

Paruse!
Courage

Handwritten notes: *Bb minor*, *dim.*, *Fb*, *arco*

Musical notation for the first system, including piano and bass staves with various notes, rests, and fingerings.

remembering
the past peace

dreamy

argente

penitence

Handwritten notes: *pp*, *arco*, *pp*, *pizz.*, *Fl.*

Musical notation for the second system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *pp* and *pizz.*, and articulation like *arco*.

Handwritten notes: *pp*, *Fl.*, *Edun 7*

Musical notation for the third system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *pp* and *Fl.*, and other notes.

Handwritten notes: *p*, *Fl.*

Musical notation for the fourth system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *p* and *Fl.*

South arm

Handwritten notes: *Bb*, *Fb*

Musical notation for the fifth system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *Bb* and *Fb*.

Starting to
climb out
of the worst

Handwritten notes: *Cl. dolce*, *p*

Musical notation for the sixth system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *Cl. dolce* and *p*.

Handwritten notes: *Bb*, *Fb*, *cresc.*, *Fl.*

Musical notation for the seventh system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *cresc.* and *Fl.*

Handwritten notes: *Fl.*, *cresc.*, *Cl.*, *Bssn.*, *cresc.*

Musical notation for the eighth system, including piano and bass staves with dynamic markings like *Fl.*, *cresc.*, *Cl.*, and *Bssn.*

Sound + Vision

On the Future of the Sheet-Music Business

Adam Baer

LAST FALL, THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY MET THE music world in a cheerfully anachronistic way when Beck, a darling of literary indie-rock aficionados, released *Song Reader*, an album in the form of sheet music. No downloadable tracks, no limited-edition vinyl, just a big book of notes. The album was published by McSweeney's and was supplemented with a crowd-sourced website, where fans uploaded their own interpretations of Beck's songs. Within weeks the site had amassed a kaleidoscopic array of performances—including polished, even animated, videos. *Song Reader* became a favorite of the staffs at NPR, NewYorker.com, and Kurt Andersen's Studio 360, where the host and a handful of editors and producers performed a version of "Saint Dude." Even *USAToday's* Pop Candy blog asked, in a somewhat cheeky headline, "Have You Played It Yet?"

Far from an old-timey, craft-movement stunt, *Song Reader* was embraced by both critics and consumers as a legitimate attempt to publish music that people could play—an invitation to musicians, amateur and professional, to interpret the works and share their musical gifts, promising or mediocre. For some of us concerned about the fate of sheet music, *Song Reader* also served as a litmus test of sorts: How many music fans (at least among the sample

Beck attracts) still read, or know someone who reads, Western music notation, notes and chords placed on a five-line staff with clefs, rests, and time signatures?

Taking the temperature of the sheet-music industry is a fiddly endeavor. The business has grown slowly but steadily since the hootenannies of the "Oh! Susanna" era. As one would expect, there have been some down years as the Great Recession all but evaporated disposable income, and music classes were among the first sacrifices of shrinking public-school budgets. In 2011, the industry as a whole was down by 4 percent, leading the independent research organization IBISWorld to predict that the sheet-music business has a dim future ahead of it. And yet it remains an industry that generates well over \$300 million globally in annual sales—neither a grim nor staggering sum.

A curmudgeon might say we're near the end of days for the printed note; an optimist might say we're in a period of transition as digital experiments push the sheet-music business into the twenty-first century. What I've noticed is simply that fewer people make music with friends and family as a form of entertainment, and that fewer use notated music as a social tool. Last winter, the third season of PBS's *Downton Abbey*, which chronicles early twentieth-century life in a British aristocrat's manse, premiered showing its characters jubilantly singing the popular 1910 song "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," most likely sight-read by

A page from Beethoven's Concerto No. 5 for piano, pulled from the stack that sits atop the Baer family Steinway grand.

a guest at the piano. But nothing of the sort happens on, say, *Girls* or *Modern Family*, shows that pretty much run the range of contemporary life. (On *Girls* we might see comically bad rock bands, coked-up karaoke; on *Modern Family* there are plenty of musical characters, but they're mocked.)

