

Circulating Course Reserve Materials on iPods: The McGill Experience

by Brian McMillan, McGill University

For the past two years, the Marvin Duchow Music Library of McGill University has experimented with incorporating the iPod, Apple's portable listening device, into its audio visual services. The following report discusses why the iPod service was considered, outlines the processes by which the Music Library staff designed and implemented the "iPod project," surveys student reactions, and lays out plans for the iPod's future at the Music Library.

Since the iPod's launch in 2001, the digital audio player has become a cultural phenomenon. Ubiquitous in everyday life, and especially popular among the "digital natives" who are now university-aged, the iPod combines multi-functionality, large memory capacity, compatibility with both Windows and Macintosh operating systems, portability, and ease of use. Its signature traits – convenience, flexibility, and personalization – are the buzzwords of today's generation, and educational institutions, too, are striving to reflect these characteristics. Like many North American libraries, McGill began to think about how to integrate this technology with its teaching, learning, and research missions. The interest of the Music Library was twofold: (1) to explore potential pedagogical applications of such a popular device; and (2) to develop new methods for the mobile delivery of course-related audio and video resources and services.

iPods entered university classrooms soon after they first appeared on the commercial market.¹ However, interest in the device's educational potential exploded only in 2004 when Duke University announced a program in which all first-year students would receive an iPod. This initiative was a multi-pronged approach coordinated by the university's Center for Instructional Technology. It focused on the curricular uses of iPods and did not directly involve the Music Library.² Nonetheless, by this time, several libraries (public, school, and academic) had already begun to incorporate iPods and podcasting into their services.

¹ Georgia College & State University introduced iPods to the classroom in Fall 2002. In early 2003, the University of Western Australia provided the players to students in communication studies (See Peter Galuszka, "Technology's Latest Wave," *Black Issues in Higher Education* (March 24, 2005): 24-28. "iPods Come to Class at UWA" Press Release, March 10, 2003 [http://www.uwa.edu.au/media/statements/2003/march/ipods_come_to_class_at_uwa_\(10_march\)](http://www.uwa.edu.au/media/statements/2003/march/ipods_come_to_class_at_uwa_(10_march))).

² Personal email communication, Kristin Dougan, Interim Head, Public Services Librarian, Duke University Music Library, June 19, 2006.

In the wake of Duke University's announcement, Apple began campus tours to promote the iPod to curious faculty, administrators, and staff. In early February 2006, five Apple representatives visited McGill. Intrigued by the possibilities raised in this presentation, McGill Library staff began to study whether and in what ways the iPod might be a feasible addition to Library services.

One starting point for this study was Duke University's one-year review of its iPod program, published in June 2005.³ This report outlined the academic potential of the device, its benefits, and the potential "barriers" to continued academic use. The scope of the evaluation was quite broad. Three of the five potential academic uses for the iPod that the Duke authors identified were "classroom recording tool," "file storage and transfer tool," and "field recording tool." However, the other two uses—"course content dissemination tool" and "study support tool"—have direct implications for academic libraries. The McGill Library felt it could certainly employ iPods as part of its traditional role of disseminating course materials. McGill's Teaching Technology Services department was willing to coordinate activities that fell under the other iPod applications: podcasts of lectures and the integration of these with the university's learning management system, WebCT (now called MyCourses).

An internal McGill Library discussion document (June 2006) considered the findings of Duke University's report as well as experiences documented in education and library literature and iPod uses documented on various Anglo-American library and university websites. This survey identified five possible library-specific applications:

- Dissemination of library information
- Loan of audio course reserve materials
- Loan of audio books and movies
- Loan of iPods
- Promotion of audio collections

Each application was first illustrated by current projects elsewhere, then extrapolated into potential McGill scenarios and the pros and cons assessed. A separate appendix of issues raised by the introduction of iPods to campuses and a bibliography of current literature accompanied the report.

Since the summer of 2006, the McGill University Library has focused on the first two of the above applications. Recognizing an effective means of disseminating essential library information, Library staff developed quick help podcasts (e.g., "What's my password?" and "How to use the Library catalogue") and a podcastable tour of the Humanities and Social Sciences Library. The Marvin Duchow Music Library staff tackled the move of some audio course reserves to a suite of newly purchased iPods.

