Oh, the stories orchestra librarians can tell. There’s the one about the third horn who arrives at rehearsal only to discover that he has left his parts for the day’s session at home. Or the young composer who, channeling one of Mozart’s less attractive traits, doesn’t complete her commissioned score until a few days before rehearsals for the world premiere. And did you hear about the player who wanted a section of a part transposed from clarinet in C to clarinet in A? ASAP, of course.

These stories tend to have happy endings. And more and more it’s because of the latest additions to the orchestra librarian’s professional toolbox—the scanners, the software with names like Sibelius and Finale, the PDF files, the industrial-strength printers, copiers, computers, and fax machines of the digital age.

Mention digital technology and most people in the orchestra world think of concert streaming, Internet broadcasting, website content, and self-produced CDs. Librarians are often consulted on such issues, especially when questions of copyright and fair use arise. But those activities concern the way orchestras record and disseminate performances; librarians use digital technology every day to help produce those performances in the first place.

“I don’t think it’s transformed what we
“do yet,” says Lawrence Tarlow, principal librarian for the New York Philharmonic. “But it’s certainly a train with a very bright light coming down the track.”

For nearly the entire history of symphony orchestras, composers hand-wrote their music and passed it on to copyists and publishers, who printed both full scores and instrumental parts. Orchestras bought or rented scores and their attendant parts, and one of the orchestra librarian’s jobs was to correct any misprints by hand. They marked each part with bowings and other interpretive details required by the conductor, and made sure that the parts were clearly organized, crisply legible, and assembled in neat, organized binders. Their final task was ensuring that the right parts ended up on the right stands by rehearsal time.

With the advent of copiers and fax machines this particular strand of the librarian’s job became a little quicker and easier. In recent years, however, the librarian’s ages-old task of getting the music from publisher to player has taken on

Responding to a conductor’s request, a New York Philharmonic librarian altered three measures of the third-trombone part to Sibelius’s Violin Concerto, substituting notes that duplicated the double-bass line. The original is shown above, the customized version below.

Musical excerpts courtesy New York Philharmonic Library

Michael Runyan, a harmonica virtuoso who also serves as principal librarian at the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, takes comfort in the fact that orchestra librarians need not toil away in isolation from one another. The Major Orchestra Librarians’ Association, known as MOLA, has “personalized the publisher-to-orchestra relationship,” says Runyan. “We know who we’re talking to on the phone, and we can commiserate in each other’s troubles.”

Founded in 1983 following a meeting of 25 U.S. and Canadian librarians in Philadelphia, MOLA today links more than 240 libraries at symphony orchestras, opera and ballet companies, music academies, and professional bands and ensembles; its membership embraces organizations in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Australia. Services include the quarterly newsletter Marcato; an annual spring conference (this year it takes place in Nashville from May 31 to June 2); and an online discussion forum.

Though crucial to orchestras everywhere, managing a library of scores and parts is an activity well below the radar of not only the concertgoing public, but of many orchestra professionals. For this reason MOLA has teamed with the Orchestra Leadership Academy of the League of American Orchestras to present a biennial seminar in orchestra librarianship just prior to the MOLA conference. In making this specialty a topic of concern for Orchestra Leadership Academy participants, “We’re hoping to reach the uninitiated,” says Marcia Farabee, librarian of the National Symphony Orchestra and now in her third term as president of MOLA. More information about this organization—and a good introduction to orchestra librarianship for the “uninitiated”—can be found at mola-inc.org.

—Chester Lane
an added dimension. More and more composers are writing music on computer, and more music publishers are issuing it electronically. They send scores and parts as PDFs or other types of digitized files, and the orchestra librarian is responsible for printing and distributing them.

“Digital technology affects how we get music and what we do with it when it gets here,” says Michael Runyan, principal librarian with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. “We still buy music on pieces of paper. But when we buy a new edition or a new publication of some sort, most often things have been computer-engraved. That can be good and bad. Often it looks nicer, but if the editor or engraver wasn’t skilled, it can actually be harder to use. If you don’t have a master working at the computer, it does you no good.”

Master music copyists or engravers know that page turns must come at a point when a violinist or a flutist can actually free up a hand to turn the page. They know that the length of a bar depends on the number of notes in it. They are aware that printed music has a visual rhythm that can either help musicians or hinder their performance. They understand that performing from a page of printed music notation propped up several feet away on a music stand is very different from reading a letter or a magazine.

“If the copyist really knows his or her craft, we’re okay. But if they kind of know it, then we end up rescuing them.”

