

How Special is Special?: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Approach to Music Special Collections Assessment

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**Slide 1**

Hello and thank you so much for being here. The topic for this paper arose through my work in an academic music library and my efforts to learn what materials are in my library's special collections and why they are there, in hopes of using that information to better steward and grow the collection.

I'll be describing the collection and its context later on but want to preface my talk by letting you know that while I am trained in libraries and music, **my library is not the British Library**, and I have no formal training in special collections librarianship or archives, only knowledge gained through working in large academic libraries for over 20 years. However, I think there are more librarians in my situation than not, so I hope what I share today is helpful.

As I continue to develop the specific project I'll be discussing later in this talk, I aim to create a methodology or framework that speaks more directly to music special collections, especially in a setting such as mine. I am sure you can all appreciate, any kind of collection assessment takes time, usually much more than one has initially allotted, and as such this work is still in progress.

**Slide 2**

In approaching this topic, I initially thought I just hadn't read enough to know how best to assess our special collections. But as it turns out, the library literature has been asking "what's so special about special collections" since at least 2000. (Yakel). And as is the case with general collections, the nature of music materials and their many formats only complicates the question when looking at defining and assessing music special collections.

There are many publications in the library literature that discuss the development and management of music collections or special collections, or that discuss collection assessment. However, at most, these publications might talk about any 1 or 2 of these areas, but few to none talk about the intersection of music special collections and their assessment.

**Slide 3**

Today's talk will be in three parts. In the first part I will set some definitions and understandings of special collections for the purpose of parts 2 and 3. In part two I will describe the special collections in my library and the context in which they sit. In part three, I will discuss my project's goals and an approach to collection assessment in music special collections.

**Slide 4**

Defining special collections in a way that matches every institution's context and covers every possibility is difficult. However, in general, they are items that are not kept in open stacks and that may not circulate or be used outside of the library (although that policy can vary).

Special collections materials can be grouped into three broad categories: rare materials, archival materials, and medium rare materials.

**The Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books Section guidelines for transfer of materials to special collections asserts** "virtually all libraries acquire materials that, with time and changing circumstances, become rare and gain special cultural and historical value. These materials may also gain significant monetary value in the marketplace." They go on to say ""Most libraries have materials in their general collections that do not meet the criteria for transfer to special collections but nevertheless warrant a higher level of protection than is afforded by the current setting. Some libraries refer to this category of material as "**medium rare**" and identify it for transfer to an appropriate location."

In our case, as I will discuss later, these materials are housed in the same "special collections" location in our branch library.

#### **Slide 5**

Certain attributes apply to special collections items, but not every item will have all of them. The item could be: created locally, one of a kind or unique, have a high monetary value, be in a special format or early edition, have a notable provenance, be in delicate condition.

#### **Slide 6**

The focus in this talk is on special and rare print items such as books and scores, less so on archival series or media materials. However, these formats are often intermingled and overlapping in collections, so please do not get too stuck on the definitions.

The criteria for determining what is rare when referring to notated music items such as manuscripts or early printed editions can be similar to those used for books, such as date of production or number of extant copies. However, variables such as incunabula parameter dates will differ for printed scores compared to printed books.

#### **Slide 7**

In considering how best to manage and assess special collections, it is important to ask why libraries have such collections in the first place. Special collections ensure the preservation of important, often irreplaceable, items so that they may be used by scholars and students for research.

Each institution will have specific goals for collecting and preserving special materials, and which materials they collect that will vary depending on the institution's:

- a. Location (US vs Europe vs...other—how diff are our arrangements/management/scopes/policies?)
- b. History (young or old collection and/or institution? Built at once or over time?)
- c. Institutional environment (library for all subjects, special collections only?)

- d. Mission of collection/library/institution and patrons served (musicology and performance?)
- e. Scope of collection and whether it includes rare or medium rare materials or a mix; and what formats and subjects are collected.

However, at a minimum, institutions form special collections with the goal of being good stewards for these materials.

#### **Slide 8**

Good stewardship of special collections materials (or really any collections) is comprised of three components: preserving items, keeping them secure, and facilitating their discovery, access, and use. These principles are key not just to how we assess materials for transfer INTO special collections, but also for how we assess those materials that are already IN special collections.

