

Maintaining local classification schemes

a Bridge(rton) too far?

Helen Griffiths

Cataloguer, The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, Cardiff

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ABSTRACT

This article is a light-hearted look at some of the challenges and opportunities of maintaining a local classification scheme at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and inspired by the Netflix drama 'Bridgerton'.

KEYWORDS classification maintenance; in-house classifications

CONTACT Helen Griffiths  Helen.Griffiths@rwcmd.ac.uk  The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama

This piece is written as a light-hearted look at some of the challenges and opportunities of maintaining a local classification scheme. Inspired by the Netflix drama 'Bridgerton' I began to draw parallels between historical and modern-day practices living side by side (I love how the music in the series is current but with a 'Regency' twist). There is a perfect harmony of old and new, and this, is how I believe our out-dated classification will survive. Details have been omitted in favour of 'entertainment' and with apologies to any die-hard Bridgerton / Lady Whistledown fans for any literary impropriety or frivolous disregard of continuity. I hope you enjoy reading it. For further information or comment about our classification scheme at RWCMD and the work as it progresses, please feel free to contact me. I would be very happy to discuss issues raised and hear any suggestions for improvement you may have. Thank you for indulging me.

Dearest, Gentle Reader,

I write to you today concerning a most pressing matter. I am presently in a most perplexing situation - a love/hate relationship, if you will, with my classification scheme and hope that by sharing my tale, I will gain clarity on how to navigate the journey ahead and maybe even persuade some of you to join me in my quest to tackle out-dated classification schemes (one delicate step at a time).

Now, please don't turn the page just yet, dear reader. I am well aware, that most of you will no doubt be wondering whether such a relationship can exist at all? Surely, this argument is moot, positively archaic. Most libraries (particularly scholarly libraries) have transcended to the giddy heights of electronic books, leaving classification quandaries to be nothing but a dim and distant memory? Even those with physical tomes will, no doubt, be purchasing metadata, complete with an array of classification schemes, from which to choose. Well, this writer urges you to spare a thought for those walking amongst you who still allocate their classification by hand and more shockingly, for those who maintain unique taxonomies. Let me take you on a journey ... a promenade down Classification Lane if you please? I am sure you will find it most enlightening.

This writer is employed at the library of The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff, which houses a small but perfectly honed collection of items to support the teaching and performance needs of the college. The origin of the classification scheme is a bit of a mystery I must confess. There are several penned versions with increasing amounts of complexity, detailing the alpha/numeric system in operation but little to none explanation of where the system originates. The more discerning examiner may identify echoes of the Dewey Decimal Scheme, albeit with the decimal place after the first digit. But therein, the similarity ends. A bespoke scheme has been devised for the 'Arts' subjects wherein, the general purpose appears to be to aid browsability. There are designated areas for drama texts, design books, play scripts, music texts and most notably music scores. Perhaps inspired by subject zoning in public libraries, the classification moves away from a predominantly numerical system (as with DDC) and instead, applies lettered sections such as D for Drama and M for Music (coincidence or design? I would like to believe the latter). Textbook collections are further subdivided numerically while plays, biographical works and music scores are arranged in an alphabetical sequence by author/composer as applicable. Perhaps the most interesting feature is the designation of lettering to arrange musical works by instrument, effectively placing works together (if you want piano music by Chopin: QA CHO will more than likely have all you need). It is for this part of the classification that I hold great affection. Browsing works by instrument allows our readers to find music they may not have found otherwise (a journey of discovery, if you will) and the library catalogue allows for searching specific titles. A happy marriage indeed.

Where I am less enamoured with the system is within the textbooks. There exist narrow subject divisions with inherent bias (Western-centric imbalance of geographical areas), period divisions that stop at the 20th century (where number designation makes sequential scaling, impossible) and closed sequences that make it increasingly difficult to generate number designations for new topics. The sequence holds more affinity to harpsichords and madrigals than digital playbacks and social media, and where does one shelve a book about Artificial Intelligence in musical pedagogy??

Thus, dear reader, you see my plight (and if you have remained with me up to this point in my musings, I thank you). The opportunities for change within a bespoke scheme are indeed exciting. In theory, I could re-write the entire scheme. In practice however, the challenges outnumber the gains. The re-classification alone would take more time than I have and that does not take account of the work needed for implementation. But we all know that any worthwhile relationship is built on a strong foundation and compromise. For all its alleged faults, I believe that DDC does provide a strong foundation. I am willing to sacrifice the temptation to start afresh and agree a compromise that will allow me to breathe new life into an aging system. Starting with the standard subdivision tables of DDC, I have begun to employ a method of matching these with existing subdivisions and identifying areas that could benefit from re-alignment. The most pressing to tackle being period designation. Although initially daunting, on closer inspection, the number of items in need of re-numbering is manageably low. The challenge is more to identify the affected areas (subsections, within subdivisions). But every journey begins with a single step and the obvious place to start was within active subject areas where we were adding new physical items - each section tackled individually - and by keeping DDC standard subdivision tables at hand, consistency is starting to shine through at last.

Yes, there are still challenges. With every change implemented, there is a ripple effect. You can rarely change one number in isolation so careful planning and timing is crucial. No, I still haven't found the perfect home for my book on AI and music pedagogy, but I have found a temporary home and am looking at how this number strain can be used in parallel sections, for example, AI in drama, composition etc. before writing it into the scheme.

Why has it taken so long? It is 2026 I hear you say. Well, against the grain, this author must confess that, as with many a failing relationship, failure to recognise there is a problem, is oft the biggest problem. Coupled with the naïve notion that everything will work itself out or even a lack of confidence that a solution is possible. There will never be enough time to dedicate to these endeavours but having a wish-list to turn to when there are moments of calm, means progress can be made.

So therein, dearest reader, is my situation. I have identified the problem and embrace the challenges and opportunities for change (albeit one baby step at a time - the exhilarating pitter patter of tiny feet as it were) and am committed to rekindle the flame I once held.

If you are still reading, I thank you for your patience and wish you Godspeed with your own endeavours.

Truly yours,

H x