Dear President Hanlon, Provost Helble, and the Trustees of Dartmouth College:

We, the Board of the Music Library Association, were dismayed to hear of the closing of the Paddock Music Library at Dartmouth. Such a closure presents incalculable harm to the music and arts students of Dartmouth, as well as to the whole community of Hanover. Indeed, the closure of this library would make Dartmouth the sole institution in the Ivy League not to have a dedicated music library. That music and performing arts libraries are among the most frequently established branch libraries in academic institutions is not an accident, but occurs because of the needs of library users, the peculiarities of the artistic disciplines, and the nature of the materials collected. It was out of the recognition of these needs that the Music Library Association was formed ninety years ago in the most economically challenging times the United States has ever faced, because general libraries and library professionals simply could not meet these needs.

Music libraries, along with practice rooms, are the laboratories of the musician. The materials are needed close at hand because performers, scholars, learners, and educators need to work with large numbers of different pieces in different editions or formats when planning programs, working in rehearsal, preparing for class, or researching music. Printed music, audio and visual recordings, and writings about music need to be kept together in a unified location to encourage use, rather than divided among different library areas because of their formats.

Music library users have distinct habits and necessary practices when using collections, and these often do not correlate with how users interact with library materials in other subject areas. For example, choosing an edition of a score is incredibly difficult without the ability to compare several, as one can when the materials are collocated. A musician must be able to examine the size of print to determine which is appropriate for the intended use, look at the editor’s introduction to understand how the edition relates to others editorially, assess whether other patrons’ markings on the score are useful or distracting, and assess its condition.

In a music library, circulation statistics tell but one side of a story about use of collections. While circulation of audiovisual materials may be declining amid the availability of some online substitutes, a sustainable online substitute for print music scores does not yet exist, and proximity to collections remains necessary to encourage student use of these materials. Moving the music collection farther from the core users could cause use of the collection to decline even more.

One of the most significant uses of music library materials is one that does not manifest in circulation counts: browsing. While browsing and serendipity of discovery play an important role in all humanities and arts research, this task is particularly important in music. Collected and critical editions, in particular, are a core collection in any music library, yet the very value of them — intrinsically and extrinsically — means that they are most often targeted for in-house use only. For many pieces, however, these works represent the only edition of a piece in the library, or they represent a distinctive interpretation of a piece, but their non-circulating nature means that nobody except those who shelve them necessarily know how extensive their use is. Further, the complicated nature of these series means that users often have to consult many
different volumes directly to determine which volume contains the piece they need, or which variation on a piece is appropriate for the intended use.

Without a dedicated space for music collections, there exist fewer opportunities for collaboration with teaching faculty to get students into the collection so that they may understand the literature and scholarship of music. This creates a vicious cycle of even lower circulation and low use of off-site materials to the detriment of music pedagogy.

Paddock’s media room provides key confluences as indicated by their motto “Listen, View, Study, Compose.” Students who study conducting, for instance, will rehearse with a score while listening to a recording. The digital media and music notation software spark creativity, with trained staff nearby for technical help and musical expertise. Lacking this assistance, users will encounter greater frustration. Faculty and music librarians work as a vital team in conjunction with collections in this personalized space with tailored services. One example is a course that Richard Beaudoin and Memory Apata co-designed and implemented in the library. This would not have been possible in a dispersed collection without rare materials at hand.

Libraries are more than buildings and collections. They embody a whole set of services provided by trained professionals. The subject specialists with deep background in the history, theory, and performance are critical in a music library for finding and using notated music and for relating it to recorded performances and the literature about music. As library users have come to expect more personalization of services, the dispersal of professional staff will, no doubt, decrease user satisfaction exponentially.

The MLA supports the proposed vision of Dr. William Cheng and his colleagues who envision a Library for Performing Arts and Social Justice. Such a solution would keep staff and collections together and maintain the personalized services that users value and expect. Dartmouth would be a pioneer in multi-disciplinary, innovative response to the current environment.

Sincerely,

Music Library Association, Board of Directors
March 22, 2021

Relevant research: