

Chapter XI

Instruments and Equipment

*Nicholas DeCarbo, Associate Dean
Frost School of Music, University of Miami*

It goes without saying that music units need considerable equipment such as acoustical shells, staging, risers, chairs, music stands, podiums, instrument storage cabinets, laboratory workstations, music library systems, audio systems, and quality instruments. All music programs also need equipment devoted to technology, including hardware, software, and furniture. Because of advances in technology, music units use an array of electronic keyboard instruments for piano labs, classrooms, recording studios, music technology centers, and faculty studio/offices. Of course, music units also continue to need traditional acoustic instruments, such as concert grand pianos, upright pianos, harps, contra clarinets, English horns, contrabassoons, a full complement of percussion instruments, and sousaphones for the marching band. According to the Higher Education Arts Data Survey (HEADS), 474 public and private accredited and nonaccredited music units in the United States reported spending an average of \$53,440 on equipment, \$16,336 on leases and rentals, and \$9,861 on repair during 2004–5. During that same period, 358 music units reported spending an average of \$17,051 on technology.

This chapter discusses the planning process needed for the purchase and/or lease of equipment, instruments, and technology-related items, along with guidelines for maintaining inventories.

Planning for Equipment and Instrument Purchases

Due to the lack of competition, the cost of equipment for performance venues, rehearsal spaces, and faculty studios is high compared to equipment purchases in many other areas of the university, excepting the sciences. Moreover, the music executive is often in the position of having to convince the higher administration that the needs are valid. Most college and university administrators know nothing about the music unit's need for balanced instrumentation, why a contrabassoon is needed, or why squeaky choral risers need to be replaced.

Many, if not most, colleges and universities engage in a strategic planning process in three-, five-, or ten-year cycles. And most would agree that equipment and instrument purchases need to be addressed in such plans. A three- or five-year instrument purchase plan should (1) contain an itemized list of the equipment/instruments that the music unit will need in the next three to five years, (2) explain how the purchases will assist in meeting the goals and objectives of the unit's degree programs, (3) outline plans for the implementation of new programs requiring additional equipment/instrument expenditures, and (4) contain an itemized list of the cost, funding sources, and applicable fees. Appropriate faculty should always be included in the planning process.

With regard to the yearly implementation of the purchase plan, faculty should be asked to submit their purchase needs for the upcoming academic year during the spring semester

so that purchases can be made prior to the fall semester. The requests should include a brief rationale explaining the importance of the acquisition to the area of study; a description of the item, including brand, model number, and estimated cost; and contact information for the designated vendor. Depending on the structure of the music unit, the requests should be submitted first to the area or division coordinator, program director, or department chair. The requests should then be compiled, prioritized, and submitted to the music unit's administration for review. Final decisions regarding approved purchases for the upcoming year should be communicated to faculty prior to the end of the spring semester. Faculty participation in the purchase of equipment encourages them to think creatively while sharing their knowledge and ideas with their colleagues. They can be an indispensable source of information regarding quality, vendors, and possible funding sources.

Planning for Technology

Since technology permeates every facet of the daily teaching and learning environment in higher education, the music executive may have less difficulty convincing higher administration of the need to spend money on computer hardware and software than on music stands, risers, pianos, English horns, and percussion instruments. While an English horn may last thirty years, a computer and content-specific software may be current for no more than one to two years. A two-year-old computer may be four computer generations old. The replacement of computers and software is ongoing, and keeping up with the latest bells and whistles is expensive.

Involving faculty in the planning for technology purchases is imperative. The creation of a technology committee, with faculty representatives from each area of the music unit, is a logical first step. Traditional performance faculty often do not see the relevance of technology to their teaching, making it that much more important that they be included. Round out the committee's representation by including the unit's webmaster, a recording engineer, and a keyboard technician. The committee's main charge should be to consider the short- and long-term technology needs of the music unit, including computers, electronic communications, and student/faculty laboratories. The individual who bears the overall responsibility for technology in the music unit should probably be considered for the position of chair of the committee.

Purchasing Instruments

Large instrument manufacturers in the United States produce quality products that are competitive with those produced in other parts of the world, but there are many less scrupulous manufacturers that produce decidedly inferior products. With string instruments, this problem is manifested in the form of shoddy materials, poor finishes, badly fitted parts, and inferior tone quality. In brasses and woodwinds, the most noticeable problems are the use of thin metals, poor finishes, and cheap pot-metal keys that are badly aligned and break easily. Let common sense be your guide. If the deal is too good to be true, it is. When it comes to quality, you get what you pay for.

Purchasing instruments through a local dealer is often more advantageous than purchasing from sale houses across the country. You may pay a little more with the local dealer, but you will usually receive outstanding service and repair capabilities. With mail-order purchases, not seeing or hearing the instrument puts the purchaser at risk from the start. You may have no recourse if something goes wrong with an instrument purchased in

this manner. Local dealers and/or repair technicians often refuse to work on instruments that were purchased elsewhere. With electronic instruments, it is especially important to deal with vendors that have the capability of providing technical support. In addition, it is wise to purchase an extended warranty on electronic instruments.