—Marcia Farabee, librarian, National Symphony Orchestra

FOR THOSE WHO KNOW THE SCORE

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really copy-savvy would know how to space it better. If the copyist really knows his or her craft, we’re okay. But if they kind of know it, then we end up spending time rescuing them.”

Or, as Tarlow tartly puts it, “The computer has taken a bad copyist with bad handwriting and made them a bad copyist with good handwriting.”

When music arrives via software like Sibelius and Finale, however, orchestras can alter it as necessary at their own computers. Most orchestras now have librarians who are fluent in that software and capable of correcting notes, re-sizing bars, or creating and inserting a replacement passage or two. But even those software programs need the eye and ear of a good copyist when it comes to generating parts that are easy for musicians to read.

“It’s not a matter of pushing the ‘part-extract’ button and then having the parts spit out,” says Kazue McGregor, a librarian (and frequent substitute flutist) at the Los Angeles Philharmonic. She recalls the challenges her staff faced with Anders Hillborg’s *Eleven Gates*, which had its world premiere at the Philharmonic in May 2006. “The violins had sixteen different lines,” says McGregor. “The second violins had fourteen different lines, the violas had twelve, the cellos had ten. If the copyist had pushed ‘part-extract,’ it would have been a mess. But he really studied the score and figured out how best to write the parts.”

**Details, Details**

Like most orchestra librarians, McGregor sees drawbacks as well as benefits in the new digital technology. But she has no doubts that its speed is an unmitigated blessing, especially for composers having trouble meeting a commission deadline.

“I always want music here six weeks in advance of the first rehearsal,” she says. “Thank goodness, we have composers...
who really work early, and we have it a year before. Other composers are having a tough time, but, man, their work is worth it.” The last-minute arrival of a new work is “obviously not an ideal situation,” notes McGregor. “But if it weren’t for digital technology, that new work or that commission might not have happened.” And mistakes in digital parts and scores for those new works “can be tweaked and corrected. You can consult with the composer. Things that used to take weeks can now be done much more easily.”

As Peter Conover, principal librarian of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, observes, “For many years it took a long time for music to get from the composer’s mind to the player’s stand.” The process is faster now, but with chronic problems like mismatched page sizes, bad page turns, and primitive formats for extracting parts, it isn’t as perfect as it could be. And Conover, for one, doesn’t expect much improvement from the computer gurus any time soon. “It’s pretty sophisticated computer software for a niche market,” he says, “so there’s not a lot of competition, or a lot of motivation for these programs to evolve quickly. Somebody could develop music-copying software, but compared with a video game, your market is going to be infinitesimal.”

Developers of the electronic music stand think they have answers to some of these problems. With individual parts displayed on an embedded computer screen, the stands can be programmed to display parts for thousands of orchestral works. Players “turn pages” with a foot pedal, and librarians can mark bowings and make corrections in one place and send them to individual music stands. Many in the orchestra world think the electronic stand will eventually be ubiquitous on symphonic stages.

But for orchestra librarians, the task of facilitating trouble-free rehearsals and concerts is all about detail, and they are not yet ready to endorse electronic stands for orchestral use. One obstacle they point to is that the stands, which have power cords, would significantly slow down stagehands racing to rearrange the stage between, say, a Haydn symphony and a Rachmaninoff piano concerto. Patrick McGinn, librarian at the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, predicts that “ten years from now people are still going to be using paper on the stands; 50 years from now, maybe not.” If e-stands become standard equipment for young people studying music, say many librarians, orchestras will begin using them as that generation moves into the field’s professional ranks.

Meanwhile, orchestra librarians are operating in a transition zone. On one hand, they love the way digital technology has made their jobs easier. Tracking down performance dates and detailed instrumentation, for example, is now as easy as firing up a search engine and pushing a button. Few librarians, however, see digital technology as an unalloyed blessing. Farabee, for one, isn’t thrilled about the new digitized scores and parts the National
Symphony is receiving from music publishers. “I feel that our role is taking us down the path to becoming a publisher, and I don’t really want to go there.”

Every orchestra librarian understands the emotional attachment some veteran players have to those decades-old, often-battered orchestral parts, with all their discolored pages and multiple erasure markings, that were on the stands when these musicians played under Solti or Szell as awestruck neophytes. In this respect orchestra librarians, for the immediate future at least, will serve as gatekeepers between the old and the new. “People who are behind the new technology want the field—the art, if you will—to conform to the technology,” says Conover. “Those of us on the other side say, ‘No, the technology has to conform to the art.’”

Wynne Delacoma is a Chicago-based music journalist. From 1991 to 2006 she was classical music critic of the Chicago Sun-Times.