

**CCL-EAR COMMITTEE REVIEW**  
**MUSIC ONLINE LISTENING**  
**April 12, 2011**

Alexander Street Press' *Music Online: Listening* package provides an extensive collection of streaming audio covering jazz, global, contemporary, classical, and American music. According to the publisher at the time of this review, over 691,000 tracks are available through the package's five databases (*American Song*, *Classical Music Library*, *Contemporary World Music*, *Jazz Music Library*, and *Smithsonian Global Sound*) that can be searched simultaneously or individually, and cross-searched with other products available on the Music Online platform (*Music Online Reference*, *Dance in Video*, and *Opera in Video*).

**OVERALL RECOMMENDATION for COMMUNITY COLLEGES: 3, 3**

#1 --- Not recommended

#2 --- Recommended with reservations as noted

#3 --- Recommended

#4 --- Outstanding offer

**RATINGS for SPECIFIC ASPECTS of the DATABASE:**

The following features were examined and rated on a four point scale (1=Poor; 2=Needs Improvement; 3=Good; 4=Excellent):

**DATABASE CONTENT/FORMAT: 3, 4**

Consider functionality, appropriateness of format, database content, adequacy of coverage (retrospective, current), and value to the California Community Colleges as a whole.

According to the vendor, at this time *American Song* (which merged with an earlier product called *African American Song*) includes 6,875 albums equaling 116,219 tracks covering America's history and culture from the 1500s to present day. *Classical Music Library* covers music from medieval times to the 21<sup>st</sup> century including chamber and orchestral music as well as vocal, choral and opera in 4,196 albums equaling 64,697 tracks. *Contemporary World Music*, intended to cover "the sounds of all regions from every continent," contains 15,982 albums including 199,870 tracks. *Jazz Music Library* includes 10,601 albums containing 131,431 recordings in 31 genres. *Smithsonian Global Sound* includes 2,813 albums equaling 40,809 tracks of "music, spoken word, and natural and human-made sounds." The vendor indicates that there is an overlap in content of about 2,000 titles from Folkways Records in *American Song* and *Smithsonian Global Sound*. It should also be noted that multiple recordings of the same work are counted individually.

Diversity of content and sheer numbers make in-depth analysis of each of the genres, sub-genres, labels, composers, and artists represented in this vast collection beyond the scope of this review, but it is clear that this product could be of definite value in supporting all levels of music theory, performance, and appreciation courses plus classes in theater, history, anthropology, and cultural or ethnic studies, as well as students' recreational listening interests. Librarians and music faculty, in particular, may want to take a look at <http://alexanderstreet.com/products/music.htm>

for partial lists of labels and artists represented in each of the five databases. Libraries wishing to subscribe to the package would do well to read individual database reviews listed at the end of this paper and to consult with music faculty to discern whether the complete package or individual databases will meet the specific academic needs of the college.

While the individual databases are extensive and continually growing, it should be noted that gaps exist and content is not completely comprehensive. This is not surprising considering the enormous amount of recorded music that exists and the licensing requirements for access to that content. Providing a collection that includes anything other than a carefully selected representative sample is very likely to be impossible. Promotional materials indicate Alexander Street Press utilizes an Advisory Board made up of seven university music librarians to ensure that their “collections are developed to meet the needs of libraries and library users as a fully integrated library product.” Previous reviews mention the vendor’s responsiveness to user requests and feedback regarding both content and searching.

Reviewers conducted numerous searches across the databases and sometimes found uneven coverage. Although selected recordings from the *American Song* database represented a good cross section of historical and popular music, a search for “Woody Guthrie” retrieved 22 albums (for a total of 281 tracks) while a search for “Weavers” retrieved only 3 tracks. “Rock Around the Clock” performed by Bill Haley is there, but not “Blowin’ in the Wind” performed by Bob Dylan. There are 40 recordings of Patsy Cline’s work issued under different record labels, but 12 of them are either single tracks of “Walking After Midnight” or albums under that title. Of these, it sounds like there are only four different recordings of the song with the rest being reissues. Despite the numerous duplications, Cline’s “Crazy” is not included in the collection. In the CCL-EAR 2004 review of *Classical Music Library*, the reviewer’s search for “Pavarotti” elicited no results. As of April 2011, the same search yielded only 2 hits.

