The Things We Keep: Considerations for Appraisal of Archival Materials in Music Libraries

Rutgers University has made this article freely available. Please share how this access benefits you.
Your story matters. [https://rucore.libraries.rutgers.edu/rutgers-lib/47559/story/]

This work is an ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT (AM)
This is the author's manuscript for a work that has been accepted for publication. Changes resulting from the publishing process, such as copyediting, final layout, and pagination, may not be reflected in this document. The publisher takes permanent responsibility for the work. Content and layout follow publisher's submission requirements.

Citation for this version and the definitive version are shown below.

Citation to Publisher


Terms of Use: Copyright for scholarly resources published in RUcore is retained by the copyright holder. By virtue of its appearance in this open access medium, you are free to use this resource, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. Other uses, such as reproduction or republication, may require the permission of the copyright holder.

Article begins on next page
The Things We Keep: Considerations for Appraisal of Archival Materials in Music Libraries

Over the past few decades we have seen an increase in collecting archival sources among music libraries, both in the public sphere and within academic institutions. Music is being created and utilized in many different contexts and effectively documenting its rapid changes is still a challenge, from parchment and quill to the born-digital. We are chasing after the documentary evidence of activities and spaces where music happens to ensure future generations are able to get a glimpse of music making in our time. Many libraries find themselves in the business of running a music archives operation whether they had planned it or not, and the notion of appraising a group of documents for their long-term care can be daunting to undertake and complex to execute. In the following pages I will discuss archival appraisal as it applies to the evidence of music-making and the principles behind acquisition decisions as this is crucial to setting up a robust archival management program that can contribute to the healthy growth of the institution and its collections. It is my goal to help formulate the bases for archival practices that actively expand the scope of the musical heritage that is recognized and preserved in archives throughout the world, in addition to helping us move past only documenting a subsection of history.

While libraries and archives share very similar missions of providing access to and preserving our cultural heritage, archives and archivists are
committed to maintaining the collections deposited for their care in perpetuity. Archival collections usually comprise one-of-a-kind unpublished material created or assembled by an individual or institution in the course of their day-to-day business. Appraisal and acquisition decisions should consider their long-term care, access, preservation, and management of the collection or record group over time. In the following pages the word “collection” is used in the archival sense, meaning the body of materials of an organization, family, or individual that have been created and/or accumulated as the result of an organic process reflecting the functions of said creator. The use of the word “collection” in library practice has a different meaning, which alludes to a group of materials that cover the same subject matter. These difference leads to confusion for users and librarians.

When thinking about collection development archivists usually operate in terms of augmenting the repository’s holdings, not growing individual collections. An archival collection does not grow, nor it can be augmented by new acquisitions unless the new material comes from the same creator thus maintaining their provenance. Sometimes prospective acquisitions seem like a perfect fit for the library but present a series of issues that would seriously compromise the archives’ ability to deliver on our end of the preservation and access contract. Archival appraisal allows the holding library to set forth a thorough and meticulous evaluation of the content of the collection materials, the era or style they represent and document, and the unique position the library is in
to efficiently manage the process of preparing the materials for their long-term care.

**Literature Review**

*Appraisal*, in the archival sense of the word, is defined as “the process of determining whether records and other materials have permanent (archival) value.” Moreover, “[t]he basis of appraisal decisions may include a number of factors, including the records' provenance and content, their authenticity and reliability, their order and completeness, their condition and costs to preserve them, and their intrinsic value. Appraisal often takes place within a larger institutional collecting policy and mission statement.” Therefore the first step towards establishing an archival collecting program in a music library is to define a mission and scope of the archival operations. Often times there are unexpected offers of material that may fall outside the boundaries of said mission, and this is important to recognize and address head-on: opportunity collecting can be a good strategy for expanding the scope of the archives, but above all good appraisal should precede any decision, no matter how unique or interesting the materials. Archival appraisal boils down to being able to discern the enduring value of a collection, considering its content, the societal segment it represents, and how these considerations fit within an archival program. When we want to identify enduring value in a prospective collection we look for the “continuing usefulness
or significance of records, based on the administrative, legal, fiscal, evidential, or historical information they contain, justifying their ongoing preservation.”

Assessing the permanent or enduring value of the records is the most important task the archivist must perform in any kind of repository given that the decision whether to acquire a collection or record series trickles down from that first assessment. This notion of value is framed within the larger institutional mission statement; it creates boundaries that are flexible enough to allow for expanding the collecting scope as documentary practices change over time.

The literature on music archives has not addressed archival appraisal in a definitive or authoritative manner. Costa Rican archivist Esteban Cabezas Bolaños summarized the general state of the archival literature in 2005 as having “no theoretical or methodological underpinning within modern archival science.” British archivist Judith Brimmer also echoed this sentiment in 2005: “music manuscripts have been sidelined in professional literature yet they make up a significant part of the national resource landscape for music, and deserve greater coverage and recognition among the information professions and in music education.” This article is another contribution to the list, and hopefully one that can clarify and solidify the reasoning behind the process of appraisal.

