

WHY DOES THE PUBLIC LIBRARY NEED A MUSIC DEPARTMENT, and why should it continue to be federally funded? ¹

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The Deichmanske bibliotek—the Oslo Public Library—is the country’s largest public library, and its music department is the largest in the context of the nation’s public libraries. Our collection includes everything from academic literature to instructional videos, and our patrons include many different groups, which are examined below.

The "Man in the Street"

The “man in the street” is our most important patron. The average Norwegian relates to music in some form in his or her life, be it classical, ethnic, techno or any other number of genres. Our mission in relation to the general music-loving population is to make available recordings, books, sheet music, video/dDVD and information relevant to the genres these patrons wish to explore and enjoy. We consider public access to this material to be equally as important as public access to literature.

Our department's material is available because the library has personnel qualified to choose, purchase and organize it. Simply providing material for circulation is not, however, enough; qualified reference personnel must be available to present, explain and recommend. This service includes answering patrons’ questions and presenting material that widens their musical/cultural horizons. Good presentation can create interest in the culture of other ethnic groups, which in turn is a valuable contribution to integration and tolerance. Through the librarian-patron interaction, patrons can also find that “high-brow” culture is more accessible than they might have thought, and that popular culture is not only for the young. Surprisingly little knowledge is required for a musical experience to be meaningful, but that knowledge must be appropriate: a qualified music librarian is equipped to determine what each patron needs to know before s/he goes to a concert, a jazz club or to the opera. The “man in the street” who comes into the music department of his local public library with a desire to learn about a “new” musical genre has a right to qualified help. This help is not available in the local music store, where sales are the goal.

¹ *In Norway, the welfare vs outsourcing debate is a central issue in government spending and prioritizing. In Oslo, all county services – the public library included – are being required to analyze themselves and suggest any elements that lend themselves to outsourcing. As the Head of the library’s Music Department, I was asked to evaluate the services we provide with this in mind. The following is the document I submitted.*

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The “man in the street” also wants to make music at home and with friends. Many Norwegians have played in bands or sung in choirs as children, while others have taken piano lessons or played in a string orchestra. These experiences can develop into meaningful adult pastimes in an age where stress-related illnesses are becoming more and more common.

Others may never have played an instrument but find that they want something creative to fill their free time. Our instructional videos/DVDs and sheet music are chosen to give everyone an opportunity to explore music making. The library circulates language courses, so why not instructional materials in music?

We must not forget that among our “man in the street” patrons are quite a few with a sizeable knowledge of music. This group expects its local music library to be acquainted with various recordings, editions and technical literature, as well as to be able to provide information at an appropriate level. Our librarians are qualified to meet these patrons’ demands.

Typical questions from the man in the street include:

- “What was that song I knew as a child, do you have the music, text and possibly a recording of it? It would mean so much to me to be able to hear it again...”
- “Can you recommend sheet music and a video that can help me get started playing the guitar?”
- “Can you help me find information on the symphony I heard on the radio yesterday? What about the composer, do you have anything on him, or recordings of his other works? What about other composers who wrote the same sort of music?”
- “I’d like to start listening to classical music, but have no idea where to begin...”
- “Our local choir is giving a concert, can you help me find information for program notes?”
- “Do you have the latest recording of X, and how does it compare to other recordings of the same work?”
- “Can you help me find articles on electroacoustic music of the 1960s?”

The information that the man in the street finds in the music library prepares him to actively use and enjoy our city’s professional musical life. The patron who wants to go to the opera can come to us to read about the plot, borrow a recording to familiarize him/herself with the music, attend a lecture on the composer—in effect, can be prepared, which guarantees a richer musical experience. Those who already have a background in music use us as a reference point to expand their knowledge.

Music Students and Professional Musicians

Both students and professionals have repertoire that changes constantly. These patrons use our collections to borrow material that they need for only a short time, and pose some of the most

demanding reference questions. Our librarians speak their technical language, and are qualified to understand their needs.

Teachers and Children in the Public School System

Music teachers and other teachers who need or want to include music in their teaching often contact us for help in putting together appropriate material. Music librarians are required to be acquainted with the national pedagogical plan (Reform 97) as well as to keep abreast of available teaching materials. The fact that very little appropriate material is available in Norwegian gives music librarians the additional task of evaluating material in English, Danish and Swedish. Reform 97 sets somewhat unrealistic demands for music pedagogy, taking into account school budgets, and the local music library is an invaluable aid. We have developed special programs and materials for this group.

Other Libraries

The Oslo Public Library participates in the national inter-library loan system. As the nation's largest public library music department, our collections and our expertise are often consulted by libraries from all over the country. We are, in this respect, a national resource. The personnel in our department are strong, active participants in the national music library *milieu*, and in this way contribute to promoting music at a national level. This, in turn, ensures the continuing expansion of our own knowledge.

Immigrants

Studies show that a high percentage of immigrants are active users of their local public library. Integration into Norwegian society is a well-established political goal. Our collection includes a large number of recordings of ethnic music from around the globe, and is very popular with the general population as well as with immigrants and asylum seekers. This collection serves to increase interest in and understanding of other cultures. It helps Norwegians to learn about the culture of their new fellow citizens, and helps immigrants to hear sounds from home as they adjust to their new lives in exile. In addition, immigrants can familiarize themselves with the folk music of their new home. This collection would not exist without the expertise to be found in the music department. A thorough knowledge of the music and artists of other nations is necessary to build, catalogue, maintain and present such a collection.

Others

Other patrons include local funeral homes, various government offices, churches, the royal court... anyone and everyone in need of expertise in the vast field of music. We aid these patrons in finding recorded and printed music and supporting material for specific occasions. Music is often used as the formal framework of ceremonies and official occasions, and

appropriate expertise is required to put together a professional package and to give the formal framework of the musical aspect of such events.

Our Role in Preserving and Promoting Norwegian Music

For a small country with only 4.5 million inhabitants, a surprising amount of Norwegian music is produced annually. Much of this music has attained international acclaim and recognition, but paradoxically is not necessarily well known here at home. The music department of the capital city's public library has a responsibility to make this material available to the general population and to promote it actively. Cultural awareness in the population must be grounded in a knowledge and understanding of its own cultural identity.

Food for Thought

Some of the content of our collections can be purchased in mainstream bookstores, in record shops and music stores - by those who can afford it. Some of the employees in these businesses are capable of giving a certain amount of help and information to customers, depending on their own interest in and knowledge of music. It is, however, a fact that not every man and woman behind a cash register has a solid knowledge of the wares on offer. It is a fact of life that suggestions given to a customer in this setting are bound to be based to a certain extent on the sales goals of the store in question. Some of the collection in the public library is of material that is difficult to get hold of or designed for a limited group, and is therefore not likely to be found on the shelves of one's local store. Without a thorough knowledge of the various distributors and sources available, the customer is not able to acquire this material for him/herself, even when cost is not an issue. Music librarians are not only able to seek out and provide this material, but are able to give patrons a general survey and help them choose the material most relevant to their needs.

Access to a professional presentation of music is and must remain a common good, equal in importance to the presentation of literature. Studies show that musical experiences give human beings the strength to persevere in difficult times, and increase health and mental well-being. It is only in the music department of the public library that everyone is met on his or her level, from the academic to the man who - quite literally - lives on the streets. Within our walls one can find the middle-class citizen who wants to learn more about the opera s/he is going to see, the middle-school student writing a paper on Madonna, and the homeless man who confides that listening to country/western music in our department got him through the last few difficult months. All these patrons must be assured that their needs and interests will continue to be met at the same level as today, and the public library's music department is the place best equipped to do so.