Sounds of Music

By Greg Fitzgerald

"Here we will sit and let the sounds of music creep in our ears."

 Appropriately, these words from Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice grace a plaque accompanying the portrait of Harper C. Maybee that hangs in his namesake library. Some fifty years have passed into history since the music collection at Western Michigan University was named for Harper C. Maybee, the first head of the music department at Western State College. For almost fifty years, students have sat in a library named for him, letting the sounds of music creep in their ears.

WMU’s oldest and only named branch library, the Harper C. Maybee Music & Dance Library, had its first home in a specially constructed and designed building, the Maybee Music Hall, on the site now occupied by the University Computing Center. Maybee Hall was one of the first buildings on the new west campus, opening in 1951, some years before the adjacent Waldo Library. A facility to house the music collection and its special formats, where students could listen to assignments between classes, lessons and rehearsals, was needed—as it is today. Music students still live where they work!

The story of the University’s music program is one of phenomenal growth, and the library grew along with the program development and enrollment. In the 1960s and 70s, music could literally be heard all over campus as new and expanding programs quickly outgrew the Music Hall, and used space wherever it could be found. The library remained in Maybee Hall, adding one room and then another, replacing seats with stacks piled ever higher with books, scores, and records. Then, just before it burst at the seams, along came the Dalton Center.

The Dalton Center is home to the School of Music and the Department of Dance. When opened in 1982, the Center was the jewel in WMU’s crown, and remains today as one of the finest arts facilities anywhere. The library, on the third floor above the fray of classrooms, practice rooms, and teaching studios, boasted all new everything, and above all, space. One very large well-lit room, it impresses even yet: a recent note in the suggestion box read simply, “Beautiful facility.” (Thanks. We intend to keep it that way.)

To music and dance faculty and students, a new library meant, for the first time in many years, ready access to all their collections. Now a book could be pulled from the shelves without moving three others to get to it! Periodicals that had overflowed to Waldo Library were returned to the music collection. Recordings were protected in closed stack areas. The dance collection was expanded, incorporating holdings from Waldo and the dance department. The name of the library was modified to include “Dance” and reflect the added coverage.

The University’s core music collection had a tradition of strength, and with the new library (and later, better budgets), it grew stronger. Although located in a what had originally been a normal school, a teachers’ college, where the music education field held sway, Western’s first music librarian, Ada Berkey, built a solid foundation of musicological and scholarly resources. The Music & Dance Library’s holdings include complete editions of composers’ works; anthologies of music; and books and journals in music history, theory, and pedagogy—all items were and are the backbone of a major collection.

The basic collection has grown over the years to more than 70,000 items as materials supporting programs in music therapy, jazz studies, music theatre, world music, conducting, composition, and performance have been added. Also challenging have been the developments in audio recording, the stereo LP in the 50s and the compact disc in the 80s, now further enhanced by the expanding role of video in instruction. Of course, recent developments in CD-ROMs and the World Wide Web continue to bring new opportunities for learning and new demands for materials and equipment.

The library has a Web presence on the University Libraries’ site, with pages of information about its collections and services (http://www.wmich.edu/library/depts/music-dance-library.html). Annotated
A Hobson's Choice

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recognized. Human factors are just as signif­
ificant as the inadequacies of computer­
ized indexing and other technological
issues. At first glance, electronic sources
do seem to perform magical tricks for our
users. However, humans have designed all of the software, including the indexing
methods. Those searching tools still suffer from "numerical" approaches rather than
interpretation or mediation that is based on
human knowledge of an information
source. Other human beings have to
search them and words become the key to
all of the responses—accurate or inaccu­
rate. Whether a keyword or subject index
retrieves data that in and of itself is accu­
rates is another key issue. Even the most
official organization or individual is
potentially fallible. Finally, there is the
question of the actual patron need.
Reference librarians have to relate to and
understand people as much as they must
have skills in searching print and/or
electronic resources. The question that
motivated this essay seemed to be
straightforward—a statistic about deaths
during a particular war. It is easier to find
a number than to find an analysis of how
and why the War of Independence
happened. It is easier to find a discrete
piece of information than to find the right
and/or complete explanation of a concept
or complex event. Reference librarians
must do both and more in their daily ref­
ERENCE interactions. At this date in the his­
tory of libraries or information centers or
sites on the information highway, the
entire interpretive process has been com­
plicated by a choice between the old-fash­
ioned print sources and the opportunity
to search online sources—and the search
catalogs or indexes to each. But, that
choice is possibly the least of the issues
facing the now and future librarian. This
commentary is all by way of reminding you that a reference librarian's work
involves significantly more than the
overly simple distinction between an elec­
tronic or printed source of information.
Would that it were only a Hobson's
choice!

[Hobson's choice ...the choice of taking
either that which is offered or nothing; the
absence of a real choice. After Thomas Hobson
(1544-1631) of Cambridge, England, who
rented horses and gave his customer only one
choice, that of the horse nearest the stable
door. Random House Dictionary of the
English Language]

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guides describe library and Internet
resources in music and dance, and pro­
vide links to hundreds of Web sites. The
Web seems a logical extension of the
Music & Dance Library's role as a
resource both on and beyond the campus
for performers, private teachers, societies
and organizations, festivals and schools,
and their patrons. Whether identifying a
song hummed over the phone, or doing a
national search for an obscure chamber
work, we have always been committed to
serving the large and active arts commu­
nity of which we are a part.

Half a century after Harper Maybee's
death, students and others using his
library still "sit and let the sounds of
music creep into their ears." But they do
much more, within and outside the
library, that the library makes possible—
watching, searching, "surfing," and inter­
acting with the whole world of music and
dance activity and scholarship. And while
Harper C. Maybee probably would not
recognize the University, the department,
or the music collection these days, we
know he would still be proud to have his
name on the Music & Dance Library.