Special Collections should not be viewed as PRESERVATION *INSTEAD OF* USE, but PRESERVATION *FOR* USE.

#### **Slide 9**

Now that we have talked briefly about the idea of special collections and their definition and roles, I want to turn to the collection at the focus of our current assessment work. The University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, founded in 1867, is the state's flagship university with over 50k students. The University Library, with two-dozen different subject or special branches, is the second largest academic library in the US with over 15 million physical items.

Other branches of the University Library system include the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, which houses most of the University's manuscripts and other rare items, including some music materials, and the Sousa Archives and Center for American Music (a branch of the University Archives). Note that the Sousa Archives was not founded until 1994 and did not have a professional archivist until around 2000. The Archives include institutional records such as faculty and departmental files, institutional sound recordings, and musical instruments, and other music-related archival series.

The Music and Performing Arts Library (**MPAL**) was founded in 1944 and has been in its current location since 1974. MPAL's collections number over 400,000 items across books, journals, plays, scores, and various audio and visual formats. Our collections serve the comprehensive School of Music and the departments of dance and theatre, as well as other patrons from across the university and community.

#### **Slide 10**

Most of MPAL's collections are circulating materials in open stacks, but we also have our own Special Collections numbering about 172,800 items, in locked stacks, which will be the focus of this project. These items live in a separate area of our stacks, that is not uniquely environmentally controlled, and while locked, is not truly secure, given the nature of our layout.

MPAL's Special collections are a hybrid affair that are three parts:

1. Items that could truly fall under the "rare" rubric, such as manuscripts and early printed editions.

2. The LP collection, most of which circulate, but are housed in the special collections area.
3. A larger portion of items in the collection that fall in the category that is sometimes called “medium rare”, which can include items that are only special due to their format such as microforms and cassettes that do not circulate, items that are too fragile for circulation, have a high theft risk, or for other reasons aren’t “special” enough for the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, or that aren’t of an archival nature and thus not appropriate for the University Archives.

Let me talk a bit about each of these groups in a little more detail before we talk about assessment approaches, as the challenge of assessing and managing our special collections comes in large part comes from its hybrid nature.

#### **Slide 11**

This is a rough break down of the materials in the Music and Performing Arts Library’s special collections by format.

#### **Slide 12**

Our noteworthy collections include over 1,000 titles and items reflected in RISM. About 2/3 of the University of Illinois items recorded in RISM are housed in MPAL Special Collections while one third are in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library. We have, for example, significant holdings of early printed editions of Thomas Arne, CPE Bach, and Henry Rowley Bishop as well as manuscript copies of opera excerpts by Jean Baptiste Lully. We are actively working to report additional items to RISM, work that is related to this larger collection assessment.

We also have over 280 items that date from 1800 or earlier, which have been part of a separate, but related inventory and cataloging project as we prepare to transfer these to the University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library for better stewardship in terms of environmental conditions and security.

#### **Slide 13**

Other significant holdings include such things as:

- Musicological Archives for Renaissance Manuscript Studies microfilms (roughly 1,600 of them) and related supporting project finding aids and index tools that form the basis for the [\*Census-Catalogue of Manuscript Sources of Polyphonic Music, 1400-1550\*](#)
- Hymn Tune Index source items including approximately 800 microfilms and 32 boxes of photographic facsimiles relating to pre-1820 English hymn tunes
- Historic American sheet music, roughly 92k items, partially shown in the picture on the left.
- U of I Electronic Music Studio scores and commercial recordings

#### **Slide 14**

MPAL is also fortunate to house a Steinway DuoArt Reproducing Player Piano and almost 3000 piano rolls.

#### **Slide 15**

In the part of our collection of medium rare items, we have things such as:

- Hundreds of Southeast Asian cassettes acquired via the Library of Congress PL480 exchange program
- Expensive facsimiles
- Historic music education materials
- 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century items with significant provenance or in fragile condition

And of course, the thousands of LPs and microform items, which are largely not part of current assessment efforts.

### **Slide 16**

That gives you a general sense of the scope of the Special Collections in the Music and Performing Arts Library. Now I want to talk about the reasons why you might want to assess such collections. The motivations fall under two categories: 1) to prioritize growth the collection and 2) to better steward or care for the collection. As with general collections, special collections growth priorities change over time and best practices and professional knowledge evolves.

