Audio Preservation and Digitization on a Shoestring: Session Report (MLA 2014)

By Michelle Hahn

Since universities and other institutions across the country continue to suffer from tight budgets and waning funding for preservation and digitization, projects "on a shoestring" are becoming the standard, and are expected by administrators. This presentation focused on a particular digitization project at the Westminster Choir College at Rider University.

One of the most pertinent concepts to take away is that "shoestring" means different things to different institutions, and the biggest challenge is determining how much one can do with their own shoestring. Amy Kimura and Kenneth Kauffman of Westminster Choir College took on that challenge in an effort to preserve a collection of audio recordings with a connection to the institution. This included commercial recordings by persons linked to Westminster in some way, recordings of events that have taken place at the college, and broadcasts made by Westminster, from 1925 to the present in multiple recording formats.

Beginning with a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Preservation Assistance grant, Kimura and Kauffman developed a plan for assessing the collection's condition and preservation needs. The grant, which is intended for smaller institutions, encourages activities that will "improve their ability to preserve and care for their significant humanities collections."[1] Such activities may include collection assessment, consultations with conservation experts, and training for staff. Kimura and Kauffman also sought guidance from organizations and institutions with extensive knowledge and experience in audio collections and preservation, such as the Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC), the Indiana University Media Preservation Initiative, the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives Technical Committee (IASA), and the Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative (FADGI).

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1. "Preservation Assistance Grants for Smaller Institutions," National Endowment for the Humanities, accessed April 25, 2014, http://www.neh.gov/grants/preservation/preservation-assistance-grants-smaller-institutions.

In assessing the collection under the auspices of the NEH grant, the folks at Westminster were aiming for an estimated cost of reformatting and preserving the materials, restricted to the cost of digitization itself, with the associated metadata and access copies. They did not attempt to determine the cost at that time for physical storage of the materials before, during, or after digitization. Also not included were detailed estimates for "enterprise-class" digital storage or remote access to the digitized files. The remainder of the grant funds after the assessment and digitization were used to provide training on how to handle each of the formats and on the various issues associated with them.

They first conducted an inventory of the collection, which had been subjected to a wide variety of storage conditions over the course of many years. The inventory provided for a concurrent survey of the condition of each item, and facilitated the prioritization of materials with the greatest need for rescue efforts. Kimura and Kauffman also found some materials that they could eliminate from the collection, including course compilations or study aides, as well as access copies on old formats, made from even older formats—a sort of ancestor of the current project. They found more than 800 reel-to-reel tapes, 500-1000 cassette tapes (this inventory is still ongoing), LPs, 78s, glass discs, and DAT tapes. As a result, they were able to separate out the formats most likely to need preservation; tape formats are in danger and DAT tapes are already obsolete, while discs are fairly stable. These efforts also highlighted common problems within the collection, such as reused tape with little or no information about the content, multiple types of tape stored on a single reel, and scraps of recorded paper tape used as leader for magnetic tape unbeknownst to the person who spliced it so long ago.

After carrying out the initial condition survey for reel-to-reel tapes, Westminster staff began digitizing the highest priority items according to IASA standards. The digital copies are stored as lossless files for preservation and as lossy files for access on hard drives and for redundancy purposes on external servers. On average, it has taken five to six hours of labour to produce one hour of digitized audio: 220 hours of audio have been completed. Access to the files is available through streaming from their local implementation of CONTENTdm, which though not ideal for audio, is at least a decent place to store the files until funding and support for a more robust system is available. They are making do with what they have until they can figure out how to create what they need.

The presentation slides including images of examples from the collection, specifications for hardware, and previews of the collection in CONTENTdm are available from the Music Library Association's 2014 conference website.