

Title:

Free Sheet Music On The Net - Truth or Fiction?

Word Count:

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Summary:

Typing "free sheet music" into google or any other search engine will have tempted anyone looking for sheet music on the net. And indeed, the search engines respond by giving us page after page of hits. But what does the user really get on these pages - and is it legal?

This article has a look at the current state of "free sheet music downloads".

Keywords:

Free Sheet Music, Digital Sheet Music

Article Body:

The search "free sheet music" (without the inverted commas) on google spews out an impressive 17,300,000 pages. Even the most inexperienced internet-user will immediately realize that the truth cannot be quite so bountiful. I click on the first hit on google (results on yahoo and msn will differ) and am promised thousands of downloadable scores. On closer inspection this turns out to be a number of Irish tunes at most, with most of the promised pieces in fact consisting of links to more so called "free sites". Funnily enough the owner of the website at one point even points out not to send him any nasty e-mails about the lack of free scores on the site.

So let's try the second hit. After navigating round the site promising me free scores, I always end up on a page telling me that all of these scores are free to download - for a small fee of 20 Dollars a year. As a user I am starting to feel confused - I haven't seen a single piece of sheet music. Can I trust this site? What would the quality of the scores be if I paid the 20 Dollars?

Frustrated, I move on to the next search engine result. This site at least has the courage to tell me on the main page that the so-called free scores will cost me 30 dollars a year, yet once again, I fail to detect a single quaver or treble clef. No scores are available for preview. This is starting to remind me of the "free DVD" I get with my Sunday paper. Only that I have to purchase the Sunday paper first.

Yet another site turns out to be just like the first, the promised pieces of

sheet music being links to more so-called free sheet music sites. I am starting to get bored of being re-directed. Aren't there any sheet music sites out there?

The story of my search continues in similar fashion, until I encounter a site that does offer sheet music, albeit a limited quantity. I download a score only to find that the graphics aren't quite where they should be, and this makes me wonder about the general quality of the scores and the arrangements that are available. Indeed. Why should anyone create a score and put any effort into the arrangement and editing, if they aren't making any money through direct sales?

Even other hits take me to a site where I am charged \$1.60 for the "privilege" of downloading a badly scanned copy of a Bach composition. Hm.

Frighteningly, I also find a site that offers extremely basic versions of John Lennon's "Imagine" and other music that is in fact still under copyright. This website is clearly an illegal operation, and one that might find itself in the crosshairs of the Music Publishers' Association (MPA). The MPA, as highlighted in a recent article on the BBC Website (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/4524086.stm>) is intending to clamp down on websites selling music still under copyright, or where the arrangements are still under copyright. In a way the publishing world is doing what record labels started a few years ago by actively prosecuting those participating in illegal download of sheet music.

I eventually find a project similar to the Gutenberg Project where people contribute scores freely. The quality seems ok, but I am restricted to pieces by a handful of classical composers, and with anything relying on donations and free contributions, I doubt there are regular updates. However, as with Wikipedia, the authenticity of the product has to come into question. The standard review process that an encyclopaedia has and Wikipedia and other websites dependent on volunteers lack will have to be considered when downloading scores (or any other information for that matter) for free: does the end-user believe all the notes are accurate? When the founder of Wikipedia himself was found to manipulate information on the very site how much can these so-called democratic sites be trusted? Obviously no one would benefit from changing a note in a score, so no one would deliberately manipulate a piece of music. But what are the skill levels of those involved in the creation of these scores? It is highly unlikely that a trained musician would edit these - he would be destroying his own industry to a certain extent. Furthermore I will not be able to find simplified arrangements of a piece, as this is a time-consuming effort, and anyone engaging in such an operation would clearly charge for the service.

After many days of searching, I give up in my quest in search of good free

scores.

But what is one to make of all this? Why are there so many sites that don't actually sell anything, and what is the point of them?

The problem is created by advertising. The people who run these sites own the most obvious url titles (i.e. the web site address) that one might type in when looking for free scores. As an example: if you were looking for free glasses, one might type in www.freeglasses.com. Hence, these sites get a lot of direct traffic. Furthermore they have also done a very good job at search engine optimisation, which makes you wonder whether google and Co are actually missing a trick here. Yet as these sites have nothing to sell they try and get the frustrated user to click on one of the many adverts, and many of these are so-called google ads. Every time someone clicks on one of these ads or paid-for links, the aforementioned website earns a small amount of money (so-called click-through). What is even more disconcerting is that some of these ads lead to legitimate sheet music download sites, making it even harder for the user to distinguish between the real thing and some dodgy operation trying to make a buck on click-throughs. This clearly does not help the industry.

Well, what about those free scores then? Well, there are some out there, basically a handful to be found on the five or six legitimate sites that are out there. These sites have the highest quality in terms of the arrangements, the quality of the score both graphically and in print-out quality.

So why no free scores?

Think about it: why should anyone go through the effort of either
A) scanning hundreds and thousands of pages of music, and then offering them for free?

Or

B) creating hundreds and thousands of arrangements for free?

Exactly. If you were to upload loads of tunes, you'd want to make money out of it.

By Lincoln Jaeger