In addition to the music, searchable PDF liner notes are available for all albums in *American Song*, *Contemporary World Music*, and *Jazz Music Library*. About 75% of albums in *Smithsonian Global Sound* have liner notes and anything released in *Classical Music Library* after 2009 also include them.

The database allows users to create, annotate, and share playlists of selected tracks and currently has over 3,000 playlists readymade for users to browse and play. This is a very nice addition, but some of the annotations do not sufficiently describe the playlist’s “theme.” The titles are usually helpful, but are frequently simply clever or catchy.

Authenticated users may listen to tracks while accessing the database or they can “borrow” any recording in the database package for 48 hours by sending a shortlink to their mobile device with a 3G connection or better. Only *Classical Music Library* and *Smithsonian Global Sound* currently give the user the option to purchase downloads of selected tracks with their credit card. Libraries can choose to suppress this feature.

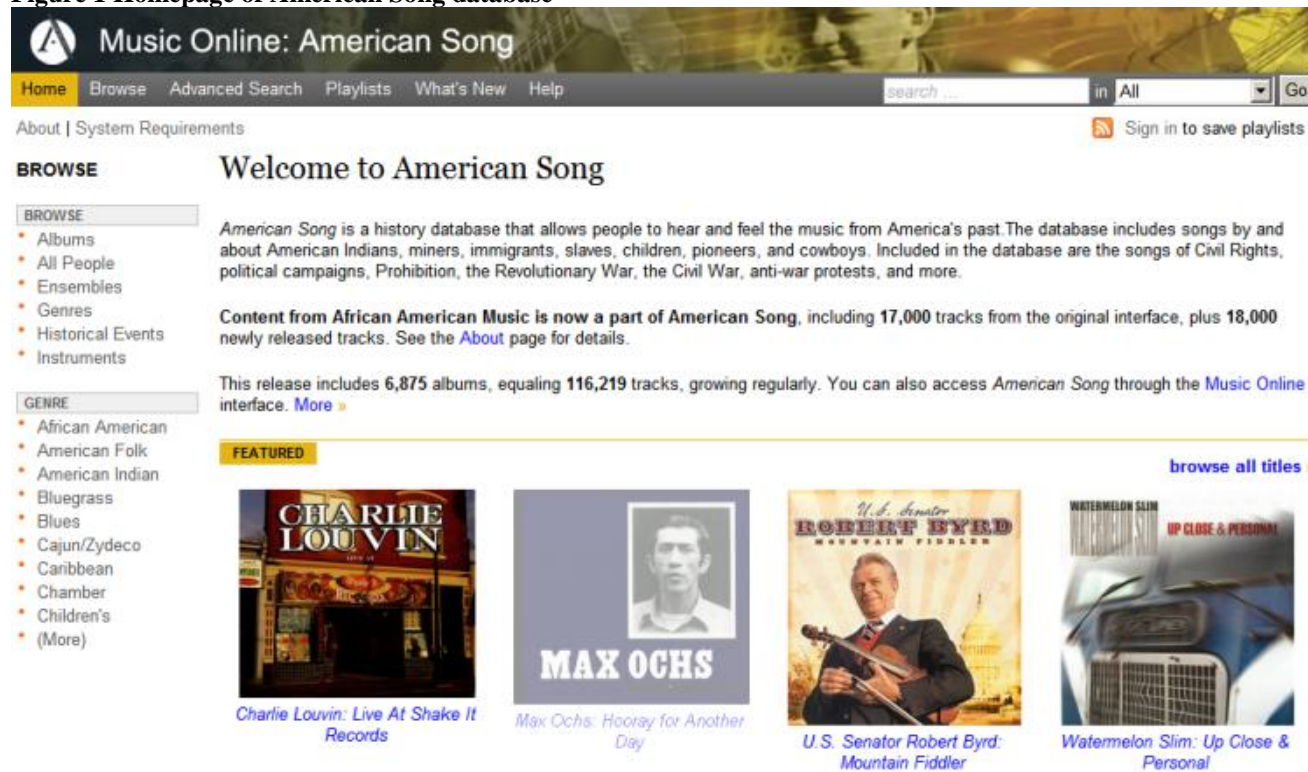
In considering subscriptions, libraries should keep in mind their policies regarding access versus ownership and determine whether the database package is a replacement for or supplement to a lending collection of CDs. With that said, the ability to create custom playlists related to specific