Today, if someone performs music for amusement in the home, sheet music's original function, it's most likely a three-second rap or pop-hook meme that went viral, a track earwormed into some child's lobes and muttered at dinner. The ability to fluently sight-read music on an instrument was considered a special but not exactly unusual talent in 1925, hot on the heels of Tin Pan Alley's success; now whipping out an instrument and sight-reading is the contemporary equivalent of a parlor trick. There's still a demand for sheet music, mostly by people who play in houses of worship and students whose school music programs have yet to be decimated. But for the most part, Americans who play popular music (as opposed to concert music) for fun perform from chord charts or memory, a progressively hazier collective mental cloud. And while YouTube lessons and free guitar-tablature websites are poor substitutes for spending time with the local guitar teacher, they're better than nothing. But then, setting aside the democratic power of the Internet, those of us who learned music the old-fashioned way must consider, despite our love for recording and digital production, the future of a culture in which the interest in and ability to read music notation seems to be fading.

I AM THE GRANDSON OF A PRINTER, THE SON OF concert pianists for whom a German urtext of Beethoven sonatas and the *New York Times's* fakebook *Great Songs of the 70's* were the most important books in the home. We were the weird ones in town. At night my parents *played* their literature, practicing or sharing performances with us, offering us chances to collaborate on interpretations, what we simply called "readings." Sure, my brother and I

often just considered their playing noise that we tried to mute by closing the TV-room door. But under those sitcom laughtracks, we listened. Our storytelling was sound. Music was always being read to us, whether we liked it or not. Tall piles of brusquely notated texts, often made of thick, yellowish paper, lived in stacks on the living room's 1938 mahogany Steinway grand, next to a couple of Bar Mitzvah photos and the odd crystal polar bear. When our father was frustrated, he communicated it in the percussive way he read an angular Prokofiev sonata; when he played Brahms we heard stories of forlorn love and despair. I would often have trouble napping on a couch three feet from the piano, where my mother might read Bach's "Goldberg Variations" with insightfully phrased sequences; the reading would get my mind going, my math homework done. Our parents were actively encouraging music literacy simply by being themselves. (We also weren't just a so-called classical house; there were pop songs, rock anthems, even showtunes, mostly Sondheim.) In 1994, my mother even called the music publisher Boosey & Hawkes in England so that my Tanglewood string quartet might obtain a newly written piece by composer Henryk Górecki, unavailable in America at the time. Receiving this music in the mail was like getting letters from girlfriends we only wish we could have attracted. We could now read and play the music of our time, breathe with it.

As kids, my younger brother and I, both bound for conservatory, collected as much sheet music as we could, and were often kicked off the photocopier at the local Kinko's by some manager fretting over copyright infringement. I lugged home two backpacks full of scores from my first trip to the Lincoln Center library, a seemingly secret, fertile farmland of music literature that lived between the Metropolitan Opera House and Juilliard School, my parents' alma mater. But as hallowed as those institutions were, we considered Patelson's, the Manhattan sheet-music store just back of Carnegie Hall, our real temple. Here was a "crossroads of maestros and tyros," as the *New York Times*

Sight-reading music was a special but not unusual talent in the age of Tin Pan Alley. Now, whipping out an instrument and sight-reading is the equivalent of a parlor trick.

described it, where we'd browse the stacks in the company of the former New York Philharmonic conductor Kurt Masur one weekend and Woody Allen the next. On pilgrimages to Patelson's from Long Island, I'd flip through the store's stock with calloused fingertips stained pewter from practicing scales on my violin's ebony fingerboard. The delight of finding something I wanted—the Jascha Heifetz arrangement of a Gershwin prelude, say, or the French edition of a Ravel composition—was like finding that rare rock album in the Village. If Patelson's didn't stock it, they'd order it, and by the third week of waiting I would repeatedly call them, like a madman trying to win a radio contest.

