

PRESERVE MUSIC LIBRARIES!

Guides to careers for musicians still tend to give music librarianship short shrift, although perhaps not quite so short as that which, not so long ago, advised that the two main qualifications are a tidy mind and handwriting to match. Well, let's see how that equips me to deal with the Lassus motet I have in front of me. No call to the musician who has to read the dots, to the historian who needs to put Lassus in a cultural context, to the linguist who'll be translating the Latin title or the rubric *In octavis Paschae*, or the liturgist who needs to know what that signifies. The tidy mind might come in handy for making vast amounts of disparate data retrievable via an online catalogue but perhaps not so much as the post-grad librarianship qualification. I think the two music degrees are more useful than neat handwriting when it comes to teaching music research techniques to Masters students. Perhaps the only time it came into its own was that occasion when two students asked if we had any fanfares for two baroque trumpets and, since we didn't, I wrote them one.

As the above shows, a career as a music librarian is nothing if not varied, at least in the academic sector in which I work. Ask me to describe a typical day and the odds are that the reality won't be anything like it. The only thing typical about being an academic music librarian is that you never know quite what's coming next but that, whatever the challenge, you've got to meet it as best you're able, which might mean bringing to bear any number of a range of skills. These are skills, too, which are constantly evolving. When I first entered the profession, in 1980, information technology was merely something that a few specialists talked about; now, anyone working in the field of information literacy or information retrieval can't get by without IT skills. In those days too, the distinction between teachers and librarians was fairly rigid, whereas now they're more fluid so that teaching those information and research skills is an important requirement.

I'm conscious, though, that I'm writing from a somewhat privileged position as Deputy Librarian at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. Privileged, not just because the RNCM is a world-class institution, which inspires pride and loyalty in its staff, but also because increasingly music librarianship as I experience it is

to be found chiefly within the conservatoire sector. Sadly, the loss of specialist posts – and in some cases of music collections themselves – is becoming as depressingly regular in our universities as it has been for some time in the public sector. The latter in particular has seen music library provision wantonly treated as a political football. To the right it was, like school music provision, not a core service and therefore had to submit to a market-driven economy; to the left it was ripe for accusations of elitism for purveying what was perceived as a white, western middle-class culture. Both rationales are highly specious in a country where more people listen to music than read books or where it costs less to go to a concert than to watch a Premiership football match. As Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, a staunch supporter of music libraries, has pointed out, choosing to learn to read music is no more elitist than choosing to learn a foreign language.

Ironically, the Internet has become both the librarian's greatest tool and biggest threat. Time and again we're told that we don't need specialists because "it's all on the internet", which as often as not is another way of saying that investing in new technology means that cuts have to be made elsewhere, or that the space it takes up can be found by removing music-sized departments from our libraries. Local authorities and universities justify abolishing music specialists on the grounds that specialists are redundant in other disciplines. Well, no doubt I could make some sense of a physics or geography textbook in that they contain words and diagrams, but what does the physicist or geographer make of all those lines with squiggles and dots on – or how do they respond to the user who wants a vocal score in the Bärenreiter edition, not

the full score from Boosey & Hawkes?

When the UK's first publicly-funded music library is now one with Nineveh and Tyre, when its largest university music department no longer has a dedicated music librarian, or where, in recent months, a major metropolitan authority openly ring-fenced a music post for non-specialists only, one might well send up a cry of "O tempora, o mores". The UK and Ireland branch of the International Association of Music Libraries (IAML), of which I'm currently General Secretary, has been addressing the situation in a number of ways, not least by offering professional responses to government proposals concerning music or libraries, stressing the vital role played by music libraries in initiatives like the *Music Manifesto* (which didn't mention them) or the recent *Blueprint for Libraries*. It was no small credit to IAML(UK & Irl) lobbying support at international level, for instance, that Manchester City Council backed down from its plans to downsize its music provision some years ago. Our Courses and Education Committee has never been busier, delivering training in various aspects of music librarianship to those librarians who find themselves responsible for music services but who lack specialist music skills. It is no accident that the course most in demand is called "Music for the Terrified".

Music libraries have a vital role to play in the lives of all whose lives are touched by music, from the child seeking a Grade I piano piece to the scholar engaged in highly specialised research. They take many forms but share a common goal of facilitating access to something that transcends the boundaries marking our day-to-day existence. It would be a tragedy to realise what we are in danger of losing only when it was too late to do something about it.

Freeman Geoff Thomason

