of ARMA, we had to work with A-R Editions a fair bit to make sure that the authentication was smooth and straightforward for students. We're still experiencing some issues when trying to link directly to a score or article. Despite these noted concerns, many of these issues are to be expected with new vendors and electronic resources, and I'm confident they will be addressed as the platforms mature.

Brian: Specific content that we were looking for was, first and foremost, course reserve materials. Ultimately, Western Libraries came up with a different solution – a controlled digital lending arrangement in collaboration with Scholars Portal – which I can discuss a little bit later. I would also love to be able to offer electronic materials instead of physical parts to the Faculty of Music ensembles. Western's Music Library is responsible for a separate performance collection, which supplies repertoire for the Faculty's choirs, bands, and orchestras, but at the moment using any of the e-score platforms for that purpose is not legally or logistically feasible.

Trevor has pointed out the many issues that plague e-score metadata. At Western we currently subscribe to only one e-score database. Strangely enough, I actually think the works in that database are *too* findable. Much of the repertoire is drawn from antiquated editions of canonical works. While these scores serve a purpose, I'm discouraged by how easily they pop up in our catalogue searches because I know many users likely favour ease of access over the quality of the score. So, for example, library patrons will accept an online score from the old Bach Gesellschaft collected works edition over the newer, more authoritative print scores sitting on our shelves. The algorithms of our catalogue encourage this choice by boosting electronic resources over print.

I'll make just one comment about vendor compatibility. Our initial trial with nkoda in 2020 was extremely taxing for the Music Library staff in terms of the setup and troubleshooting. Patrons found it really onerous to initiate their personal accounts with the database through our trial subscription. That experience made me realize we did not have the staff capacity to handle the

subscription. Now, I know things have changed significantly at nkoda, but at that point it was not feasible for us.

Kevin: I agree with Brian. My original intent included finding some mechanism to improve access to library “course reserve” and “in demand” materials. Electronic resources offered one solution. Expanding upon Trevor’s comments, these are young businesses. They are learning to pay closer attention to the needs of academic institutions. nkoda has been very successful at expanding their client base to include North American music schools. Other commercial e-score enterprises have struggled. One e-score vendor renovated their website mid-term, impacting findability and usability of content – and stressing out students. I think it’s important during initial conversations with e-resource database vendors to ask about their inclusion of librarians on their development projects. Do they understand how those projects might impact academic library patrons? Things are changing. It’s a learning process. Libraries are learning to adjust to the process of accessioning e-score databases, and e-score vendors are learning to accommodate the demands of academic libraries.

Question Three. How did you make your patrons aware of the e-score resource? Were your marketing strategies successful or unsuccessful? Why?

Brian: I didn’t do anything innovative in this department when we launched our 2020 trial of nkoda. It was a few months after the pandemic had hit, the academic year was over and undergraduates had mostly left, so I pitched the trial to faculty and graduate students, who are more consistently engaged with the library through the summer months. This also made the pool of potential users more manageable. I announced the trial via e-mail on the faculty listservs and at Faculty Council meetings. The nkoda database trial was more broadly advertised on the Western Library database page.

Were my marketing strategies successful? Yes, I would say so, primarily because of the timing. As I said, it was the beginning of the pandemic, and at that point in the early summer, the music faculty members were heavily engaged in planning the Fall 2020 semester, trying to figure out what things were going to look like. Attendance at the virtual Faculty Council meetings was very high. A lot of people heard the message, and they were primed to try virtual scores at a time when there were several obstacles to obtaining print scores from the library.

Trevor: We incorporated a lot of the same strategies that Brian mentioned when first trialling these new platforms. We published a few posts on our blog to introduce the resources and highlight their functionalities. We highlighted the resources on our library’s homepage and advertised them on our digital display at the circulation desk. We made students aware of the resources through classroom visits and orientations, as well as Faculty Council meetings. We have considered offering tutorials or workshops to demonstrate how to use the platforms. We haven't fully followed through on this idea yet, partially due to the fact that screen-sharing or recording is not possible with nkoda, but this is something we intend to explore in the future.