With only 40 iPods (20 4-GB nanos and 20 8-GB video iPods), the decision was quickly made to deal with one medium-sized class in isolation and to sign out one iPod per student for an entire term. Whereas other university music libraries, such as Crouch Fine

³ Belanger, Yvonne. "Duke University iPod First-Year Experience Final Evaluation Report," June 2005. http://www.duke.edu/pdf/reports/ipod_initiative_04_05.

Arts at Baylor (Waco, TX), had chosen to place all course reserve listening on individual iPods,⁴ McGill's Music Library decided to focus on one class only. This approach allowed the Library to study how students used the iPod over an extended loan period. Limiting students to Baylor's 12-hour loan (the iPod's approximate battery life-span between charges) would have also limited how, when, and where the students could have potentially used the device.

For several practical reasons, the Fall 2006 course chosen as an iPod "testbed" was MUHL-396, "The Era of the Modern Piano," an upper-level undergraduate history course. The class had a cap of 35 students; the course was a core offering (so potential reuse of the iPod music files was probable if the iPod project continued); the professor was enthusiastic, and finalized the required course listening list with ample time to upload the content to the iPods before the start of classes.

Preparation of the iPods took about a month. Although the Music Library staff was already comfortable dealing with various types of audio equipment (they regularly circulate computers, microphones, and other digital recording devices), there was, as with any technology, an initial period of familiarization. Music Library staff had to learn how the iPod worked in order to determine the best way to prepare it for course use and then to field any questions from students. To make sure all staff were comfortable with the device, iPods were introduced and circulated at a late summer staff meeting and made available for "in-house" experimentation.

From start to finish, all levels of full-time staff and one student library assistant were involved in the project. Tasks included coordination, hiring of the student assistant, sourcing of the required music recordings, purchase of protective skins and bags to hold all the component pieces, processing and cataloguing of the iPods, preparation of a borrower's manual, standardization and implementation of the metadata that accompanies each track,⁵ and charging of and uploading content onto the iPods.

The project generated quite a lot of interest. Even before the fall term began, word had spread and several students approached the loans desk inquiring about the availability of iPods. When the project was officially announced in the 3rd class of MUHL-396, some students stood up to go directly to the Library to sign out their iPods. The professor had to tell them to sit down and wait until his lecture was finished! Not surprisingly, all of the enrolled students borrowed an iPod.

⁴ Renée McBride, "Hot Topics Session a Lively Gathering," *Music Library Association Newsletter*, no. 145 (May-June 2006), <http://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/publications/newsletter/MLANEWS145.html#cover> (accessed 20 April 2008).

⁵ Though the Music Library did not follow the example of North Carolina School of the Arts, Christia Thomason and the staff of this institution propose an excellent (and inexpensive) method to supply streaming audio/video to students. They have also circulated course reserve listening via iPods (both the institution's and the students' own!). Of particular interest is their adaptation of iTunes's metadata structure to suit the needs of classical music description. See <http://mla2007podpeople.pbwiki.com/> (accessed 20 April 2008).

The iPods were treated as any other loan from the Music Library. Students were informed of their responsibility for the item while it was signed out to them and that replacement fees would be imposed for any lost item. Still, the Music Library staff preferred to accentuate the positive and encouraged students to explore the capabilities of their iPods to the fullest. At the end of term, students could complete a voluntary survey to help guide the Library's future implementation of the program.

The survey's purpose was to better understand students' use of the iPods, their impressions of its effect on their listening/study habits, their comfort level with the device, and any suggestions they had for future development of the project. Student responses were overwhelmingly positive. Some typical comments included: "GREAT idea. It was easier, more efficient, and made me want to listen more;" "Overall, it was fantastically helpful and convenient;" and "Keep it going."

