



InterPARES 2 Project

International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems

Overview

General Study 04: Survey of Recordkeeping Practices of Composers

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The Creator Context/Activity

General study 04 focuses on the recordkeeping practices of composers of digital or “electro-acoustic” music. Conducted in the form of a 22-question survey, the study first identified potential participants from published membership lists of the Computer Music Association, the Canadian Music Centre and the College Music Society. Participants were limited to English-speaking countries to eliminate the need for translation of the questionnaire and responses. Out of 500 composers who were sent the questionnaire, 161 completed the survey. Their responses and the compiled results were used as the source material for this general study. While a majority of the questions dealt with recordkeeping practices that were not specific to the musical field, seven of them did directly address musical issues.

Information for the current overview was taken from the General Study 04 Final Report by Michael Longton of the School of Music at the University of Victoria, British Columbia.¹ References to page numbers for direct quotations are to the above document.

Documentary Practices Observed

Most of the survey participants were either not aware of or not concerned with archival issues. A lack of time, knowledge and especially money was evoked by respondents as the reason for not doing more in the way of recordkeeping. One stated “I would very much like to keep more comprehensive archives and migrate data to new formats, but the time and cost would be prohibitive...I...lack time to keep an up-to-date database of my personal archives for my creative works.” (p. 12)

¹ Michael Longton (2004), “InterPARES 2 Project - General Study 04 Final Report: Survey of Recordkeeping Practices of Composers.” Available at http://www.interpares.org/display_file.cfm?doc=ip2_gs04_final_report.pdf.

Record Creation and Maintenance

Another half of the respondents (54%) produce audio files in the course of their work, with 23% producing data files for a manuscripting program (such as FINALE or SIBELIUS) and 18% producing other types of files (patches, programming code) or a combination of audio and data files. One respondent stated, “The creating of my own software/patches is very important to my work. In fact, I can’t separate the programming and composing from each other.” (p. 17)

Documentation of the creation process is practiced, but is far from the norm. Only 60% of composers surveyed claim to keep a record of the digital entities that they produce and when they produce them. For some respondents, simple procedures such as naming conventions were not practiced. One composer stated, “Very large number[s] of audio files are very difficult to organize with names. I always have problems naming the files for future reference.” (p. 17)

Only 44% of respondents claimed that the records that they produce change over time as the result of actions by themselves, other people or the system in which they reside. Out of these, 71% do not document when and how these changes are made.

A majority of the composers surveyed (72%) stated that other people or systems do not have **access** to their records. This may influence the question of authenticity (below), since the need for authenticity may be seen as low to non-existent, since the author (composer) retains sole access to and authority over his own works.

Though most composers surveyed did not mention metadata in relation to their work, the one that did stated, “it’s really keeping track of the metadata that’s the most challenging, and though we might do the backups, keeping them organized is not exactly in the nature of most composers.” (p. 12)

Some composers have the view that their works are never finished and are constantly in the creative process. For example, one respondent stated that he may decide “that the final document/audio file is not in fact the finished product, but a constantly evolving work in progress.” (p. 12)

The issue of copyright does not seem to be of great concern for many of the composers surveyed. However, some are aware that the ease with which certain formats may be transmitted and copied may have an instance on their rights as a composer. One composer stated, “I am very aware of the dangers of allowing clips of my work to be transmitted digitally to others and the possibilities of instances of plagiarism or use without my knowledge or consent. All my original work and subsequent copies is marked under my own copyright.” (p. 13)

Recordkeeping and Preservation

“Composers have not, historically, had to concern themselves with preservation – unlike, for example, photographers, where archival concerns are embedded in the craft of printmaking.” (p. 2) With regards to preservation, one respondent voiced the feeling that “it is a time consuming task, and of course takes time away from writing music.” (p. 18) However, due to the (often repeated) loss of important files due to media failure, hard drive crashes or obsolescence, several

of the composers echo the statement by one of their colleagues that “good housekeeping is a must. Good backup and documentation is essential.” (p. 14)