The Music Library Association recently published *Keeping Time: An Introduction to Archival Best Practices for Music Librarians* outlining important principles of archival management for the music librarian-turned archivist such as
arrangement, description, and preservation of archival materials, which happen in a parallel yet different model than a library. The book provides good examples of workflows and outlines important considerations for those who are folding an archives operation within an established music library paradigm. The authors frame the appraisal process by assigning “historical and research value to a collection and determining whether the collection should be acquired.”

This approach, however, takes the reader through the process of acquisition and appraisal, but does not engage with the reasoning behind the process given the book’s overall introductory nature.

Archival literature has also recently addressed issues of collecting personal papers. In archival practice is important to make the distinction between personal papers as opposed to the records of organizations as they represent different entities. Records are generated as part of an organization’s routine processes and transactions while papers, being created by an individual are “created on a more or less ad hoc basis.” Thus the records generated as part of an orchestra’s business operations will differ significantly than a composer’s personal papers, both in scope and structure.

The role of personal papers has been discussed in a number of articles that have countered the “corporate myopia” of archival literature, which describes how, until the late 1990s, archival literature focused only on the issues pertaining to institutional records, with a few cases analyzing the unique nature of collecting.
preserving, and providing access to personal papers, as it has been the case with music archives literature described above. Riva A. Pollard compiled a critical literature review on the appraisal of personal papers, in which she distills the value of personal papers to the relationship between society and the materials’ creators as well as the functions and motivation behind their record-generating activities. Aligning this documentation process with what society values as important or fashionable does help to contextualize an individual’s personal papers, letting this perception dominate the archivist’s decision-making process can lead an institution’s collections to reflect what it is “popular” which isn’t always reflect the papers’ enduring value. Archival materials should aim to become a microcosm of the larger subject area, representing all points of view in the historical record.

Archival documentation strategy—a means to identify voids of information represented in the archival record of a group or an individual—was identified as another suitable approach to appraisal. This is a valid and useful approach to take, and is not far removed from traditional library-centered collection development practices, where acquisitions are made after a careful assessment of current holdings and advances in the respective fields of study. It constitutes another way to keep up with the abundance of recorded information. In archives where composers’ papers are more likely to be collected, the use of documentation strategies as a proactive acquisition and appraisal tool enables the
archivist to keep abreast of the developments in the field, as well as major events such as awards and festivals, that can yield future acquisitions. Ellen Garrison illustrates the changing role of the archivist from a custodial stance to an active approach to collecting: “many [archivists at] special subject repositories like the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University have been practitioners, although not philosophers, of documentation strategy since their inception.”

She argues that archivists at special subject repositories such as music libraries, find their collections’ strength within their subject area’s depth of coverage and that documentation strategy has been used for decades before its “rediscovery” in the general archives practice.

Collecting the personal papers of musicians, in the broadest sense of the term, encompasses more than the music itself, either printed or in manuscript form. Similar to records of a creative nature, such as architectural records or literary manuscripts, the materials associated with musicians’ papers document a complex work process and generate a great variety of documents in fragile and fugitive media such as magnetic tapes, DATs, and other digital formats, as well as the more “traditional” categories (i.e., correspondence, business records, photographs, and so on.). Ephemera, such as concert programs, reviews, and newspaper clippings, are also a coveted source of information for these types of performances where a paper-based score only captures a portion of the event, and their preservation can help future users understand and place the work in a
broader societal context. Music collections expand to more than notes on staff paper, and that the responsibility for creating or growing an archival program in a music library should conscientiously reflect the diversity of the historical record.

**Appraisal in the Context of Music Archives**

Archivists are trained to evaluate prospective acquisitions’ enduring value. This must not be confused with the notion of research value, as history has clearly demonstrated that we cannot predict new avenues of inquiry. Most importantly, everything that surrounds us has some research value, which doesn’t mean that the archives should collect, preserve, and provide access to everything under the sun. Thus having a defined collecting scope and mission statement for the special collections and archives operations of the library will help ground the appraisal process and hopefully steer the decision-making process in the right direction\(^\text{15}\).

When appraising a potential acquisition, archives rely on these interpretations of value: evidential, informational, and intrinsic values. These are weighed in relationship to the repository’s existing holdings, its collection development policy and mission statement, and the extent to which the collection documents a particular subject area. The items are evaluated as a whole, meaning that the group of items will have to be considered as a unit and administered as such. It is at this stage where many may be tempted to add the donation to the library’s collection. Aside from the enduring value of the materials themselves,
there is important contextual information and evidence contained within the grouped unit. Therefore it is important to keep items with the same provenance together.