Were these marketing strategies successful? I would say largely, yes. Usage stats, especially for nkoda, tend to bear out that the resources were really well used, at least initially. Usage was highest in October 2020, peaking at 1200 scores viewed that month. This coincided with the beginning of our subscription and one of our library closures. There was consistently high use through 2020 and into 2021, with usage decreasing through the summer months, since there are far fewer music courses offered then. nkoda has continued to get a lot of use in the last year [2021], though the numbers aren't quite as high as the first year.

BabelScores developed a beta usage stats module, but it does not seem to be working at present, and when it did work, the metrics it outputted were limited and of questionable accuracy. In regard to ARMA, we haven't really explored stats too much because it's mainly a teaching tool. So, the assigned readings will dictate which titles get the most use. I'm confident that once we get individual title-level records for these resources into our online catalogue, usage will increase across the board. So, generally speaking, I think the marketing strategies we have incorporated have been effective, but there is more we could do in terms of going into the classroom and providing demonstrations at the library.

Kevin: Marketing is important for me because of the ephemerality of the music collection consequent to our increased holdings of music e-resources. It's not like you can wander into the library and actually see the full music collection at UBC anymore. E-mail marketing campaigns have been one solution. They can be anywhere from twelve to twenty pages highlighting recent acquisitions and including links to catalogue bibliographic records and streaming audio. The latter helps boost my Naxos usage stats! But the ephemerality of the music collection also impacts my music research guide. That guide serves as a map of the music collection as well as a means to promote e-score databases. Traditional marketing instruments actually work: signage in the library's physical space and advertising our e-score databases during library tours. Taking undergrads through the library is an opportunity to draw attention to the dates on call numbers and where to look online for more recently published materials. However, the biggest impact on marketing comes from our faculty. Whenever they refer students to online resources, that builds student awareness and increases usage.

Question Four. Who provides the e-score resource usage stats? You or the vendor? How frequently do you run e-score resource usage stats? What did your resource usage stats reveal? Were there any other ways you received user responses (i.e., e-mails, texts, in-person, blogs, other social media)?

Trevor: nkoda has an intuitive administrative module that provides easy access to granular usage data. All the user information is anonymized, but you can see which titles were accessed and how long they were viewed, right down to the second. I do question some of the data. For instance, there was one score that had been viewed in one session for 117,000 minutes. So, maybe somebody just left the app open for months? While I have noticed the odd anomaly in the data, it generally seems quite accurate, and when I look at which scores, composers, and publishers are

getting the most use, everything seems to track. I find it really interesting to be able to see how usage waxes and wanes through the monthly usage and I'm looking forward to seeing how more strategies around marketing can further increase our usage.

In ARMA, we have to ask the vendor to provide stats upon request, as the platform does not include its own usage stats module. However, as I previously noted, I'm not overly concerned about the stats right now because it is mainly used as a teaching resource in some of our core music history classes, and the cost isn't too substantial. We're comfortable that it's being used effectively and the subscription is providing good value, but I am hopeful the vendor will offer a self-serve option for tracking usage stats as a part of the future development of the platform.

BabelScores provided some usage stats in a beta phase in December 2021, but the information was limited and questionable, and last I checked, it did not seem to be working. I plan to follow up to see if they have any updates in that regard.

How frequently do I check usage stats? With nkoda, I try and check them on a monthly basis just to track usage trends and monitor for potential turn-aways. We've got a 150 simultaneous user subscription, or what they call the unlimited user limit, so we haven't had any turn-aways reported so far. I should specify a user is defined as having the score open in the app, so nkoda is confident that even an institution of our size is unlikely to run up against user limits with an unlimited user subscription. This has served as a good reminder to promote the platform at the beginning of each semester, because there will be students who might not be familiar with the resource.