The students identified three advantages of iPod course listening: flexibility, accessibility, and convenience. Students could listen "everywhere basically," and none had to worry about the Music Library's reserve copy being out when they wanted to study, perhaps not a uncommon occurrence when dealing with a new and less frequently recorded repertoire such as 20th-century piano literature. Second, the iPods facilitated easier access to listening since all the necessary tracks were assembled ahead of time. As a result, students reported doing their required course listening more often and for greater amounts of time than for other courses. For some, the iPod actually got them *to do* their listening. In response to the question "Did having an iPod affect the amount of MUHL-396 course reserve listening you did this term?" one student wrote, "Yes, I actually listened." Another student commented, "I never would have gone to the library two times a week to do listenings."

In general, an iPod seems to support? the study habits of today's student. Many reported that they preferred to do their listening in the evening, at home, or while doing other tasks. In fact, only one student (of twenty-four responses) listed the Library as a location where s/he would do course listening. One typical comment explained why: "There's more space [at home] to spread out ...than listening on the Library computers. I did more [listening] as a result."

Students did identify some drawbacks to the iPod project. A few noted the high cost of replacement in case of loss. More intriguing were a few unique comments that perhaps speak to a larger change in listening habits encouraged by the iPod. For example, one student thought the pre-packaged nature of the iPod course listening content discouraged further exploration of the repertoire. Another commented on how the easy accessibility of the course content made it easier to ignore: "Because the material was readily available[,] I got a little lazy about making time to listen." Convenience also led to a sense of diminished *quality* of listening "In some respects, I think I listened more [because] the material was at my fingertips. In other respects, I might have listened less [because] I didn't have to make a concerted effort [or] schedule time to go to the Library to listen." The student identified a lack of 'effective' listening.

While the basic process of the iPod project has not changed since its launch in 2006, the project's scope has expanded. The steps worked out almost two years ago are now comfortably part of the Library staff's regular workflow: before each term begins, professors and Music Library staff identify potential courses, the audio reserves lists are finalized, and student assistants (usually graduate TAs) assemble the repertoire and prepare the iPods for circulation for up to three courses per term. Interestingly, until the past term (Winter 2008), this expansion did not necessitate the purchase of more iPods. Despite being offered to more students (in the 2007 Winter term, for example, over seventy students could have signed out an iPod), the Music Library's supply of forty iPods was rarely depleted. This decline in loans most likely stems from the increasing number of students who own their own iPods or other MP3 players. Student survey responses in part corroborate this assumption. Several non-borrowers echoed one student's response: "I have my own and did not want to risk losing [the Library's]." Other students also cited the iPod's relatively poor audio range for classical music and the potential hearing damage caused by earbuds.

This decrease in demand has not diminished the Music Library's dedication to the project or the enthusiasm it inspires at McGill's Schulich School of Music. In a way, it reemphasizes a traditional and fundamental role of the Library: to supply services and collections to those who cannot otherwise obtain them. Students have overwhelmingly endorsed the addition of iPods to their music studies. Like one student who wrote, "So helpful! Helped me pass," they perceive a distinct benefit to their academic performance.

Encouraged by such positive feedback, the Music Library has decided to further extend the scope of the project. This past term, the Library invested in 20 more iPods. While "targeted" audio course reserves circulation will remain a central service, the Library also plans to respond to student requests for iPods without preloaded content for a limited loan period so they use them to prepare their own class and seminar presentations.

The iPod has proven itself a useful and popular addition to the McGill Music Library audiovisual services. The project's implementation in Fall 2006 demanded careful study, preparation, and diligent follow-through. Its continuation has required a constant monitoring of technological developments and best practices at other institutions. However, the extra labour has been repaid several times over in the enthusiasm and appreciation expressed by students toward the Music Library. There are several more ways in which libraries could incorporate iPods into their services: the Music Library is now planning a second (is something missing here?); more broadly, the McGill University Library is investigating new ideas. Further studies, both qualitative (to measure faculty impressions of the iPod and its usefulness) and quantitative (to measure the effect – if any – of iPods on student performance), could direct these developments. Nevertheless, this first stage has proven a success for both the Marvin Duchow Music Library staff and the students it serves.

For further information on this project, please contact Brian at brian.mcmillan@mcgill.ca.