

[Search](#) | [Back Issues](#) | [Author Index](#) | [Title Index](#) | [Contents](#)

ARTICLES

D-Lib Magazine
February 2001

Volume 7 Number 2

ISSN 1082-9873

Strike Up the Score

Deriving Searchable and Playable Digital Formats from Sheet Music

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Introduction

The Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music represents one of the largest collections of sheet music available online.¹ The Collection, part of the Special Collections² of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library (MSEL) at Johns Hopkins University, comprises nearly 30,000 pieces of music which correspond to nearly 130,000 sheets of music and associated cover art. It provides a rich, multi-faceted view of life in late 19th and early 20th century America, featuring famous songs such as "The Star-Spangled Banner", "Hail Columbia", and "Yankee Doodle Dandy" along with engravings, lithographs, and many forms of early photo reproduction on song covers. Scholars from various disciplines have used the Collection for both research and teaching; the online collection, described below, has proven popular with the general public as well. In the early 1990s, the MSEL considered the need for preservation of the Collection, while respecting the need for continued access. Accordingly, the MSEL evaluated two ideas to meet the dual goals of enhancing access while reducing the handling of the physical collection-microfilming and digitization.



Figure 1. A cover sheet from the Levy Collection.

With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)³ in 1994, the Milton S. Eisenhower Library began the process of digitizing the Levy Collection. While there is now a reasonable amount of experience with digitization of library collections, this was not the case in 1994. Not only is the Levy Collection a relatively large online collection, it is also one of the first major digitization efforts by an academic research library. The Levy (Phase I) Project team initially hired a subcontractor to implement and manage the digitization. Both the subcontractor and the Levy team realized some rather "painful" lessons regarding large-scale digitization projects. The workload associated with digitizing the Levy Collection, especially the process of inspecting, editing, and correcting images and attaching appropriate metadata, proved onerous and overwhelming. In fact, the subcontractor declared bankruptcy, leaving the responsibility for completing the digitization with the Levy team.

In the final report to NEH, the Curator of Special Collections at the MSEL stated, "the most useful thing we learned from this project was that you can never overestimate the amount of time it will take to create a quality digital product" (Requardt 1998). The word "resources" might represent a more comprehensive choice than the word "time" in this previous statement. This "sink" of time and resources manifested itself by an increasing allocation of human labor and time to deal with workflow issues related to large-scale digitization. The Levy Collection experience provides ample evidence that there will be mistakes during and after digitization and that unforeseen challenges or difficulties will arise, especially when dealing with rare or fragile materials. The current strategy of allocating additional human labor neither limits costs nor scales well.