In regard to other ways we received user feedback: at the onset of these trials, we asked our student library assistants to provide reviews of each resource from their perspective. We have a good mix of performance, ethnomusicology, and music history students in our student library assistant group, so that worked really well to get some different perspectives. We also asked for feedback from faculty. I compiled all the responses and used this feedback to support funding requests for the new resources. We also promote the resources on social media, so we received some feedback that way, as well. We've also encouraged students to write posts for our library blog to discuss their experiences with the resources. I think it's all been fairly effective, and as Kevin noted, it's an ongoing process, since there are new students every semester.

Brian: I have two sets of stats that I've looked at concerning e-scores at Western. One comes from our current e-score database, and those I look at once a year just to monitor trends from year to year. Not surprisingly, usage spiked in 2020 and 2021, more than doubling that in any of the previous three years. The second set of e-score statistics I collected during the pandemic related to virtual course reserve usage. Earlier I mentioned a Controlled Digital Lending (CDL) program that Western Libraries set up in collaboration with Scholars Portal. In the 2020/21 academic year, Western Libraries did not offer physical reserves. Thanks to this CDL program, library staff digitized a number of required course materials in the collection, including entire scores which were still under copyright, and made them available via Western's course reserves module. Very strict

conditions applied: only faculty and students registered in the course could access the online content; the print copy was pulled from circulation; the digital copy was viewable by only one user at a time, and no downloading or printing was permitted. Through this program, the Music Library made 59 scores available, which experienced a total of 764 views over the academic year, an average of 13 views per item. Now, that actually sounds pretty good because in other years we have a number of physical reserve items that never circulate. However, diving into these stats proved this same story to hold true for e-scores. The range of use for these 59 items was from 82 views to 0 views and, typical of the “long tail effect,” only nine of the 59 items accounted for 57% of the 764 views while 14 items experienced absolutely no use whatsoever. Based on my past experience, I suspect a student’s perceived need to read a score in order to complete a course assignment will raise its probability of use. Few students will take on supplemental, or optional reading. There’s apparently no difference between electronic and print scores despite the convenience of online access.

Now, one might also blame low usage on the lack of the CDL e-score functionality. At the end of the 2020/21 academic year, one professor told me that she would not use the CDL program again for her course materials since students could not download, save, or annotate the scores, which was an essential component of her course assignments.

Kevin: I have four sources for usage stats. First, the portals provided by some vendors to use on your own. *nkoda* is an example. I support what Trevor was saying. Their stats are detailed enough to help indicate areas of the collection where scores are in demand and areas prime for development and/or marketing. Second, our Technical Services Department provides usage stats. Third, vendors provide their own stats. Curiously, I dealt with one e-score vendor who handed over stats that revealed little use of their product. I had to ask myself whether such low usage stats were the result of poor marketing on my part, disinterest on the part of my patrons, or the vendor’s website inhibiting access and findability. Regardless, deaccessioning a database for whatever reason can be a problem. With cancellation, would your institution allow you to retain the subscription money for allocation to a different resource? I recommend negotiating what happens to funding prior to onboarding an e-resource should you decide to cancel a subscription. Finally, there is one other source for usage stats: students. I’ve been thanked through one-on-one personal conversations with students for onboarding e-scores. Perhaps these exchanges have been the most personally rewarding source for resource use.

Question Five. Did you experience any e-score resource issues (i.e., periods of loss of service, impact of HathiTrust on catalogue records) and how were these addressed? Did your patron base notice service disruptions and respond?

Brian: Western Libraries is a member of HathiTrust. When the offer was made to make our scores available via HathiTrust, I said no because of the lack of usability or functionality with scores that appear in that platform. I felt it was better to offer our users physical access to scores albeit in a less

convenient way (curbside pickup and quarantine delays) than restrictive e-access. My decision was also informed by the experiences of my CAML colleagues whose score collections were available via Hathi. Nevertheless, some Western scores did appear because they were miscategorized in our catalogue as books, not scores. It was a bonus for us to find them online since the Music Library staff could run a list of these miscategorized scores and get their status corrected by technical services staff, but it also meant we weren't permitted to circulate the physical copies while the HathiTrust program was running. Still, as far as I know, the situation caused no problems for users. At least, I didn't hear any complaints.