assignments for on-campus or distance education students should be of great benefit to instructors wanting to offer 24/7 access to virtual “reserve materials.” The use of headphones or separate listening rooms will probably be necessary for use within the library.

### SEARCH INTERFACE: 2, 3

Consider the functionality and ease of use of the interface. Is it intuitive or is an excessive amount of training required? Are any crucial features missing from the search interface?

Figure 1 Homepage of American Song database



The *Music Online: Listening* package consists of five separate databases that can be given separate URLs, cross-searched on the *Music Online* platform, or selected individually from a pull-down menu at the top of the *Music Online* screen. Tabs and search boxes are the same on each of the homepages but browsing and filtering options change slightly depending on the database. Content descriptions and “Featured” album covers are specific to the individual database being searched. Clicking on the “What’s New” tab takes users directly to an alphabetical list of newly added content and immediate access to the streaming audio, “add to playlist,” or “send to mobile” options.

Reviewers differed on their reaction to the initial search screen. One reviewer felt the homepage was busy and not conducive to searching, with the rotating display of featured albums distracting and the search box hidden in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. Another reviewer liked the emphasis on browsing and felt the location of the search box would be familiar and comfortable for students who are used to searching and shopping on iTunes. One notable

frustration felt by both reviewers was the absence of a link back to the main *Music Online* homepage once an individual database is selected from the initial drop-down menu. The vendor indicates that this problem will be corrected in 2011. It would also be nice if the homepage could be customized by subscribing libraries interested in making the search functions more prominent.

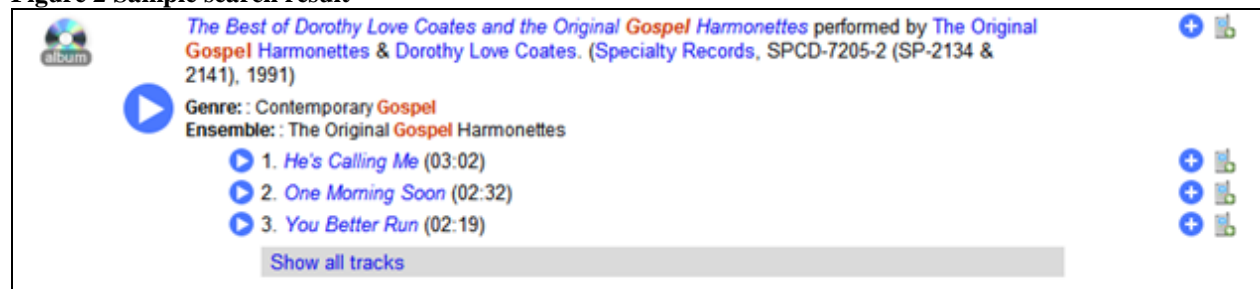
The quick search box at the top right of the homepage allows searchers to enter terms along with the option of specifying the following fields: album title (or work title for *Classical Music Library*), ensembles, genres, instruments, people, or track title. In addition, cultural groups or places can be searched in *American Song*, *Smithsonian Global Sound* and *Contemporary World Music*. A defining feature in *American Song* is the ability to search historical events.

The advanced search page provides many more searching options. Terms can be specified to the following fields: track title, work/opus number, album title, people (artist, composer, etc.), genre, instrument, time period, label, catalog number, place of recording, date of recording, cultural group, language, or historical event.

