



Association internationale des bibliothèques, archives et centres de documentation musicaux (AIBM)

International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (IAML)

Internationale Vereinigung der Musikbibliotheken, Musikarchive und Musikdokumentationszentren (IVMB)

International Standard Music Number (ISMN), report 2015

The ISMN is the unique standard identifier for notated music (ISO 10957). It was developed due to the initiative of the IAML (UK & Irl) branch and is an indispensable tool for music publishers, for the trade, as well as for libraries.

The International ISMN Agency is situated in Berlin and coordinates the work of currently 57 agencies all over the world, the newest member being Malta.

The annual highlight of ISMN work is the AGM that takes place in different places around the world, alternating between Europe where most of the agencies are situated, and other parts of the world. The 2014 meeting was organised in Istanbul, Turkey, by the Turkish Ministry of Culture. Although ISBN (International Standard Book Number) and ISMN meetings had been aligned for the past few years, this year was special because the ISSN (International Standard Serials Number) network held its Director's Meeting with us as well. Thus all ISO standard identifiers for "manifestations" were represented. The hosts kindly offered an excursion that was actually an opportunity to talk to our colleagues from the serials world. Since ISBN and ISMN are very similar systems and are often administered by the same national institutions, we already work closely together, and quite a number of participants attend both AGMs.

The importance and success of these conferences does not lie in the AGMs, which are juridical requirements and often very short; similar to the IAML conference, it is the user community meeting that allows networking and the discussion of practical questions, upcoming



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challenges, evaluation of new developments in publishing, and promotes, last but not least, the interoperability between related standards.

Among items of discussion and interest besides the annual budget questions was the news from the CDNL (Conference of Directors of National Libraries) that took place in Lyon, France. This meeting is an excellent platform for contacting decision-makers from national libraries (very often in charge of ISMN) around the globe. Thus, for example, it was an opportunity to discuss ISMN with the Polish national librarian. Polish music publishers and producers prefer the ISBN for their publications as it is linked in Poland with massive tax benefits. But the resulting practice not only means a breach of both the ISBN and ISMN standards, but in a more practically sense defeats the mission of the standard, namely identifying notated music within the many millions of other published items. So efforts are under way to find an official solution.

A detailed report of the 2014 meeting was published as *ISMN Newsletter 24*; it is also available on the Agency's website. A constant matter of discussion and explanation is the situation in countries that publish very little music, such as many African countries. This music is appreciated worldwide because elements of folk and tribal music give musicians new ideas, but is the ISMN really necessary if you have just 5 new items a year? Well, yes! Music is not limited to one country or a certain area like many "books". Music does not suffer the limitations of individual languages but is international. Records of new publications may be integrated in the international music offering, in trade directories, etc., which would be impossible without unique identifiers nowadays. Manual work has become too slow and costly to be an alternative to computer linking.



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One would assume that the success story of the ISBN (few books are issued without the number) would have convinced the music sector to go for it as quickly as possible. This is not the case, unfortunately – for a number of reasons:

- Smaller music publishers are not fond of technology as it seems opposed to the arts, and they feel more like creative artists than business people.
- Some of the very large companies embraced ISBN many years ago before ISMN existed (i.e., before 1993) and they are reluctant to change. Some of the envisaged benefits of ISMN are not yet tangible.
- Some traditional well-known companies have ISMN but they do not publicize the numbers in catalogues or on the web. When asked, the answer is: Our customers usually order by our own (proprietary) numbers. In former times employees of music shops invested much time in memorizing these numbers which still play an important role. But, of course, they do not open the market to people who are not regular customers.
- The preparation of a Music in Print directory has been under way for some years. It is called IDNV and is maintained by the German ISMN agency. It comprises more than 600,000 records so far and is growing. Hopefully, it will soon become indispensable: an international trade directory of such a kind would make the numbering much more attractive – see ISBN!

But there are other challenges – or should we say obstacles? Some time ago the most powerful online bookselling firm put pressure on music publishers in European countries such as Finland and Hungary: if they wanted their publications to be sold they had to put ISBN on their items. As ISMN fits completely into the EAN barcoding system, this could only be a misunderstanding. However, the ISMN agency wasn't able to approach this bookselling firm to discuss the problem with them: the company did not publicize email addresses or offer other contact options. Letters were not answered. We hope to continue to search for ways to resolve this (easily) surmountable problem.



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Fortunately, the international barcoding company GS1 in Bruxelles is not as unapproachable – they updated their *GTIN Validation Guide* and made it clear that ISMN is a valid trade item number.

If we may consider the first case an unfortunate misunderstanding, there are also obstacles from the technical side. We usually argue that technology has the potential to greatly improve our operations – if we are flexible enough. Otherwise it may turn the other way round and become an obstacle. Here is another case:

In a renowned European country, book- and music sellers receive their bibliographic data from one authoritative bibliographic agency that apparently ignored the ISMN to the point that they are not able to provide ISMN data. If the participating stores want to take items with ISMN they have to key in the data manually! Or the publishers use ISBN (what do we need standards for?). Official explanation: it would be too costly to change the automated system. For somebody working with standard numbers that is not very plausible. Most people cannot distinguish between an ISBN and an ISMN because they use the same GTIN system - it is only the human legible prefix ISBN or ISMN that makes people recognize what it is. If the company would be interested in solving the problem, they might just enter ISMN into the ISBN field (electronically only the numbers are processed, not the acronyms ISMN etc.; there is no duplication of numbers either) and tell the system that not only numbers with the prefix 9791 but also with the prefix 9790 were valid.

An important development is the fact that the ISMN standard has come up for systematic review (an ISO routine to keep standards up-to-date). During the ISBN review, the International



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ISMN Agency suggested some changes in the ISMN standard, too, to facilitate interoperability.

It is expected that a working group will be created to make the necessary changes.

The mentioned issues shed some light on the work of the International Agency. This year's annual meeting will take place in Indonesia. Indonesia is one of those countries with a small music output but with a rich musical tradition.

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