

Collecting for RAMH 2: To Infinity and Beyond

There seems to be an ever increasing belief among our library users that if they imagine something, therefore it is, and it must be here someplace! Every piece of knowledge, every record ever recorded, even the most seemingly insignificant items in our purview, must be made known and available for imminent use. This includes material in our collections that is uncataloged, under processed, or simply unavailable because the material being requested has been promised to us but has yet to be delivered! News travels far beyond the speed of the average music librarian, and just as these hidden treasure's give off the most light, so too are the best aspects of the first edition of *Resources in American Music History* — the hidden archives or collections that would otherwise be unknown, but certainly not unimaginable.

Assuming that much of the world's imaginable material will already be in OCLC, the focus of *RAMH2* should really be first and foremost on manuscripts and unique items of all formats as well as ephemeral items that will never appear in the OCLC catalog. The suggestion that *RAMH2* be dynamic and adaptable to change, particularly when new discoveries are uncovered, whether through a wiki or other platform, says a lot for the fulfillment of the expectations of our users, particularly those who are born digital, if you know what I mean— those that assume that everything is already online and available or soon to be available, or should be available in some form not yet available. To obviate this myth, *RAMH2* must be more participatory so that the librarian or archivist no longer functions as the sole gatekeeper of this imagined reality of information, its context, and its

ongoing dissemination. In the case of my friend, Andy Strasberg, who owns the largest known private collection of material relating to the song “Take Me Out to the Ball Game,” aggregating and disseminating the work of collectors whose holdings include important but seemingly distant musical segments, will become an increasingly important and ongoing obsession or sport, particularly if the collectors themselves become directly involved, as we gather information to create today’s online universe of *RAMH2*. And while we are on the subject of baseball, it is good to note that the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, while not included in the first edition of *RAMH*, has since become a major resource for sheet music on our National Pastime. If it’s out there, sooner or later it will be known.

It might be easiest then to ask what *not* to collect. However, to answer that question would be to disturb the ebb and flow of information across boundaries and to make unaccountable, materials with heretofore unknowable significance. Let us look at a model on which we might begin our examination of this point. If we look back to what I like to call the Americana decade of the 1930s, and we observe the goings-on in the Music Division of The New York Public Library, we see that Dr. Carleton Sprague Smith (Chief of the Music Division from 1931-1959) was already hatching a pre-*RAMH* scheme for his library that would be both broad and inclusive, and believe it or not, under one roof— something that he believed to be eminently attainable. During our nation’s darkest hours of the Great Depression, Dr. Smith identified materials that should be collected, along with projects that would realize his aim for an integrated music library. To move this vision along, he sought and received assistance from the Federal

Music Project of the Works Progress Administration. He was able to put people to work that would not otherwise have employment, as copyists, editors, and indexers. The WPA staff included luminaries such as Curt Sachs, Hans T. David and Joseph Braunstein. In the words of Dr. Smith “...the musical heritage of ...America is being unfolded as never before...[and] the music of our great libraries is being put in practical obtainable form without a great outlay of private capital.” This statement is as profound today as it was then, and the expectation of access to our American culture is greater than ever before, thanks to the development of the virtual environment. A digital *RAMH2* would get a lot of people working, quickly and simultaneously, to disseminate information through a kind of social networking scheme that would put this information in “practical obtainable [digital] form,” particularly the “fugitive material” as coined by Dr. Smith.

In an unpublished NYPL memorandum titled “Fugitive Material: The Music Library’s Problem,” Dr. Smith observed that the music library “is a great deal more than a place to store books and music. It is a living archive, or a depository of numerous sorts of fugitive materials, which must be kept active [substitute online].”

Within the scope of *RAMH1*, fugitive materials were represented by clippings and program files, iconography, and other like-minded ephemera. Additional fugitive materials might also include glass lantern slides, publisher’s catalogs, political materials of the musical variety, non-commercial recordings, press materials, oral histories, and advertisements of performers and performances. *RAMH2* might add to this list of fugitive

materials more complicated formats, such as broadcast wave files containing electro-acoustic works in their purest form, or raw notation files created in programs such as *Finale* and *Sibelius*, or other materials residing in a variety of electronic formats.

Depending on how the information is delivered, a digital *RAMH2* might, in a unique way, weave a virtual scrapbook of musical life around an expanded community of active users and/or participants. Given opportunities to interact with this information, the stuff of libraries, archives, museums, and private collections can be seen and heard through links to catalogs, as well as digital collections of visual materials, or online delivery of sound recordings, or essays on the provenance and contextual history of collections and collecting. In short, *RAMH2* will belong to its users.