The usual Boolean operators, AND, OR, and NOT work in both the quick and advanced searches. The use of quotation marks does not seem to alter results, so it appears that phrase searching is automatic. The help pages do not address this particular search strategy.

Reviewers were frustrated by several of the search features. “Select Terms” and some of the “Browse” categories open boxes or screens which take an extremely long time to load. “Refine Search” seems to be a misnomer, because it brings the user to a blank “Advanced Search” form, losing whatever terms that had been previously entered as well as the results that were originally retrieved. The system does not supply suggestions or a “did you mean” statement when misspelled search terms result in no hits. Bibliographic information is available, but there is no citation generator. Help information is not context sensitive.

Figure 2 Sample search result



The screenshot shows a search result for an album. At the top left is an album icon. The main title is "The Best of Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes performed by The Original Gospel Harmonettes & Dorothy Love Coates. (Specialty Records, SPCD-7205-2 (SP-2134 & 2141), 1991)". Below the title, it lists the genre as "Contemporary Gospel" and the ensemble as "The Original Gospel Harmonettes". There are three tracks listed: "1. He's Calling Me (03:02)", "2. One Morning Soon (02:32)", and "3. You Better Run (02:19)". A "Show all tracks" button is visible at the bottom. On the right side of the album information, there are icons for a plus sign and a book icon, and on the right side of each track, there are icons for a plus sign and a book icon.

Browsing categories will always return results alphabetically, with the option to jump to any part of the results list by clicking on a letter of the alphabet at the top of the display. Results from term searches can be sorted by relevancy or title. Search terms appear in red. Results can also be filtered by artist, composer, conductor, ensemble, genre, instrument, label, sub-genre, and time period. Helpful drop down lists of values for the fields that appear in the results list are provided.

The results display is very clear. Users can click on the arrow icons to play a full album or a single track. Windows Media (for use with PC) or MP3 (for use with Mac) play applications open in a new window. The controls are typical to most such applications, including a choice between high and standard quality. The streaming audio loads quickly and the sound quality is quite good.

**Figure 3 Sample album information**



The screenshot shows a search results page for the album "African and Afro-American Drums (Folkways Records, FW04502)". The page includes a search bar at the top left with "Search" and "Results" buttons, and a "Sign in to save playlists" link at the top right. The album title is displayed in a large font, followed by a play button, a plus sign, and a download icon. Below the title are three icons: "View Liner Note", "Embed/Link", and "Print Screen". The album's catalog number (FW04502), credit note (Various Artists), and description are listed. The description states that the album is an examination of African drumming and its influence on the music of the Americas, compiled by Harold Courlander. It also mentions the release date (1954) and the source archive (Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian Institution). The genre is listed as "Traditional; Drumming; Ritual Dance & African Drumming", the label as "Folkways Records", and the occupation as "Anthropologist; Folklorist; Writer & Performer".

Clicking on titles in the results list will take the user to full information about the album, the link to liner notes and links to other searchable index terms in the record. Of special note: One outstanding feature of this search engine is its apparent automatic search within the full-text of the liner notes. This allows users to find tracks related to very specific music concepts. A keyword search on “microtones” brought up 5 different tracks illustrating the technique even though the word “microtone” itself appeared only within the PDF liner note.

Users can very easily create, edit, and share playlists by opening a free “My Playlists” account. Individuals can keep their playlists private, make them publically available to any authenticated user, or share only within the local institution’s IP range. This third option could be especially helpful to teachers in creating a course syllabus as playlists can also accommodate the addition of any outside URL. The publisher has selected many theme-based playlists to assist in research and “encourages students and scholars to share annotated playlists with other users to add context to the collection.”

Playlists display in spreadsheet form. The column headings are title, composer, publisher, label, date published, date recorded, and media type. The default sort is alphabetical by title, but this puts non-Roman alphabet languages first. A better default sort might have been by publication date, however this list illustrates the gaps in documentation for the recordings as many do not include a date. The list can be resorted by the column headings, however the only indication of which column is being used for the sort is that the heading font is in a not very distinctive bold-face.

