

Preserving Composers' Process in the Digital Age

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, contemporary composers have increasingly integrated digital tools—notation software, digital audio workstations, and other technologies—into their creative processes, generating vulnerable digital documentation. They also use digital platforms to record and manage their personal and professional lives. This documentation is essential to music scholarship, which relies on access to sketches, manuscripts, recordings, and biographical records to study the compositional process and contextualize musical works within broader historical narratives. However, the long-term viability of this digital material is threatened by software and hardware obsolescence, fragile and diverse file formats, media degradation, and inconsistent or missing metadata. Without early and proactive preservation measures, these materials—and the scholarship that depends on them—are at risk of loss.

This presentation shares findings from a recent survey of working composers, focusing on their compositional workflows and their knowledge and implementation of digital preservation practices. The data highlights significant challenges composers face in managing and sustaining their digital outputs, as well as a general lack of awareness about archival standards and long-term access. Our research supports the development of a preservation toolkit tailored for composers, aimed at bridging the gap between personal creative practices and the technical requirements of institutional archives. By fostering sustainable documentation strategies at the point of creation, we hope to ensure that the cultural and scholarly value of contemporary composition endures.

About the authors:

Stephanie Akau is a Senior Archivist at the Library of Congress Music Division, where she processes physical and born-digital collections from some of the nation's leading composers and performers. She has previously presented for the American Musicological Society, Music Library Association, and Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. Her recent co-authored publication in *Notes*, "Preferred Preservation Formats for Digital Music Scores: A Survey of University Music Faculty" received the 2024 Richard S. Hill Award for best research article related to music librarianship from the Music Library Association. Before coming to the Library of Congress, she worked in Access Services at the University of New Mexico Libraries providing reference and general public services support. She holds a Doctorate of Musical Arts from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and a Master of Library and Information Science degree from San José State University.

Jessica Grimmer is Co-Director of the Center for Archival Futures (CAFe) and a Lecturer in the College of Information at the University of Maryland. Her research sits at the intersection of archives, cultural history, and digital musicology, with a focus on how digital tools shape the creation, preservation, and interpretation of cultural memory. She is particularly interested in the sustainability of digital knowledge infrastructures, including community-based digital collections and born-digital creative works. Her historical research investigates the role of opera in shaping

American cultural and political identity, with a particular emphasis on the Washington, D.C. region.

She has presented at the American Musicological Society, the Society for American Music, the Association for Information Science and Technology, the Music Library Association, the Music Encoding Conference, and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference. Grimmer has published in *Notes*, *The Journal of Musicological Research*, with forthcoming work in *Archival Science*. Grimmer holds a Ph.D. in Historical Musicology and an MLIS, with professional experience in both academic and federal institutions.