While nearly all of the participants (97%) actively keep their digital records, all who claim to do so keep these records for practical reasons. One of the most prevalent of these reasons is re-use or re-purposing. According to one respondent, “I try to find ways to use these compositions (audio files) in different ways later...I keep the MIDI source and original audio in order to be able to reconstruct a piece.” (p. 13)

Keeping different versions of a work is seen by composers as an “archiving” practice that is feasible for them. According to one, “Composers (like me) who compose directly to computer don’t have paper “drafts” of their pieces for posterity. So, keeping dated versions of the electronic score in an archive is something we can do.” (p. 12) Note that “archive” here is not used in the sense of “repository” but that of “offline storage.”

Nearly half (47%) of the composers surveyed stated that they had lost important files due to hardware or software obsolescence, despite the fact that 97% claim to take measures to protect their digital documents from being lost. Obsolescence is often a frustrating point with composers, as exemplified by one who stated, “In order to preserve a work, one needs to not only keep the media, but also the machines that read it! It seems insurmountable. I can keep the ideas and the audio/video record of the event. The rest (which may represent years of work) is quite ephemeral.” (p. 15) Some composers have resigned themselves to viewing obsolescence as a fact of life in their field. One stated, “I’ve become used to the fact that I’ll lose some of the raw materials of my work (the original sounds) – even some of the material that makes it up.” (p. 16)

The question of obsolescence and the fact that 76% of the composers surveyed use off-the-shelf commercial software need to be taken into consideration for any future preservation strategies. Also, due to the solitary nature of the work as mentioned above, “the archival and preservation policies and practices of [any institution that a composer may be affiliated with] will seldom touch them.” (p. 2) As a result, individually applicable solutions must be sought.

Performing backups (often to CD-ROM) and migrating files to a newer version of the software used appear to be the current preservation practices used by the majority of composers surveyed. However, one respondent stated that after five hard disk failures and “countless bits of lost data,” according to him, “no prevention is better than keeping the most important bits of information in one’s head!” (p. 11) One respondent is even practicing what may be dubbed “backwards migration.” He claims to be “experimenting with migrating finished works to older, obsolete media such as reel to reel, cassette, vinyl, DAT and minidisc. Might as well hedge one’s bets, right?” (p. 14)

Accuracy, Authenticity and Reliability

According to one participant, “Though authenticity, accuracy, and reliability are not important to me personally, I agree that these issues should be important to persons whose task is to collect and maintain records.” (p. 17)

Accuracy

Slightly more than half of the composers surveyed are concerned about accuracy. “The concern for accuracy is almost certainly a practical one: the nature of the digital records is that if they are not accurate they will probably not work.” (p. 2)

Authenticity

Authenticity was defined for the participants with the question “Is it important that [the digital records that you produce] can be proven to be yours?” 56% of composers responded no, they are not concerned with the issue of authenticity. One even stated, “What I care about more than proving that a work is mine is being able to replicate performances.” (p. 18)

This may be because authenticity has never been a problem for them, due to the fact that most composers—even those in organized, institutional environments—work alone and more often than not have sole access to their files and works (72% of respondents). One composer is concerned with the ease of use of digital music, with files being sent all over the world via the Internet in easily-accessible formats. “With this ease of use, the original becomes the date at which the file was last saved. Authenticity is sometimes only assured through the source of the file.” (p. 16)

One respondent dismissed the question of authenticity and the attendant question of copyright by saying “issues of copyright are irrelevant as I am the only one that can produce [the documents].” (p. 12) Another echoed this sentiment by stating, “Nobody else could reproduce my music, not because it’s difficult, but simply because they’re not me.” (p. 16)

Reliability

Reliability was defined for participants with the question “Is it important for you to be able to prove that the documents are what they purport to be?” Only 53% responded “yes.” One composer even went so far as to state, “We work within a medium that is not 100% reliable, and that is good!” (p. 17)