Trevor: We have yet to experience any major outages on our electronic score platforms. Regarding HathiTrust, University of Toronto Libraries made a system-wide decision to use the HathiTrust Emergency Temporary Access Service (ETAS) to provide sustained access to library materials during the COVID-19 lockdowns. As a part of the ETAS agreement, we had to prohibit all access to our print collections, even going as far as to place caution tape around our stacks. Unfortunately, we soon discovered that we were only able to access a tiny fraction of electronic scores available on HathiTrust, due to issues related to matching on OCLC numbers for HathiTrust records against those in our own catalogue records. So, that was our most significant challenge with respect to access to electronic scores.

We also ran into a challenge working out how to share custom course packs within ARMA. The instructor can create a course pack within the platform that essentially serves as an online course reserve for students to link to. We ran into connectivity issues when attempting to share out the course packs with students. Fortunately, the issues were resolved by sharing out credentials to a single, course-specific login. Unfortunately, this process is a bit clunky. Normally, we use IP authentication that would allow students to authenticate using their U of T credentials. However, as Kevin mentioned, sometimes when working with these smaller vendors, you may have to accept some technical limitations.

Kevin: I only have a couple of points to add. I simply don't know what types of problems patrons may be encountering with our e-score databases if they don't talk to me. I wonder how many users are just walking away as they encounter access difficulties. Again, our e-score vendors are young businesses with limited experience working with academic libraries and a student patron base. For example, learning that it's disruptive to release an e-score platform redesign in the middle of spring term when students are stressed with papers and performances. I appreciate when a vendor learns from such incidents, listens to their client base, and adjusts their practice.

Question Six. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that you would like to add regarding introducing e-score databases into your institution's music collections?

Trevor: Echoing Brian's comment, my main concern with a subscription model for electronic score platforms, particularly for nkoda, is the possibility that publishers will eventually opt to create their own subscription platforms, as we've recently seen with Henle. If commercial video streaming

services and academic e-book platforms are any indication, that could be a real potential future for e-scores, and there's a real fear that we're going to end up having to pay for six or seven different e-score vendors all with their own proprietary apps. Subscription costs in such a scenario could quickly become unsustainable.

Kevin: I would add that there's a benefit to e-scores in terms of alleviating costs related to replacing worn print scores and binding new print scores. Another concern for me is the duplication of scores in print and 'e.' That's an expensive proposition. There's only one music librarian here and with all my other duties it's not always possible to review duplication across formats. It may be more feasible to detect duplication once all e-score bibliographic records are findable through our library's search engine. However, that's currently not the case for the most popular e-score databases.

Brian: Just to add one broader point which hasn't been mentioned yet, I worry about the impact of electronic collections on the consortial relationships that bind our libraries together. How does our increasing reliance on e-only collections affect our ability to provide materials for users at other institutions through interlibrary loan or even to our local patrons not affiliated with the university? How does the subscription model as opposed to outright ownership affect libraries' ability to share our collections broadly? I know there's work being done on this already by other people, particularly concerning ebooks, and I wonder how long it'll take for e-scores to catch up.

The roundtable concluded with a question and answer period moderated by Houman Behzadi. Attendees extended the conversation by speaking to the shareability of content consequent to the restrictive licensing agreements associated with electronic resources, content accessibility issues when subscribing to resources dependent on the downloadability of apps, and the impact on students and their ability to develop performance repertoire when ownership of exclusive tools such as computers and page turner pedals is required.

Canadian Association of Music Libraries (CAML) Virtual Conference

June 9, 2022