### **USER SUPPORT SERVICES: 2, 3**

What types of customer and technical support are available for end users and library administrators?

Searchers can view the list of help topics by clicking the “Help” tab at the top of any screen in the database. Help pages are provided for all browsing, searching, viewing and playlist functions but display only very basic instructions and they are not context sensitive. The help page for “Advanced Search” showed only a brief description of what is readily evident on the Advanced Search page. The provision of more examples would be beneficial. More in-depth coverage is devoted to the technical requirements for audio streaming, creating and sharing playlists, and using a mobile device.

Most of the necessary documentation regarding database administration is available on the help screen under “Getting Started.” The licensing agreement is available by clicking on the “Terms of Use” link. An email address and 800 phone number are provided for technical support.

The vendor has indicated a willingness to provide free WebEx demonstrations, online tutorials, and rep visits if staff training is required. Promotional materials are available on the Alexander Street website for subscribing libraries wishing to access how-to guides, brochures and search widgets, give feedback or suggest content. The vendor also indicated that local administrators have the ability to access usage statistics and create reports but reviewers did not have access to these particulars during the trial period.

### **COST: 2, 4**

If cost is available, does it seem reasonable in terms of comparable products?

Reviewers disagreed in rating the cost of this database. From the student perspective, a great deal of music can be accessed on YouTube for free or purchased from iTunes for substantially less than the cost of purchasing a download from *Music Online: Listening*. As mentioned earlier, only *Classical Music Library* and *Smithsonian Global Sound* offer this feature for selected works. A sampling indicated that individual tracks range from \$1.00 to \$3.00 and there is no discount for ordering all of the tracks from a particular album or work. For classical works, separate movements are considered individual tracks and the price for downloading Beethoven’s *Eroica Symphony* is \$20.15. The charges for downloads are not readily apparent in the database descriptions and libraries should make note of this in making the decision to subscribe (however, as mentioned earlier, “purchase a download” can be disabled).

Libraries wishing to give their users options for listening without logging into a computer or that are used to lending CDs for a week or more may find the 48-hour “send to mobile feature” an inadequate time period for their users to “borrow” material even though it is free. One librarian noted that the feature could also result in increased fees for students who pay for their data through cell phone data plans if they use the database heavily.

On the other hand, *Music Online: Listening* provides 24/7 unlimited user access to thousands of albums that community college libraries could not hope to afford to purchase individually for their CD collections. Instructors and librarians can create and share playlists that target specific

academic needs and new playlists can be created immediately as new curriculum is developed. Libraries supporting strong music programs will want to have in-depth discussions with their music faculty and spend quite a bit of time searching the databases during the trial period to make sure the vast content relates to local course outlines and class assignments. Cost of the database package is quite reasonable if there is sufficient interest in the subject area. Although pricing was not available to these reviewers, libraries might want to make cost and content comparisons to *Naxos Music Library*.

**AVAILABILITY/ACCESSIBILITY OF SERVICE: 3, 3**

Is access/connection to product reliable and stable? Is response time adequate? Is product accessible to users with disabilities?

The vendor states the database is ADA/Section 508 compliant. An “app” for all mobile devices will be launched in 2011. Other than the noted slow response time within some of the browse features, reviewers had no problems in accessing the database from on or off campus.

**OTHER REVIEWS OF THIS PRODUCT**

Adam, A. J. Rev. of *American Song*. *CHOICE* (Oct. 2008): n. pag. *Choice Reviews Online*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

Duffy, M. J. Rev. of *Classical Music Library*. *CHOICE* (2006): n. pag. *Choice Reviews Online*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

Groves, C. A. Rev. of *Contemporary World Music*. *CHOICE* (Oct. 2008): n. pag. *Choice Reviews Online*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

Jenkins, M. D. Rev. of *Smithsonian Global Sound*. *CHOICE* (Jan. 2006): n. pag. *Choice Reviews Online*. Web. 4 Apr. 2011.

McLane, Alec. Rev. of *Contemporary World Music/Music Online*. *Notes* 66.3 (2010): 610-614. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 5 May 2011.