Later, when I attended Manhattan School of Music's high-school preparatory program, and eventually the Peabody Conservatory of Music, I met other misfits with similar loves for the sight of sixteenth notes and fermatas. We compared editions of Bach solo sonatas—mine, from German publisher Bärenreiter, was unadorned; others were heavily edited with expressive commands by great violinists from the past. (Owning the Schott volume edited by Henryk Szeryng, famous for his luscious Bach chords, was a pass-through to a realm where the most difficult equations made miraculous sense). I ended up working in Peabody's bookstore, a rowhouse storefront across the street from the school that sold both music books and sheet music. There were few places in Baltimore then (and fewer now) where you could buy it, and I relished playing salesman to the city, explaining the differences among certain editions to local amateurs who might walk in off the street, or helping other students find the classical-music editions they wanted to study. Mostly, though, I just sat behind the counter

and worried about why it was so peaceful in that high-ceilinged shop. But I wasn't alone; my literature surrounded me. Whenever I wanted, I could open up the pages of a Shostakovich score or Leonard Bernstein song and hear the voices, hemiolas, stories baked into the black dots and lines on the page. This language meant for me what it meant for my staunchly utilitarian grandfather, whose upright Steinway held frayed copies of Jerome Kern showtunes and Art Tatum's jazz standards, which he clumsily banged out as occasionally as he might catch a favorite Paddy Chayefsky play. In other words, sheet music wasn't just for concert musicians. And with each new arrangement my mother ordered for her students, many of whom played sports as well as their instruments, it seemed plausible that amateur musicians might proliferate widely enough to keep music-notation literacy alive outside the conservatory.

TO UNDERTAKE THE HISTORY OF PRINTED SHEET music is to undertake the history of printed Western literature (though the earliest forms of written music date back to Sumerian cuneiforms). The CliffsNotes version of sheet music's proliferation is that by the end of the nineteenth century in America, sheet music was the chief way that popular songs were disseminated. Many of these songs told stories of war, love, exotic travel, and other social issues of their day. Stephen Foster, the first American songwriter to try his hand at making a living from his compositions ("Oh! Susanna," "Old Folks at Home," and "Beautiful Dreamer" among them) died poor. But the birth of Tin Pan Alley, the name for the stretch of street in downtown New York City where the music publishers worked, made music writing big

business. A successful song might sell up to 500,000 copies, eventually more than a million. The business would only be challenged by the inventions of the phonograph and player piano. When the Copyright Act of 1909 made it impossible for a musician to record a composer's work without permission, composers finally won the entrepreneurial power that had eluded Bach, Mozart, and company, collecting fortune-building royalties. The Copyright Act also lay the groundwork for the byzantine art of licensing, which permeates advertising, film, and television, and practically saved the music industry after the MP3-sharing revolution.

"If you go back to the composers in the European tradition, they all had their publisher," said Larry Morton, president of the Hal Leonard Corporation, the world's biggest sheet-music publisher, which created more than 3,500 new editions last year alone. Morton, a former music theory and composition major, took great pleasure in discussing with me how Beethoven would bring his music to get edited, engraved on lead plates, and eventually printed. "That's how music got performed, and it stayed that way until the player piano," Morton said. "In fact, in the copyright world, we still use the term 'mechanical royalty' when we talk about audio reproduction, even in the age of iTunes."

Morton was getting at the idea that as the mechanical rights brought songwriters more money through recordings and broadcasting, the original right—that is, the notes on a page—became licensed to specialty companies like his. Hal Leonard was founded in 1947 after two Minnesota brothers, Harold (Hal) and Everett (Leonard) Edstrom—and one friend, Roger Busdicker—began to sell their arrangements of popular school-band music. They made their way to New York, where they won licenses to write even more arrangements, eventually ending up with the rights to popular songs like "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" (1909). Today sheet-music publishing works pretty much the same way it did then: A big publisher like Hal Leonard will receive a song well before its of-

ficial release; transcribers then notate an arrangement, so that the score is available by the time the song airs. "We have an army of people with music theory backgrounds and fascinating DNA that allows them to hear things most people can't," Morton says. "For something to qualify as traditional sheet music, it has to stay within a certain difficulty level. You have to put the melody in the right hand for pianists, for example, and keep it easy enough to play." With permission from either the songwriter or label, the transcribers can work on different arrangements—"derivative" versions for beginning piano players, advanced piano players, guitars or other instruments. "The sheet-music business started as singles and then became books," says Morton. "Now, because of digital, it's a singles business again."