Evidential value, the first facet, is focused on the events or transactions that the document or artifact represents. Archives may have a performer’s touring contracts, which document the exact dates and venues where he or she may have played, in addition to the cost of the performance and evidence of other fair labor considerations for the time period he or she was active. Payroll records, for example, can confirm someone working on a specific tour or recording session. This is why ephemeral documentation that falls out of a strict realm manuscripts and personal papers is useful to contextualize how the creator’s life and work unfolded over time.

Informational value focuses on the essential information contained within the documents. Information that becomes apparent through the document at hand. For example, within the Marshall Stearns Collection at the Institute of Jazz Studies, there are a number of press clippings from Dizzy Gillespie’s State Department tour of 1956 where different newspapers report on the seemingly outrageous salary being paid to him for his overseas performances.\textsuperscript{16} It is through these documents that we can ascertain the salary being paid to Gillespie, and the admittedly high rate the State Department was offering the trumpeter at the time.
Lastly, intrinsic value also plays an important role in determining a collection’s desirability for the repository. Intrinsic value focuses on the “one of a kind” consideration about a particular item, where maintaining its original format and physical appearance is a priority for understanding and appreciating the circumstances under which it was created. As defined by the Society of American Archivists Glossary of Archives and Records Terminology, “[t]he usefulness or significance of an item derived from its physical or associational qualities, inherent in its original form and generally independent of its content, that are integral to its material nature and would be lost in reproduction.” The United States’ Declaration of Independence is a prime example as this one document carries an enormous amount of significance for U.S. citizens, and embodies the spirit in which our nation was founded. As such, intrinsic value represents those materials that are so unique, rare, and pivotal to a community. This notion of value is sometimes associated with what art museums collect, artist masterpieces that embody the zeitgeist of their time and essence of their artistic interpretation. This is where we would include incunabula, original manuscripts and sketches, and diaries, among others.

Documenting an individual’s life as a whole is also important to consider in the appraisal process. Sometimes musicians have additional interests and life experiences that cannot be completely divorced of their performance lives. Jazz pianist and composer Mary Lou Williams, for example, turned to the Catholic
Church later in life and had a spiritual renaissance that fed into her work as a performing musician and composer. It was important for the Institute of Jazz Studies to also capture and document this facet of her life. As human beings we have different interests and inclinations, which only add value and interest to the complexity of our everyday lives. This is why documentary evidence of these “extracurricular activities” must be acquired and preserved alongside the main body of musical work.

When to say “No”

Thus far this article has examined what elements constitute a solid appraisal strategy, especially for music librarians tasked with expanding library holdings into the archival arena as many have done over the past few years. Archivists are ultimately offering the human race the possibility of preserving evidence of its growth and development, and as such we are operating under a very long timetable. The decision to keep a group of documents is made with the understanding that we will maintain them in the best physical state for as long as it is humanly possible, and as such the decision of what to keep and how to do it must be well informed and weighed against what the parent institution is able to support over the long term. What happens when a repository is not equipped to preserve and provide access to a collection, even if it fits all the appraisal criteria established beforehand? In an ideal world we would all have the right amount of
space and resources to collect to our hearts’ content, but the world we live in is far from ideal. There are occasions when even though the materials are a perfect fit for the library or archives, the reality of the situation makes it difficult for the acquisition to move forward. For example, if the collection consists of cylinder recordings it is problematic if the repository has no playback equipment or budget to reformat the sound recording for the users. It is important to remember why we do what we do and the larger societal contract we are abiding by. There are five factors that affect the long-term sustainability of a collection that archivists should think about as they come to an acquisition decision: copyright, preservation and conservation issues, presence non-traditional formats, storage space (in the broadest sense), and, most importantly, the human resources to adequately arrange, describe, and rehouse the acquisition.

Many of us have dealt with rights issues in archival collections, and more libraries and archives are taking calculated risks to broadly disseminate the materials under their care. It is important to clarify who owns the intellectual property rights to the collection, and where they see those rights going in future generations. While it is nice to think about a composer passing on his or her rights to his or her descendants, this information should be kept current since reproduction and performances of the materials within a collection fall within the archival enterprise. It is possible to transfer intellectual property rights to the library or archives, and this makes for better stewardship of the collection over
time. But sometimes the donors do not even own the rights to the materials they want us to take, thus establishing who is the legal owner of the material can help prevent complications down the road. Having a good standing on the ownership and rights to the collections is of utmost importance to running a robust archival operation, and any time invested in good record keeping and thorough vetting of the issues is worth the effort. The Society of American Archivists offers a copyright workshop on a rolling basis, and there are also other continuing education opportunities offered by state libraries and historical societies. There are also publications that can be of immense help for gaining a better understanding of how the law applies to the management of archival materials¹⁸.

