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Information resources: Has the digital revolution made the world of global academic research bigger or smaller? RILM: A case study in the field of music

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In 2003 I wrote my report for the Council of Library and Information Resources, detailing my experiences with libraries, archives, and instrument collections in preparation of my PhD Dissertation on the early history of French piano music at New York University. A few years after completing the PhD I was hired as a fulltime editor at the International Office of *Repertoire Internationale de Littérature Musicale* or “RILM”; one of the main resources used all over the world for research in the field of music and writings about music. Little did I know that my thinking and writing about the past and future of library research for the CLIR report was an excellent preparation for this job, which I still hold today. Therefore, this paper provides an opportunity to reflect again on the observations I made in my CLIR report after my 14 year experience as RILM editor. This is a short presentation, so I will confine myself to a few points just to illustrate the monumental changes in the world of library resources and to show how RILM, which has a front seat in this process, has adapted during the last years.

First let me briefly explain what RILM is and does: RILM was founded in 1966 as a non-profit research tool for musicologists, producing annual printed volumes of bibliographies of music literature with abstracts and indexing. It was designed following the UNESCO model: each country organizes its own national committee contributing bibliographic records that are sent to the central database so that editors in the International Office in New York can check, translate, research, abstract, and index them. All information, is selected in each country by native scholars, and preserved in the language and spelling of the country of origin,

supplemented with English translations. RILM includes historical musicology, traditional music, popular music, organology, iconography, and music theory in more than 200 languages. In its time it was amazingly forward-looking in its global scope and vision. Unlike other research tools, it did not privilege English-language scholarship and, at the height of the Cold War, it contributed to academic exchanges in which cultural borders were more easily crossed. As our executive director, Zdravko Blazekovic recently wrote:

“When [the founder] Barry S. Brook (1918–1997) conceived the Répertoire International de Littérature Musicale (RILM) in the mid-1960s, his starting point for the scope of RILM’s bibliography was to provide a solution for better communication among music scholars. [...] His global thinking was in many ways atypical at the time, as it was more in the line with the mission of the United Nations than with the advancement of the global Pax Americana. At a time when Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain between the political East and West, and non-European political players were aligning themselves with one or the other ideological side, Brook observed the world as an opportunity for multilateral collaborations across all political systems and ideologies. He may not have entered through the gate of “global musicology”, but he had certainly arrived on its doorstep.” (“Advancing communication in global music research”, 2022)

In 2001, with a grant from the Mellon Foundation, RILM started to digitize its printed volumes; now the complete database is available online anywhere in the world through subscriptions. In the following year (2002) the Mellon Foundation supported my own research through CLIR at a time when all these huge changes towards digitalization took place. And in recent years, RILM has dramatically increased its coverage of music scholarship in countries like China, India, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, following Brook’s original concept.

At the end of my CLIR report I addressed three topics: accessibility of material, copying procedures; digitalization, and specialization.

The first, clearly, is by now an antiquated topic; in most cases microfilms (a big topic of concern in my report) are a thing of the past. Accessibility is an interesting topic, because it

shows to what extent the locus of research has shifted from physical libraries to digital ones. Accessibility is now mostly understood, not as the use of libraries, but as the ease and availability of digital resources. RILM was originally designed as a tool that would point its users to the journals, books and collections that contained the relevant articles so that the user would then head over to a physical library to find it on a shelf. Now RILM *is* the music library. Moreover, in the last 5 years RILM has expanded to include 260 fulltext journals in order to compete in the marketplace with all the books and articles that can be found online.

The second, digitalization, is a hot topic today: what is digitized, what is publicly available on the internet, and who decides? A new form of “imperialism” has taken hold in which groups can potentially push their agendas and question the validity of everything else regardless of precedent or tradition and with little accountability. Therefore, it is important that databases like RILM, that hold high academic standards, evolve with the digital times and maintain their active presence. In my report I worried about online-catalogues that are slow to keep up with traditional librarianship and vice versa: I still remember the painful moment at the Bibliothèque National in Paris when an older and clearly very knowledgeable librarian was unable to find the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* in the digital catalogue on his computer.

Specialization as I addressed it in the report is closely related to digitalization. I still think that the division between general libraries and specialized ones that I proposed then is still a good idea: the first one is more selective or traditional, while the second would cover all levels and aspects of scholarship but only as pertaining to a narrow topic. The expanded availability of information on the Internet is wonderful, assuming that researchers are trained to be critical and careful—this is clearly not always the case. As I said in the report: “Compared to the world of 18th century scholars, it is obvious that it is today very easy to obtain information. The question is

whether we have the tools to select, assess, and process it". Fortunately, many educators recognize this problem and teach their students from an early age to be critical and protective of their own values. To conclude with a response to the title of this paper: yes, the world of information has expanded and exploded in the last 20 years, opening up exciting new avenues. But more than ever, it is important to be sensitive to unfamiliar cultural traditions that can and should be surprising in countless ways. Academic resources like RILM are in a position to oversee a more even-handed and equitable exchange of information while trying to uphold scholarly standards. This is good news, as long as academic researchers know that, in the end, it takes the same long hard work as it did in earlier times to understand exactly what they are finding. Thank you.