This idea of a virtual scrapbook calls for an examination of collections outside the traditional understanding of the scholarly American music arena. One such area, less talked about today, is the scope of Native American materials which in the 1930s was a core part of identifying and collecting musical Americana. Something more talked about today because of increased accessibility would be collections of Spanish colonial music. Recent papers on the exploration of repositories of this type welcome discovery and expansion into this area of study and collecting. Should *RAMH2* go there as well?

The issue of what repositories should be represented raises an international concern, particularly when surveying the holdings of institutions such as the Paul Sacher Stiftung or the American Academy in Rome, whose holdings

include significant collections devoted to American music and the archives of American composers. This is the infinity of collections and collecting. I don't think the discussion will ever enjoy a sense of closure, nor do I think it should; however, the "beyond" part of collections and collecting still poses many questions: here are just a few:

Will *RAMH2* become an open resource that points its users to collections of artifactual materials such as musical instruments, costumes, set designs, lighting designs, schematics, and other related material? What about the aforementioned electro-acoustic music and the instruments on which this music was created such as tape recorders, computers, or digital controllers?

In addition, there are a variety of complicated miscellaneous issues such as collecting documents about rights history relating to music that literally influences what is available to collect and how that information and material may be dispersed. As new collections are transferred from the private sphere of collections and collecting to the public world of information access, and disseminated by sharing, indexing, cataloging and blogging, will there always be strings attached and impediments to negotiate, circumvent, or even ignore? How, too, will we identify the vast amount of reluctant American music sources that are essentially proprietary, because they are in the possession of record companies, music publishers, or private individuals?

The idea of what to collect, more than ever encompasses a growing landscape of American musical activity. What about the Google books project? Does it matter who owns something worth including in *RAMH2*

that *virtually* belongs to everyone? Or is it merely enough to say we have the print item even though Google is going to digitize whole swaths of material that would be aggregated by a single click in the virtual discovery catalog, but are physically thousands of miles apart?

Carleton Sprague Smith's interest in American music during both the Depression and wartime prompted him to establish the Americana Section of NYPL's Music Division, and as mentioned above, accomplished a great deal in fulfilling its historical mission of access to a comprehensive collection under one roof. Should *RAMH2* emulate this idea as a virtual "Where's Waldo" of musical materials? I suggest that this is an opportune moment to hold a mirror to the methods used by Dr. Smith to achieve his goals. Such activity deserves a serious look under the scrutiny of today's frightening economic downturn. We now face our darkest economic crisis since the Great Depression, and like the WPA projects of the 1930s, President-elect Obama is calling for the formation of a National Infrastructure Bank to be created within weeks of his inauguration on January 20, 2009. Perhaps the *RAMH2* project, once it is underway, could be promoted and operated on a large national scale that would easily meet the parameters of a project worthy of inclusion in the National Infrastructure Bank. In 1936, it was Dr. Smith's hope that the Americana Section of NYPL would someday attain an independence and scope that would be unparalleled in the world. So why not aspire to make *RAMH2* an unparalleled resource for holdings in American music? We are at a crossroads in our history. Let us take full advantage of the necessary means that may be available, so that we may carefully, and in a coordinated fashion, visualize and create a project that would be sustained by the lessons and experiences of the past century but

flourish on 21st-century engineering and technology. It is a grand idea whose time is now but whose implications, expectations and possibilities stretch to infinity and perhaps beyond.

NOTES: Thanks to music librarian and former NYPL Music Division staff member John Shepard for his article “The Legacy of Carleton Sprague Smith: Pan-American Holdings in the Music Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. *Notes* 62.3 (2006) 621-662. Other sources include the office files in the Music Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts on the Federal Music Project and internal divisional activities supported by the WPA, and *Libraries, history, diplomacy, and the performing arts : essays in honor of Carleton Sprague Smith*, edited by Israel J. Katz ; associate editors, Malena Kuss and Richard J. Wolfe. Stuyvesant, NY : Pendragon Press in cooperation with the New York Public Library, c1991.

Thanks also to NYPL Music Division staff member Tema Hecht, Jonathan Hiam, Head American Music Collection, and Bob Kosovsky, Head, Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Music Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts for their invaluable assistance.

George Boziwick
Chief, Music Division
The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
January, 2009