Next, the physical condition of the materials also plays an important role in the materials’ long-term accessibility when considered under the initial appraisal process. Conservation and preservation concerns play an important role in the health of an acquired collection and assessing the need for such work on a prospective acquisition is also a factor to weigh in the overall appraisal process. If the materials exhibit a substantial mold or pest infestation, is the library or archives equipped to mitigate and repair the damage? Do the materials exhibit physical damage from flooding or fire? Is the damage to such extent that reformatting is the only viable long-term solution? These are all valid questions to ask, and when the reality of the conservation and repair work comes to light, those who make the acquisition decision should know how far is the institution willing
to go to repair the damages, considering the evidential, informational, and intrinsic value of the collection.

In a similar vein it is important to consider the abundance of audiovisual formats, especially the presence of non-traditional formats such as minidiscs and \( \frac{1}{2} \)-inch videotape, in performing arts archival collections. Acquiring materials whose contents the repository cannot ascertain or play back is not a good starting point for stewardship and future access. It’s akin to having a book that can’t open. Basic arrangement, description, and preservation work is very difficult to complete if the playback equipment is not accessible to the archivist or librarian managing the collection. This is an instance where those making the acquisition decision should place institutional pride or notoriety aside and seriously consider the long-term implications and effect on scholarship and perhaps help the donors find a more suitable repository. We are, after all, working for what’s best for the historical record, and as such we should be able to point donors to alternate homes for their materials.

Adequate storage, or the lack of it, is another obstacle for good stewardship that relates to the broader institution where the collections will reside. Long-term storage of archival collections in physical and electronic format is a serious matter, especially in the case of libraries that are dabbling in archival operations and beginning to acquire archival materials. There are temperature, humidity, lighting, and security considerations, and stashing portions of
collections in closets and offices is never acceptable, even if it’s temporary. It is crucial to have well-thought plans for collections growth, and if the library is serious about the addition of an archives operation to its menu of services, then the library’s blueprint should reflect this change in direction. Electronic records also fall within this consideration. There is much more to acquiring electronic records than suitable and trusted storage, and those who embark on the preservation and access of electronic materials have broader issues to consider, including administrative oversight, a sustainable and robust digital preservation infrastructure, to name a few.

All the above-stated factors also require adequate human resources to manage the archival operation from start to finish. Archivists have been vocal about relegating this work to student interns, as building an archival program, even a small one, requires expertise in collections management in addition to a solid grounding in archival theory and practice. There are a few ways to acquire these skills, especially for music librarians working in academic institutions. The first stop should be the college or university archivists’ office, for guidance and a second opinion in the matters described throughout these pages. There are also numerous workshops led by agencies such as state libraries or historical societies as well as by professional organizations where one can invest in the training of personnel whose responsibilities will now include managing archival materials. It is important that these responsibilities fall onto permanent staff (full or part-time).
to ensure continuous oversight of, and follow-through on, the implementation of minimum standards in archival practice.

Finding the road to success is not impossible, and by making good appraisal and acquisitions decisions we are more than halfway there. As a profession we have moved past documenting the leaders of history, those individuals who have had starring roles in the development of our musical heritage. Collecting their personal papers only documents a very small segment of the contributions and life experiences of entire generations of performing musicians. We are also interested in documenting those whose voices have contributed to shaping our musical landscape, and without which we cannot see the big picture. The Institute of Jazz Studies, founded by Marshall Stearns in 1952, was based on his belief that jazz was worthy of the serious study other types of music had observed for many years. As archivists we are in a position to recognize and document the work of many who made important contributions to our musical heritage, and it is through careful and thoughtful appraisal analysis of potential acquisitions that we are assembling a well-rounded view of society for future generations.

Abstract

The Things We Keep: Considerations for Appraisal of Archival Materials in Music Libraries
This article discusses archival appraisal in relationship the documentary evidence of music-making and the principles behind acquisition decisions in an archival setting. It also explores the concept of enduring value as it applies to music materials and formulates clear definitions of the distinct facets of archival appraisal. This is a crucial component to any archival management program that can contribute to the healthy growth of the institution and its collections. The author formulates foundational elements for archival practices that actively expand the scope of the documented musical heritage preserved in archives throughout the world and outlines strategies for collecting a well-rounded and inclusive view of history.

1 Adriana P. Cuervo, CA is the Associate Director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University-Newark. She received an MSLIS from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2005 and a BM in Music History from the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
10 Pearce-Moses, 2005 - http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/r/record
See Appendix A: Sample Collection Evaluation Form, as a useful tool to document the appraisal process. This information should be kept as part of the archival collections’ administrative files alongside the signed deed of gift and any correspondence or exchange with the donors. Being able to track the acquisition process is of utmost importance to avoid misunderstandings with heirs and other individuals who may lay claim to the materials at some point in time.


