

Creating a Sheet Music Web Site: The British Columbia Sheet Music Project

<http://www.library.ubc.ca/music/bcmusic/default.htm>

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Almost two years after I spoke about the British Columbia Sheet Music Project at the CAML conference in Lethbridge, it is nearing completion. There are now over 150 pieces that reflect the people, events and features of British Columbia. The project has been over five years in the making and, depending on copyright clearances of the remaining pieces, will be finished in late 2005 or early 2006.

The idea of a web site was first proposed at a meeting of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the Music Library Association. The intent was to create a site for music held in various libraries within the chapter, but the project did not materialize. For my part, I discovered after searching a number of Canadian collections there was enough sheet music about British Columbia to warrant a web site of its own.

Why a web site on B.C. sheet music? Popular sheet music has long been regarded in libraries as ephemera. Difficult or expensive to house, it was mostly left uncatalogued in filing cabinets. Similarly, sheet music in archives was often indexed just as "music." Much of it was buried in folders of significant events in British Columbia history, with little indication of content. In contrast, displaying this music on a web site has proven to be a cheap and effective way to give it unprecedented exposure and prominence.

A close examination showed there was a type of music in British Columbia that had largely been ignored. For the most part, it was composed not by music professionals, but by people who wanted to express something in music about the province. Many of the pieces on the site were written by prominent citizens. Their stories are also told in the accompanying biographies (when known). In this way, the site shows not only an aspect of the music history of British Columbia, but the evolving local and cultural history of the province.

Dale McIntosh's *History of Music in British Columbia, 1850-1950* contained a checklist of musical compositions that became the starting point for the project. It not only listed music about British Columbia, but music published in B.C. Some of the locations of the music were also given. The Vancouver Public Library, which has indexed the sheet music in its collection, was (and is) a valuable resource. The Vancouver Museum also held unique pieces. Joan Seidl, Curator of History at the Vancouver Museum, gave permission for me to scan its public domain works. These were the first to be launched on the site and they became the template for the ones that followed.

The *Historic American Sheet Music* web site, published by Duke University, offered me much technical information on scanning as well as ideas for display. Indexing and

access to the British Columbia Sheet Music Project was derived in part from the Duke template. Also helpful were the scans of indexed public domain sheet music on the site.

Most sheet music web sites display only works in the public domain or, for works not in the public domain, just the cover. I decided to take my project to a higher level by trying to find the copyright owner and ask for permission to use the music (or at least the cover). Because biographical information for most of the composers was available, this was included as well. The site also features MIDI sound files and pieces written in Finale to correct errors or in some cases to provide a cleaner copy.

Many of the pieces were probably in the public domain, but how could I be sure? What would I do with pieces that were not in the public domain? Were composers willing to allow me to display their music on the World Wide Web? And how would I contact the composers or their heirs? These were some of the questions that had to be addressed throughout the course of this project.

First and foremost, it was important to understand the Canadian copyright act as it pertained to music and to determine if the music in hand was in the public domain. The best starting point for the latter was the British Columbia Archives' Vital Events Indexes. This online index lists birth, marriage and death registrations, as well as references to microfilm copies of the registrations. Several composers were identified through the index and their works were found to be in the public domain (i.e., fifty years had passed since the composer's death). A difficulty with searching these indexes was that death registrations are not available until twenty years after the date of

death. Another problem was verifying if the person listed in the index is the same person who wrote the music. As noted before, many of the songwriters did not make their living from music and occupations in the registrations were not necessarily given as "composer." It was also time-consuming to search for people with a common name, such as William Campbell.

Another resource for obituaries was the indexes of provincial newspapers. The notices not only determined the date of death of the composer, but also provided much information on the composer's life and the whereabouts of the heirs, some of whom were located this way. This was how I learned that one piece composed in 1919 was still not in the public domain. The composer's daughter, who herself is now in a nursing home in California, told me that fifty years had not passed since her father's death. (Fortunately, she was more than happy to allow me the use of her father's music.) It should also be noted that some of the sheet music itself mentioned where the composer was living, and Canada 411 was another excellent source. Many composers or their heirs were located by telephone.

Once contact was made, a covering letter and permission form was sent to the copyright owner to use the material. The form also asked for biographical information and why the piece was written. It was important to state clearly the use of the music and to get written permission from the copyright holder. I did not assume that everyone was familiar with the Internet, and I was prepared to demonstrate the use upon request. Also, if permission was granted, the copyright holder still had the moral right to determine the use. I emphasized that it was strictly for research and educational purposes, not financial gain.

Although locating copyright owners was difficult and often frustrating, the overwhelming response made it well worth the effort. All but two of the located copyright owners allowed their works to be displayed. One of the copyright owners was unaware his piece had been published as sheet music. He had only granted permission to reproduce the piece as part of a collection of songs distributed to British Columbia schools. (The composer threatened to sue the violator, but decided against it after being advised it was not worth the effort financially.) The second copyright owner declined to say why she did not want her mother's piece used.

The Copyright Board came into the picture for copyright owners I could not find. The board issued me a non-exclusive license to do what I wished with the music. But it also required that I make reasonable efforts to locate the copyright owner. Information provided to the board included detailed information on the piece, the copyright owner, and sources consulted to locate the copyright owner. These included Amicus, CMRRA, SOCAN, BMI Repertoire, ASCAP, British Columbia Vital Statistics Death Registration, British Columbia Archives, Encyclopedia of Music in Canada, Canadian Archival Information Network, British Columbia Archival Union List, City of Vancouver Archives, City of Victoria Archives, British Columbia Provincial Library Newspaper Index, Canada 411, Canadian Music Periodical Index and Google searches.

In the case of the B.C. Sheet Music Project, the license for web site use was granted under the following conditions:

a) The license expires when the works become part of the public domain;

b) The license is non-exclusive and valid only in Canada. For other countries, it is the law of that country that applies;

c) The applicant (UBC in this case) will pay the sum of \$25 per work to any person who establishes, no later than five years after the works coming into the public domain, ownership of the copyright of the works covered by the license;

The license came into force on my filing with the board an undertaking to comply with the conditions set out above.

So far, no copyright owners for works licensed by the Copyright Board have come forward. Copyright clearance took the bulk of the time in this project. The steps included locating the owner, waiting for the form to be sent back, reminding copyright owners to fill out the form, and awaiting a decision from the board. The latter can take up to six weeks.

During the course of the research, I searched or visited collections at many libraries and archives across Canada. Amicus proved to be an especially valuable resource not only for locating pieces, but also for verifying if a work was in the public domain. Word-of-mouth led to other pieces. A list of libraries and archives where pieces were found is listed under Collections (under the Search button) on the web site. There is also a section for missing material, located under the About This Site button.

The site presently receives 200-300 hits per month. It also is being used as an experimental site at the UBC Archives for adding metadata. Once testing is complete, an announcement of the new site will be made. It is featured at the Irving K. Barber web site at UBC: <http://www.ikebarberlearningcentre.ubc.ca/>, and it will

also continue to stay at its present location. Future plans include adding more sheet music as it becomes available, converting MIDI files to MP3 files, adding MP3 files of recordings of some of the songs, and adding photos of the composers.

In conclusion, I wish to express my sincere appreciation to CAML for its financial support of this project, which has helped advance research and publication in the field of Canadian music bibliography.