Democratising Digitisation: Making History with Community Music Societies in Digitally Enabled Collaborations

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ABSTRACT

In post-COVID times we are focusing quite rightly on the plight of our major cultural institutions; but just as important are the local societies that enrich community life, including amateur music societies, devastated by stringent social-distancing requirements and the health and safety implications of live performance in small spaces. We propose a vision of digitally enabled collaboration that may help these societies rebuild their sense of community and purpose, by working together with academics, archives, and a major US arts centre to reconnect with their past and enrich understanding of their own histories and traditions within a broader national context.

KEYWORDS

Musicology, performance history, digital archives, digital humanities, ephemera, concerts, linked data, open data.

1 A UNIQUE TIME

It is a unique time. Since the turn of the century we have seen a growth of jingoistic nationalism and authoritarian leaders; global powers seem locked in intractable conflict, causing waves of refugees to seek shelter across Europe. Now disease has struck. Pandemic sweeps the world, with cities closed down and citizens raging against restrictions. As ever, the pallor of sickness illuminates dark divisions in society, the poorest and most

disadvantaged suffering most deeply. It is hard to see how such inequalities – previously so normalised as to be invisible – can persist in a post-pandemic world. The arts provide comfort for many, but the constraints of disease control on live performance reduce their power to speak directly, in consoling, but arousing tones, of the pain of today and our hopes for tomorrow.

This is of course about 1920, when Spanish flu killed more than the war just past and the war to come [9,6]. We and every generation share a belief in our own uniqueness, and our experiences in 2020 are clearly not the same as those of 1920. Science has advanced. We have so far avoided global conflagration through conflict, though not the slower, graver tread of climate change; yet we can perhaps still learn from those times and the capacity of humanity to cope amid such devastation.

2 HEALING AND EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MUSIC

Experiencing music is a social action [8,3] – one intimately tied up with our personal lives, individual and collective identities, memories of shared events, and intergenerational dynamics within our communities. Certain amateur concert-giving societies active in Belfast, York, and Huddersfield today share a common point of origin – a vision of music cutting across continents, but rooted in local communities, that was brought into being as 'the British Music Society' (BMS) in the summer of 1918 by English author, composer, and critic Arthur Eaglefield Hull (1876–1928). Hull's initiative was part of a widespread movement popularising the arts at that time in response to the darkness that had been [11].

One hundred years on, societies descended from the BMS and rich in archives are celebrating centenaries amid post-Covid

uncertainty, and thus, ironically, having to suspend their performance series for the first time ever. Huddersfield Music Society (HMS), Belfast Music Society, and the British Music Society of York have joined with us in planning a collaborative project with the University of York (UoY), Borthwick Institute for Archives (UoY), and Krannert Arts Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) to explore how the communities that have carried forward the legacy of the BMS, and societies like them, can find empowerment and renewed identity by exploring their pasts and that of the BMS through the creation of a dynamic, interactive digital archive, drawing together and extracting data on performances from their own physical archives and documents published by the BMS (Annuals, Congress Reports, Bulletins, and so on) that are scattered between UK and overseas archives and so relatively inaccessible. Until now the societies have remained largely unaware of their shared heritage and each has something unique to contribute. Collections of concert programmes, in some cases stretching back to the 1920s, provide the central core of material for digitisation (Huddersfield was Hull's home town, and the HMS archive is therefore particularly rich).

Researchers are beginning to appreciate what historical concert programmes have to offer the study of musical cultures, particularly when (as here) they become the focus of new transformative techniques in digital scholarship [5]. The BMS is a potentially rich case study in the development of internationalist networks for music and the arts after the twin catastrophes of Spanish flu and the Great War [2]. More broadly, however, and of the moment, we aim to explore what these and other community-based music societies can achieve by turning their physical archives into dynamic digital resources for intergenerational community memory, and how reconnecting with their pasts, traditions, and original mission can enable such societies collectively not only to serve the needs of current communities, but to empower them as agents of global and local change.

3   DEMOCRATISING DIGITISATION

By capturing these documentary traces of live musical experiences, the project aims to create resources for scholarly research and historical preservation, but we also seek to democratise the digitisation process as follows.

Some digitisation will be done in libraries and archives using expensive equipment, to create a small, high-quality set of scans, which are then subjected to OCR and other automated extraction techniques, hand-corrected, annotated, and interpreted by specialist researchers (informed by crowd-sourced commentary), and presented as an authoritative archive following IIIF standards.

Other sources will be digitised using a public model: enthusiasts, volunteers, and society members producing a lower-cost and higher volume of scans with ordinary scanners or their phones. These are subjected to OCR and hand-corrected by the same group (some matched to formal authority files) adding locally meaningful crowd-sourced interpretation.

These two modes will live together in a mixed ecology of digital resources, with the project taking careful account of the strengths and weaknesses of both.

The digitised archive from each BMS society will be developed in close collaboration with members and audiences in ways that model deep community engagement, and offer potential applications for archives and performing institutions outside the project, both within and beyond the humanities.

The repertoire of these local music societies is predominantly classical chamber music, and there are clear opportunities to enrich publicity and programmes for current performances with information relating to the works themselves, past performances of the composer's music, or related pieces in a society's own repertoire, plus information about historic performances including those digitised by the authors' earlier projects [10,7,4,1].

In addition, however, the BMS archives include records such as meeting minutes, many of which will relate to relatives of current members as well as other local figures creating potential for richly threaded family and local history.

4   TRANSFORMING THE ARCHIVE

This mix of professional and public digitisation poses new challenges. First it needs to be **open**, not just in the technical sense of open standards such as RDF or IIIF, but in a true sense of being available. It is not enough for data to be crowd-sourced, using the public to capture and process, it needs to be crowd-engaged, involving communities in shaping the data beyond the conceptions of the schema, and ultimately crowd-shared, accessible and usable by all. Second it needs to be **heterogeneous**, combining data with different levels of detail, sourced from different formats, encompassing different levels of quality, and different levels of authority.

For such data to be useful for scholarship the digital infrastructure needs to be: **incremental**, allowing different threads and parts to evolve at different rates; **auditable**, documenting who did what, where, and when; **updateable**, so when new higher-quality data is added this does not invalidate previous work connected to the old; and **connected**, so it is more than a collection of individual items, allowing scholarly and community driven investigation and genuine collaboration.

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