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Mainstream Patron-Driven Acquisition: Topicality Over the Scholarly Record ... and the Cello Suites

by **Aaron Wood** (Vice President of Systems and Data Architecture, Alexander Street Press) <awood@astreetpress.com>

Patron-driven acquisition (PDA), or demand-driven acquisition (DDA), as it is also known, is everywhere. It is at every library conference you go to and in every library journal or newsletter you read. As one example, at **ALA Midwinter** 2013, there seemed no way to miss hearing about PDA. Over several days of conference attendance, it was more difficult not to hear mention of PDA than to pursue a tailored stream of sessions aimed purposefully at the topic. It is likewise harder to find a recent issue of *Against the Grain* that does not contain an article about PDA than it is to find one containing several.

PDA is often touted as a move away from just-in-case collection development to just-in-time purchasing. As a way to add eBooks of current interest to the collection without breaking the library budget, there seems nothing better. Very few libraries are in a position to collect the entire output of academic publishing, and as a result they have compensated by focusing the collecting process on areas of particular research interest and relevance to curricula. Pursuing large packages of eBooks can be prohibitively expensive as well as not allowing focused areas of study to be covered in full, since many of these packages are publisher-specific or lack specific publishers. PDA allows the library to provide access to a complete range of content in the subject areas needed from a multitude of publishers while spending only on those titles used by students and faculty, thereby decreasing overall cost while maintaining breadth of accessible titles. However, in handing the act of collecting to the end user, academic libraries may be putting the scholarly record at risk.

Purchases initiated by an end user reflect his/her immediate need, whether for coursework, research, or something more tangential. The topic in mind is bounded, the reflection of a current need prefaced by the requirements of an individual course or specific area of research and limited to a discoverable set of content. In finding relevant content, the end user's goal often does not involve going beyond the immediate topic to take into consideration related or obscure areas of scholarship, areas of less immediate interest to the task at hand; this is particular true of the student user. Selection of content through this type of purchase system is therefore limited to what is topical. This is what potentially puts the scholarly record at risk.

There is an example from music history that illustrates this risk well, that of **Johann Sebastian Bach's** cello suites, dating from the late Baroque period (1680-1730).
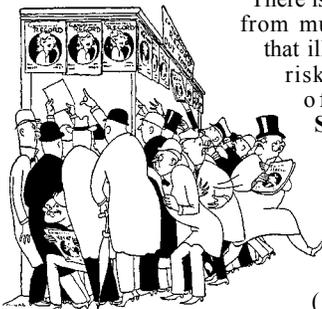
There is no surviving original manuscript of **Bach's** cello suites and little evidence of them being popular in either performance or transcription during **Bach's** lifetime, yet they are now at the core of the canon of works for cello.

The *Suites á Violoncello Solo senza Basso*, as they are titled in the earliest known version of the works, a manuscript copy made by **Bach's** second wife, **Anna Magdalena**, between 1727 and 1731, suffered an extended period of obscurity; an obscurity brought on and prolonged by the works' non-fashionability within the main music circles of the day: aristocratic courts, religious establishments, and opera houses. During this age, the reproduction of works was cost-prohibitive, leading to the most fashionable pieces' gaining distribution while other pieces were very narrowly, if at all, distributed, having to rely on personal funds or physical resources to be copied. Not being "fashionable" made it extremely difficult for a work to be exposed broadly to musicians and music enthusiasts outside of one's circles; it made them non-topical, shadowed from the mainstream interests of the day. If it were not for the great Catalan cellist **Pablo Casals'** rediscovery of these works in 1890 and his subsequent recognition of their importance and celebrated performance of them, this period of obscurity would have extended even longer, perhaps long enough for the seemingly non-topical works to never come out of the shadows and attract the attention of performers, composers, and scholars alike.

There were numerous fashionable works during the Baroque period that continued to be topical in the music community, and rightfully so. This is the period that also saw the works of **George Frideric Handel** captivate the English court and the music of **Antonio Vivaldi** take hold of Venice and spread across Europe. However, it is hard to argue that these works were of greater importance than those of **Bach**, yet that is essentially how the subsequent century progressed, particularly as concerns the cello suites.

Coursework, research, and personal and tangential interests are as essential to the information record today as the aristocratic courts, churches, and opera houses were to the music record in the Baroque period. These activities further the distribution of the knowledge record through citation, the extension of knowledge through research output, and the sharing of remarkable content through social media and word of mouth. However, they may miss completely, for the lack of immediate topicality, important areas of the scholarly record, just as the cello suites were missed in their day for not being fashionable.

Patron-driven acquisition as the sole or central method of developing an eBook collection heightens this risk, as it has at its core the immediate need, or topicality, of the purchase initiator. There are, however, ways to avert this threat, as is evident in how libraries have been experimenting with and refining PDA processes and balancing PDA with other collection development activities.

For example, a library with extensive eBook approval and slip plans may choose to keep the subject areas most central to supporting the institution's research and teaching strengths in an automatic approval plan while having slip profiles default to PDA. The approval plan could allow maximum coverage of the scholarly record in the collecting process, as it does not rely on the immediate end user need and its inherent topical boundaries for the purchase decision. Meanwhile, using PDA profiles in place of slip plans could ensure that only those other titles needed by end users were also added to the collection. This option might only work for institutions with comparatively large eBook budgets, considering the potential cost of having eBook approval plans across a wide range of subject areas, but could also be adapted for more constrained budgets through a tipping of the balance toward PDA profiles.

There is also the option of balancing just-in-time, topical PDA with consortial backfile purchasing. The equivalents would be current subscriptions versus journal backfiles. PDA across a broad range of current titles could serve the immediate needs of end users, just as current subscriptions serve this need for faculty research, while eventual eBook backfile purchasing could serve to protect areas of the scholarly record not of topical interest to the day, in much the same way as journal back runs ensure that libraries can protect a more complete knowledge record for future generations.

It has been the role of academic libraries to make scholarly material available to patrons at the time of need and to protect the scholarly record for posterity and future scholarship. PDA ensures that collection expenditures directly meet the needs of the community they are intended to serve. It seems a logical and safe move as far as collecting and prudent spending are concerned. However, if unaided by other collection development strategies, it puts libraries at risk of eroding the scholarly record. The risk run is not just that of missing pieces of the scholarly record, but also that of unintentionally pushing toward oblivion important pieces of the knowledge record. Libraries need to ensure that there is some remnant of this record protected for a future **Pablo Casals** of the academic world to uncover and remake topical.

Further Reading

Kaplan, Richard. *Building and Managing e-Book Collections: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*. Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2012.

Siblin, Eric. *The Cello Suites: J.S. Bach, Pablo Casals, and the Search for a Baroque Masterpiece*. New York: Grove Press, 2009.

Ward, Suzanne M. *Guide to Implementing and Managing Patron-Driven Acquisitions*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2012.

Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach; The Learned Musician*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013.