

# Paper or File? The Future of Sheet Music

**On 1 April 2009, the International Confederation of Music Publishers (ICMP) organized a panel discussion on the topic “Print Publishing: Glorious Future or Sentimental Past?” at the Frankfurt Music Fair. An important and widely noted paper was read by Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert, Managing Director of G. Henle Publishers.**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this panel discussion. For centuries music has been printed on paper and bound, similar to books. What does the future look like for printed music? Is the way music scores are brought to the reader endangered by modern digital distribution via the internet, through downloads, computer screens and the “Kindle”?

Dear Colleagues, we as publishers are not called on to answer this question. Rather, our customers, the musicians will answer it for us. Demand determines the supply, and not the other way around. So we need to ask the musicians: Would you rather print out your own music than put a professionally produced edition on your music stand? Is it your wish to download digital scores from the internet instead of buying printed editions? Do you prefer to read music on a screen than on paper?

For several years now I have been asking such questions to musicians of so-called “classical music”, enthusiasts, students and professionals. I observe them in concert and in their consumer behavior when they purchase the products of my company. The answer to these questions, for me, is absolutely clear: Currently, in 2009, we publishers are not at all confronted with a revolution of our traditional way of business. The opposite is the case: “Classical” musicians are and remain a conservative class, they value the quality of a professionally bound edition and are happy to pay money for it. They remain unimpressed by the current hype around digital distribution. I assume that this situation will not change in the next 100 years, and even beyond. So, my answer to the question that arises from the panel topic is: Print Publishing: Glorious past, and long-lasting future.



*Dr. Wolf-Dieter Seiffert, Managing Director and CEO of G. Henle Publishers*

Of course the survey would appear in a somewhat different light if one were to include pop music. But in regards only to classical music, I have no doubt that we can stay relaxed, even in these times. In order to explain my strict point of view and maybe to stir up the debate I would like to make three statements with short explanations.

## **1 Downloading music scores will not have a more negative effect for music publishers than photocopying has had so far**

Photocopying has been going on for decades, and “classical” music is badly affected. Photocopies are cheaper than sales editions; some people, for instance in China or Russia, can simply not afford to buy sheet music, so they copy a lot. And still, all over the world there are many, many musicians who buy and use print editions instead of photocopying them. Why? Are they idiots who don’t want to save money? The reason is quite obvious: The quality of printed music is tremendously superior to the quality of a photocopy, may it be on paper or as an image on a screen. There will always be those who want to spend as little as possible on a product. But they get a lesser quality. Especially for musicians, however, who spend a lot of time playing their instruments and reading the music, this is not an acceptable alternative. I like to compare the situation to food: photocopies of music are like fast food, good music material is a nourishing and sustainable enjoyment.

There is actually no difference between downloading music and photocopying. The mass download of music scores, whether legally or illegally, free of charge or against a fee, is merely the more comfortable and modern way of photocopying via the internet: many pieces of music no longer need to be borrowed from a friend or a library and mechanically copied. One click is all you need and your home printer will do the job. Downloading is lastly just a technically advanced development of the principle of photocopying. But why should it hit publishers even harder than before? Whoever, after 30 years of coexisting with photocopy technology, still buys sheet music instead of making copies has a reason – and the reason of course is good value for money. And whoever has survived the photocopier until now in music publishing will outlive downloads. The download opportunity itself will not change the user behaviour of the afore described quality oriented musician: this musician will always or almost always prefer printed music over fast food, provided it is available and does not pass a certain price limit. We have suffered this “missed” market for years, decades, but we’re still here.

## 2 The distribution of digital scores helps to open new sales opportunities

On the other hand – I do believe that digitalization and electronic distribution bears a certain amount of potential for music publishers. Our archives are filled with music that was once printed and bound, music that today hardly anyone knows or plays. For the most part this music has simply been removed from the catalogues. It would have a revitalizing effect for this music if the publishers scanned it and published it online for legal downloading. So, musicians looking for pieces that are seldom played could leaf through the databases and would be better motivated to perform music beyond the mainstream. We publishers would have the opportunity to greatly expand our catalogue of “items on stock”. “On stock” would have several meanings: depending on the expected demand, either printed and bound or as a pdf, downloadable against a fee. Of course this would not generate a large increase in turnover; but, long-term, the investment does appear to stand in relation to the output.

## 3 There is no future for music-e-books

Perhaps some of you are familiar with “MusicPad” or the „Electronic Music Stand“ or „eStand Reader“. These are basically screens for musicians with enormous storage capacity for pages of music. Markedly, to today they are of little importance – and I am convinced that they will never reach significance. When computer geeks expound on the alleged advantages of digital versus real, this is what they say: „For centuries, musicians have been plagued by the problems of working with, handling, sharing and editing sheet music. Issues caused by the limitations and fragility of paper have cost musicians vast amounts of time and money. Every musician has wished for an easier way to make individual notations, change notations, share and duplicate music, catalogue and store music and even just turn pages. “ [Excerpt from the online advertising for the „eStand Reader“]. Agreed: it saves room to keep hundreds, even thousands of music pieces in a small space, easily accessible at any time. And the option of scrolling up or down screen pages is an advantage, albeit an overestimated one. To claim that it's easier to take notes or make comments on the screen than on paper, appears to me to be proof that these computer geeks are so stuck to their screens that they have completely forgotten the culture of using a pencil and eraser.

The equipment I just mentioned costs a lot: between 750 and 1,400 US dollar. You can really buy quite a lot of sheet music for that money. I open a book of music – and begin to play. The bound music book is the thing itself. There is no need for an electronic or technical transmitter. Here are some striking arguments you may share with me:

- ▶ We are all aware that technology ages; at some point, regrettably rather earlier than late, we are forced to replace technical equipment. Years from now my children will be able to take the printed volumes I buy today from the bookshelf and play their instruments.
- ▶ When my screen falls down to the floor, it breaks. Sheet music has been falling on the floor for 500 years – and survived.
- ▶ When you have a power blackout, your screen goes dark. Even 500 years from now music on paper will not need electric currency.
- ▶ Software is consistently updated, storage media is subject to change; that leads to the next technology-related problem: I am not sure whether the next generation of equipment is compatible. A few years from now, will I be able to read and convert the music I painstakingly scanned and downloaded? Music on paper is independent of software and does not need a disk drive.

Music on paper is what it is. It is the thing itself – and that is the quintessence of what I mean to say. The electronic device is between me and the music, it separates me from the thing itself, it's an obstacle that creates unnecessary problems. Nobody needs these expensive devices that create more problems than benefits.

Music on paper is a 500 year old medium. For the act of playing music it is ideal and perfectly adjusted. And more: music on paper is a cultural tradition that, even if we wanted to, we cannot and will not easily brush off or change. So, even if the screen had all the advantages of paper – the opposite is the case – even if the future would bring inexpensive screens and storage media with a guaranteed problem-free life span of 100 years, still a very very long time would pass before curiosity and determination would crack our deep cultural habits and traditions, so that we ultimately would never pick up a piece of sheet music again. Aren't you all, ladies and gentlemen, as we stand here today in agreement with me that we will not live to experience that?

Many thanks for your attention!