WHEN PATELSON'S FINALLY CLOSED IN 2009, THE mood in the store and among the musicians loyal to it was funereal. Clerks offered their condolences to customers, reluctantly steering them to another sheet-music store run out of a West Side highrise. Patelson's was a New York City institution, not unlike McSorley's Old Ale House. But its demise could be predicted as soon as we learned that Barnes & Noble could kill Shakespeare & Co., on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Indeed, it felt like a death.

By then I'd left New York for California. In moving I found that it was hard to pack and carry all of my scores, and so I've existed in Pacific Standard Time with a small fraction of the physical sheet music I once possessed. I miss having these pieces of bound paper, which often bulged out of the front pocket of my violin case, even if I don't practice as much as I used to. Now and then I'll binge at the reigning king of crowdsourced sheet-music websites: the International Music Score Library Project (IMSLP), which offers vast amounts of printable sheet music in the public domain (over 220,000 scores). Apparently I have plenty of company, since IMSLP has reported more than 250,000 downloads in a single day. I use the site with more than a little guilt, knowing

that online sources helped shutter brick-and-mortars like Patelson's.

Despite the size of IMSLP's holdings, the cache is small compared to companies such as Sheet Music Plus, an online retailer that holds more than 850,000 pieces of music. Even that is a fraction of the music that could be notated. (Gracenote, the world's largest music database, documents more than 130 million musical recordings in what must be elephantine spreadsheets.) "If a piece of music doesn't exist in print, I can't play it," says Jenny Silva, CEO of Sheet Music Plus. "I'm not good enough to pick up things by ear or watch a YouTube video on how to pick it out." Silva grew up playing piano, and sheepishly accepts the role her company and others like it have played in the fate of brick-and-mortars. She, too, had been a fan of Patelson's, but knew, as I did, its limitations. "Sheet music is a hard product to retail," she explained. "Even in a store as great as Patelson's, you couldn't always find what you wanted. Even with us, more selection is what people ask for. We get it over and over again. My kids' piano teacher is from Argentina, and she's constantly asking about pieces from [tango master] Ástor Piazzolla and other South American composers. We've got a pretty decent Piazzolla collection, but we have nowhere near his full repertoire. We've been trying to figure out: How do we even get it? There's just so much music out there, and so much of it has not been transcribed for people who read sheet music."

I asked her if she worried about the disappearance of our ability to read music. "It's so fundamental, I have no concerns of it going away," she said. "One of the really fun things we see is that, along with the market for kids, playing music is a really popular retirement activity. We hear from our older customers that they've always wanted to play piano and have recently picked it up. There will always be a healthy sheet-music market, even if it's not as dominant culturally."

One irony to remember is that many of our most celebrated popular songwriters—Paul McCartney, Billy Joel, Bob Dylan—say they

cannot read music. Many of our great jazz, rock, and blues players couldn't either. For them, music notation is nothing more than a technicality, since there's an obvious biorhythmic ooze to all kinds of music that doesn't lend itself well to the signs, time signatures, and symbols of Western notation. Sure, it's possible to write lilting phrases and scribble directions to explain how a part should be played (Mahler's note, second movement, Fifth Symphony: "*Stürmisch bewegt mit größter Vehemenz*"—"Moving stormily, with the greatest vehemence"). But reading blues straight off the staff doesn't really do the song justice.

That said, even the most basic music literacy is important to a culture, especially as music becomes more difficult to notate because of electronic sounds—say, the newly intriguing ones created by Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood and Nigel Godrich—that are more difficult to precisely reproduce. This is language, a means of communicating and chronicling a history, one that's often hidden in the interstices. You don't need sheet music to get the gist, say, of how Bob Dylan fingerpicks "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right," and getting every off-beat pick and scratch right in the service of reproducing his particular touch is probably a niche concern. But while I, too, use YouTube to pick up these tricks, I feel a debt to the composer, knowing that folk or rock or electronica is as edifying as a classical sonata. I still want this literature to be notated, preserved for others, not just recorded sound. There's an oral, social tradition of passing down the blues, but somewhere, someone should be writing everything down.

TO WORRY ABOUT THE FACT THAT FEWER PEOPLE IN America know how to read music risks sounding effete, even classist. Admittedly, music may not be as pragmatic as, say, Mandarin or Spanish, but it is a language nonetheless, and as vital to the mind. "With notated music, as opposed to, say, guitar tablature, there are more ways of mapping signs to sonic and motor correlates," says Elizabeth Hellmuth Margulis, Director of the Music Cognition Lab at the University of

Arkansas. “There’s just more information of various types encoded into the signal when you read written music.”

Unfortunately, there really aren’t simple, clear numbers that document the national extent of cuts to music programs in schools, but the indicators we do have—litanies of cuts reported in local newspapers from Phoenix to Harrisburg to Orange County—aren’t encouraging. One study shows that since 2000, music-education enrollment in California public schools has dropped by more than half. Continuing state budget problems and the looming threat of deep federal cuts don’t seem to promise an end, either.

If music literacy survives, it may very well depend—as it always has—on its ability to bring people together to read and enjoy music, and digital might be the way that it happens. In September 2012, Sheet Music Plus introduced a way for people to self-publish arrangements of works in the public domain or their own original compositions. While it hasn’t produced any breakout hits, Silva has seen some success among those who publish arrangements of popular-domain works for groups made of the same instrument—say, for example, clarinet quartets. On Hal Leonard’s Sheet Music Direct iPad app, the sheet music is interactive, and you can play it back. Messing around with it, I was able to transpose the key of a song, speed it up, slow it down, scribble “Peas and Butter . . .” on a difficult passage that required a smooth, comforting hand. Tonara, an app which purports to “listen to you,” turns the pages as you play. (Having been the page-turner and sweaty-towel holder for more than a few of my parents’ piano recitals, this app sounded like a godsend.) I tried it. The experience was like practicing in front of a slap-happy teacher from Odessa: The app slows down with you, but I felt someone watching me, with more anxiety than usual. Another earnest app is called Jammit, launched by Scott Humphrey, a rock musician and producer who’s worked with Rob Zombie, Motley Crüe, Metallica, and *NSYNC. Jammit

is a good time, a passion project for the equally passionate that allows you to “find out what music is made of” by isolating and removing a voice or instrument from the master track. But Jammit improves on that experience by allowing you to play along as the visual score scrolls past. These are, for the most part, private experiences. Where the nexus of sheet music and public performance has the most potential might lie in where the public itself has something to say through what it plays.

Chromatik, an app invented by a twenty-five-year-old entrepreneur named Matt Sandler, is a “digital music stand” that allows you to notate your digital sheet music, record your practicing, and collaborate with other musicians in real time over the Internet. Sandler has already received \$2 million in funding from venture capitalists and set up offices in a stretch of Santa Monica, California, called “Silicon Beach.” Even Bruno Mars, the Motown-inspired rave who commands extraordinary influence among the pop-and-lock set, has invested in the company. When we spoke, Sandler wouldn’t disclose how his app will sell digital sheet music, nor which publishers will partner on his “storefront.” But when I mentioned that I’d be speaking with the president of Hal Leonard, he wrote back: “Say hey to Larry for me :)”

Chromatik could very well be the Facebook of sheet music, Sandler its Mark Zuckerberg. Despite the armies of composers using digital-notation software, it feels almost bizarre to equate the sheet-music business with one of the world’s most exciting technology start-ups, and even more so to draw the line of music literacy from Bruno Mars back to my family’s literature, Tin Pan Alley, and the Russian taskmasters who smacked me with their violin bows before marking up my etudes so crazily that their razor-sharp pencils ripped the pages. But music, like its literary cousins, is an entrusted art made in real time, and I sure would like to find a way to notate the next Radiohead download. Godspeed, Mr. Mars. Let’s move stormily, and with great vehemence. ■