Because of the highly hybrid nature of our special collections, I have long wanted to get a better sense, especially for the “medium rare” items, but not only, why they are there, if they need to be there, or if they might be transferred elsewhere, either for better security or increased access.

In addition, we are effectively out of space in our locked stacks, and even if we had space to grow, I don't feel that we can continue to add to the collection without knowing what is there, what the strengths of the collection are, and what is lacking from those holdings, especially since there are limited resources for purchasing new items. I also wanted to get a better sense for the preservation and cataloging needs of the collection.

Therefore, a complete assessment of these collections would serve several purposes and, as a result, involve several smaller projects with different methodologies.

### **Slide 17**

Part of assessing a collection effectively and making appropriate decisions on that data require understanding the history of the collection. As with assessment of general collections, this should include knowing the context of the institution, the programs supported by the collection, and of course, the needs of the patrons served by the collection.

There are several sources of information that librarians can use to learn more about the history of their collections. I have listed a few here and depending on the nature and location of your institution, there may be others.

### **Slide 18**

Having a sense of the history of the collection and past collecting priorities, along with knowledge of the institution itself, the curriculum, and patrons' needs, can help librarians understand which collections

could be considered heritage collections and which could be considered legacy collections. This is illustrated in the Leeds framework for assessment excerpted here.

### **Slide 19**

The literature about general library collections assessment focusing on assessing collections for physical condition, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a collection, and to map collections to the curriculum. The literature around special collections assessment literature primarily focuses on three areas:

1. Condition assessments
2. Identifying processing and cataloging backlogs and the resulting hidden collections
3. Measuring the impact of collections on users and value of collection

But while we can conduct condition assessments and identify processing and cataloging needs, we can't measure the impact of the collection on patrons and its overall value if we don't even know what we have in our special collections. This is not as simple as taking inventory, although that is a first step, but truly understanding what resides in special collection and why it is there (and not, for example in open stacks) or in our Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

### **Slide 20**

An inventory can start with a shelf list and ideally a proper inventory will be conducted to identify:

--missing or misshelved items

--items that are incorrectly identified or cataloged

It is important to remember that for both inventory and assessment purposes, reports from the catalog or Integrated Library System only represent ONE DISCRETE POINT IN TIME, so item statuses in particular may have changed since the data was pulled, and items' locations on shelf may have changed if they were misshelved in the interim.

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An element of inventory can involve identifying data improvements and corrections. For example, ensuring that everything has the correct material type, which is important for accuracy and for filtering in the public catalog.

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### **Slide 25**

Once approach is to start with the parts of the collection that are already known to be distinctive, as those are presumably a priority. However, you may have already done that work or may not know what your significant holdings are. In that case your goal might be similar to my current project, in which I hope to form a better picture of the overall makeup of our “medium rare” items. Regardless, there are a number of ways to look at the items, such as dates and places of publication and composers.

Evaluating the collection for subject content is harder. It can be done by analyzing subject and genre headings, but because those have changed over time and their application is so subjective, they can't give a complete picture. However, call numbers might be used in a similar fashion—but if the collection isn't fully cataloged or doesn't use a subject-based call number system, then that will have to be done first.

### **Slide 26**

As discussed briefly at the beginning of this talk, this is a standard list of some of the variables that can be assessed when determining whether to place an item into special collections, but items already in that location can be reassessed periodically to see if they might move back to circulating collections or be transferred to another location. This is the case when, over the years, we have chosen to transfer materials to the University Archives or Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

### **Slide 27**

You may find a need to verify the details of the item in hand, whether the date, the publisher, or even the composer. There are several tools for this ranging from the generic to the specific.

**Slide 28**

There are numerous tools available to assess whether items are rare, although as I've noted earlier, in some of these cases, they are more applicable to books.

More tools listed in Cullingford Appendix A

**Slide 29**

Another part of your evaluation might include checking for digitization: DIAMM, RISM, Europeana, National Library sites

**Slide 30**

And finally, here are some citations for cites and texts that are useful in learning more about special collections management and assessment. As I continue work to complete the current assessment and more fully develop a framework for assessing music special collections in hybrid settings, I plan to publish my thoughts and findings. It will include resources such as these and more.

**Slide 31**

Thank you so much for being here today and listening as I talk through these issues of how to approach assessing music special collections!