Chapter 3

Music Information Seeking
Opportunities and Behavior Then and Now

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ABSTRACT

This Chapter provides a summary of the challenges faced by music searchers and a chronological overview of how music information seeking capabilities and resulting user behavior in library settings have changed over time as bibliographic control tools have evolved from card catalogs to online discovery systems. It revisits some of the studies reviewed by King in 2005 and also evaluates studies done in the decade since, identifying trends in music information seeking behavior. Finally, it looks briefly at recommendations for music requirements in catalogs and specialized interfaces.

INTRODUCTION

Academic library collections, along with the methods and tools used to describe and search them, have evolved over time. They began with print materials and collections slowly grew to encompass audiovisual and other media, and now include online materials. None of these formats supplanted the others, but instead collections accrued to include multiple formats. This is especially true in music libraries, where there are not only multiple media formats, but a variety of formats of printed music. Once libraries outgrew simple paper lists of accessions, card catalogs took their place as a tool that both described and allowed searchers to find materials via access points, such as an author’s name. Eventually, online computer catalogs and related descriptive standards, like MARC, became the norm, and now web scale discovery layers are growing more common for discovering not only physical holdings in the library but online content as well. In the last decade or more, libraries have also found themselves competing with content and tools that originate outside of the library sphere, from Google to Wikipedia and YouTube to iTunes, just as examples. These tools compete for the attention of music performers and scholars.

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BACKGROUND

Card catalogs were the descriptive and discovery tools for library collections for decades. They provided very focused entry to a physical collection via controlled access points (author, title, subject). In music libraries it was not uncommon for librarians to try to meet the disparate needs of their users by creating supplemental stand-alone card catalogs to provide additional access points such as record label. Browsing in the card catalog could only occur in a limited manner. While searchers were able to skim cards surrounding their starting point, there was very little opportunity for finding materials that might be related to one’s query, but for which catalogers had not supplied similar subject headings. Therefore, because subject headings could only go so far, card catalogs were well suited for known-item searches, but they were somewhat less helpful for searches wanting to do broad searches for items about a topic.

In the 1980s, card catalogs representing the physical library collection were widely replaced by online catalogs, bringing more discovery opportunities for researchers. New access points were available, as MARC-formatted records provided additional fields that could be indexed and searched, such as publisher, date, and so forth. Not only could library users search on individual indices, they now also had the added power of being able to combine fields in their searches (Author and Title, Author and Date, etc.). Over time, OPACs also began to incorporate the option to perform keyword searches across both indexed and non-indexed fields, such as notes fields. While librarians could see the great usefulness of keyword searching, they continued to espouse the value of performing precise searches using specific indices when possible.

Over time, library collections, including music ones, expanded beyond physical items to include online resources such as e-books, e-journals, and streamed audio and video resources. Libraries also began local digitization programs to provide greater discovery of and access to materials such as images, books, sheet music, maps, newspapers, and much more. Online catalogs expanded proportionately, providing links out to electronic materials that the library had purchased or licensed. Meanwhile, catalogers attempted to create better ways to improve access to materials and connect related materials in the online catalog and other environments. The Functional Requirements for Bibliographic Records (FRBR) model, released in 1998, was designed to connect multiple versions of the same work (editions, formats, etc.) in the online catalog. Boyd (2005) gives an overview of how music access differs between card and online catalogs and posits how FRBR may address the shortcomings found in online catalogs when searching for music. More recently, BIBFRAME and Linked Open Data have emerged to address challenges presented by catalogs and cataloging languages that were originally envisioned to manage print monograph collections and find themselves less successful at providing access to bibliographic information about materials in other formats.

The most recent evolution in library search environments has brought discovery layers, tools that, through the creation of central indexes, can be configured to search across not just a library’s holdings,