# The Case for Open Access Scholarly Reference Sources in Music

## DLfM 2020 TROMPA Challenge

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## ABSTRACT

While the idea of reference sources has become synonymous with the internet, online scholarly reference sources in music are currently only accessible to those with affiliations to institutions that can afford their annual expensive subscription costs or, in some cases, those individuals paying expensive personal subscriptions, while backup print copies sit inaccessible in libraries closed for the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper considers the advantages and possible financial models of open access scholarly reference sources for music and proposes some potential paths forward.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Reference Works • Wikis

## KEYWORDS

Open Access, Reference, Scholarly Communications

The initial steps of almost any research project rely on reference sources—basic, introductory information such as encyclopedias and dictionaries. [1] While the free-to-all, crowdsourced, and easy-to-update Wikipedia has its advantages, scholarly music research relies on scholarly reference sources, written by experts in the subject and peer-reviewed [1]. Selected important examples of music scholarly reference sources include *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (and its various offshoots), *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (MGG), *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, and *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. In the last two decades, as researchers have turned to using the internet almost exclusively for reference sources in

their research [2], music reference sources have slowly transitioned from print to digital formats, allowing access away from a library and the possibility of more frequent article updates, among other advantages. Unlike print editions, for which libraries or other parties pay one price and then are finished with the transaction, the financial model for these online scholarly reference sources involve subscription payments that are more costly than the print versions over time.[2] While these continuing payments purportedly pay for updates of the system and additional content, publishers may not have financial incentive to commission many new articles or update older articles, as they would likely continue to receive subscription payments from libraries whose researchers require access whether or not new content is produced.[3]

Besides financial downsides for libraries and individuals, these subscription-model online reference sources present many problems with access. Even if publishers allow individual subscription to scholarly encyclopedias, the cost can be prohibitive [3]. As each year library budgets shrink and e-resources eat up a larger portion of libraries' budgets, even many institutions cannot (or could never) afford to subscribe to all (or any) of the online reference sources desired by their users. Further, these subscription sources are behind authentication barriers; while in the past, unaffiliated researchers could at least walk into a library and use the physical scholarly reference sources, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, even the backup, sometimes outdated print volumes of the resources are out of reach. Still further, born-digital content is being produced for the online versions of these resources but not included in the physical editions, which are now considered relics of a bygone era. Finally, swaths of the population who could benefit from scholarly research may not even know about these important scholarly sources at all; or they have heard about the sources,

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[1] While some may consider specialized music databases (such as RILM and RISM), academic journals, scholarly editions of scores, and some individual e-books as reference sources, these sources are out of scope for this position paper.

[2] *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition (2001), cost around $5000 in 2001 (about $7300 in 2020 dollars). Those institutions that have been paying subscription costs for electronic access since 2001 by 2020 have paid at least four times that amount for the online version, more likely six times or more; those institutions likely purchased the print volume, also.
[3] Certainly, the financial rewards for new digital content are lower than for their print reference predecessors, which only received payment upon delivery of the new print object; though, I also acknowledge that digital content is often more expensive and complicated to produce and store, including costs for multimedia, upgrading platforms, and website maintenance.

but do not know the sources' value or content as they sit behind a paywall.

The answer to these numerous access problems: open access scholarly reference. The benefits of open access scholarship in general have been discussed at length elsewhere.[4] While open access scholarly journals, monographs, and textbooks have been touted extensively by scholarly communications communities, open access scholarly reference has not received the same level of attention. Further advantages of open access reference include: 1) open access reference sources could be used by anyone with an internet connection, not just those with institutional affiliation; 2) these resources could be disseminated much more widely, possibly achieving greater use and impact, such as receiving higher relevance rankings and being included in abbreviated search results of major search engines; 3) as the possible audience for reference is much greater than other forms of scholarly production, these resources could have a transformative effect on the learning of those not normally included in academic spaces; and 4) with the increased audience and visibility, plus the need to compete with Wikipedia, publishers would have possibly greater incentive to create new content or revise out-of-date content. One other possible future advantage is scholarly reference sources might eventually be less fragmented—separate reference sources packaged and sold separately for difference disciplines, often on the same platform, could be joined together.

Do models of open access reference sources currently exist? While some exist in the sciences (MathWorld.Wolfram.com, PubChem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, ChemSpider.com, or MedlinePlus.gov), these are supported by government agencies or industry—unlikely sponsors for humanities disciplines.

If the music scholarship communities want to move forward to a world of open access scholarly reference for music, I see three main possible solutions: 1) Scholars spend their efforts updating the main already highly recognized and used open access reference source, Wikipedia; while perhaps the option with the least roadblocks, lack of scholarly trust in Wikipedia, lack of professional incentive to contribute, and the technical challenges of including musical examples would hinder adoption.[5] 2) Existing scholarly reference sources could be made open access. While this is perhaps the most favorable solution, publishers would be hesitant to lose a lucrative business; yet this approach might be possible if libraries, with support from professional music organizations, collectively bargained with publishers to make a particular source open access and also contracted to continue subscribing support.[6] 3) Scholars could create their own new open access scholarly reference source, as they have with open access journals; this would require significant time investment to duplicate already-completed work,

along with coordination that would be difficult to organize without a publisher; further, scholars would face an uphill battle to compete with the authority of established scholarly reference sources.

The major undiscussed problem with options 2 and 3 in the preceding paragraph (making extant reference sources open access or creating new open access reference sources), then, is how to pay for open access scholarly reference, including website maintenance, editors, and providing new authors with honorariums. Possible solutions, however, have been already been proposed for other open access projects: 1) As for open access monographs such as Knowledge Unlatched (KnowledgeUnlatched.org), parties (such as libraries, nonprofits, and similar institutions) could pay the upfront cost of producing new content (most likely new reference sources, or volumes of reference sources in this example) and then continue to pay a smaller access fee. Or, 2) as with some open access journals, a subscription model where subscribers pay an annual fee and editors produce a certain amount of content every year, whether new articles or revisions, while continuing to provide access to older content ("subscribe to open") [4]; either of these funding models also encourage new content or revisions. While it is possible that libraries would receive a better financial deal with these funding models (especially if music scholars create a new open access scholarly resource, though not without a high cost of initial investment), more likely libraries would need to use the high cost of subscription reference sources as a bargaining chip in the pursuit of making publishing content open access while maintaining current pricing.

While the scholarly communications community makes advances in open access for other scholarly content (journals, monographs, textbooks), we are currently ignoring one aspect of scholarly communications that could have the most impact outside of our small scholarship circles in open access. This should change. If we move forward with creating open access scholarly reference sources in music (or any other scholarly discipline), whichever path we decide, the benefits could lead to much greater access and impact not only in our fields, but outside of our scholarly communities.

## REFERENCES

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[4] For a summary, see the Open Access page on the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) site: https://sparcopen.org/open-access/

[5] In this solution, libraries would also want to consider making regular donations to Wikipedia, which I would argue libraries should be doing anyway.

[6] If libraries were able to convince publishers to make their existing scholarly reference sources open access, publishers may want to consider attaching a Creative Commons license to their content.