For tax purposes, people occasionally want to donate an instrument and will need to know the value of the instrument. Market forces determine value. Generally speaking, an instrument is worth what someone is willing to pay for it. An appraiser can estimate the current market value based on examination of the instrument, knowledge of the market, experience, and records of past sales of similar instruments. Price guides for used musical instruments are few. The Orion Research Corporation publishes a price guide for used musical instruments, including pianos, organs, and electronic keyboards. The *Guitars and Musical Instruments Blue Book* includes acoustic string instruments, woodwind and brass instruments, and percussion instruments; and the String Letter Press annually publishes the *Musical Instrument Auction Price Guide*, listing the price of string, brass, and woodwind instruments and pianos sold at auction.

Lease/Purchasing Arrangements

Certainly the highest instrument costs for a music unit are quality acoustic and electronic keyboard instruments. A small music unit with fifty music majors probably has an inventory of at least twenty acoustic pianos. A larger music unit with 250–500 music majors may have one to two hundred acoustic pianos. A new concert grand piano can now cost \$90,000. It is not uncommon for a music unit to have an inventory of acoustic pianos and electronic keyboards valued in the millions of dollars. How does the music executive find the funds to purchase or replace expensive keyboard instruments? Many music executives have turned to lease/purchasing agreements involving the music unit, a large keyboard manufacturer, and a local keyboard dealership. Though some schools once balked at the idea of leasing, they now realize that today's lease/purchasing programs provide a practical and economical way to cope with the higher costs of these instruments and increasingly tighter budgets in higher education.

The most common lease/purchase plans involve acoustic and electronic pianos. Most large keyboard manufacturers are willing to provide, for no or little initial cost, quality keyboard instruments for performance halls, rehearsal halls, faculty studios, practice rooms, and piano laboratories. The agreement is executed by (1) the music executive, (2) the college or university's business officer, and (3) the dealer. The dealer agrees to provide a specific number of acoustic pianos for a year, at the end of which the pianos are removed and sold at a reduced cost to the public, and new pianos are brought in again to replace them.

Most dealers assume responsibility for (1) shipping, receiving, uncrating, delivery, and placement of the units; (2) the cost of cosmetic maintenance resulting from normal wear and tear; (3) warranty service; and (4) reimbursing the music unit for the costs associated with the design, production, and mailing of sale announcements. The music executive maintains the right to approve all promotional materials. The music unit will usually be asked to agree to (1) be responsible for the routine maintenance of the instruments, including tuning, voicing, and action regulation; (2) provide reasonable protection of the instruments by establishing appropriate controls and security; (3) be responsible for any neglect that causes severe damage during the term of the agreement; (4) allow the dealer and piano manufacturer to use the name of the music unit in the public release of information about the brand/s on loan; (5) cooperate with the dealer in the on-site sale of the units (the university should be aware

of this before entering into any agreement); and (6) provide a mailing list of faculty, alumni, and other constituents. The agreement may include a clause specifying that the music unit will buy a percentage of the leased units each year, such as 15 to 20 percent, until the inventory is completely owned by the college/university, and the agreement generally contains a termination clause giving either party the right to terminate the agreement with prior written notice.

Another common lease/purchasing agreement enables music units to maintain a sufficient number and variety of woodwind, brass, and string instruments for the techniques classes that make up such an important component of the music education curriculum. Commonly, a music unit will have ten of every instrument for these classes—flutes through tubas, violins through double basses, and a variety of percussion instruments. Large instrument manufacturers are in a position to provide these instruments in the specified quantities almost immediately upon execution of such an agreement.

Yearly purchases of instruments must take into account annual price increases. With a yearly, renewable lease/purchasing agreement, no price increases on the instruments are allowed during the term of the lease, which means that the music unit's instrument inventory can continue to grow with the assurance that their carefully planned budget will not suffer inflationary pressures. Most agreements contain an option for purchase of the instruments; some specify that the music unit is required to purchase the instruments, or a number thereof, within a specified amount of time. Most manufacturers do allow the music unit to terminate the lease if it is unexpectedly unable to come up with the necessary funds.

Leasing instruments can be a good thing if done properly. For a music unit with a large budget, \$20,000 is not an unreasonable amount to spend on instruments, excluding pianos, in one fiscal year. However, for a small music unit, coming up with the funds necessary to make a cash purchase can be quite difficult. Leasing can actually be more economical and practical than waiting several years to purchase needed instruments.

Maintaining Instrument Inventories

It is important for the music executive to determine if the inventory will be maintained by the central music office or by individual faculty members. If possible, it is a good idea to appoint a member of the faculty, that is, an area supervisor, in each program to oversee their inventory. The supervisor should assess the conditions of the instruments prior to the start of classes in the fall and spring semesters to identify the maintenance and repair work that needs to be done by a competent repair specialist. Separate policies and procedures should also be established for the instruments that are used in music education classes and the instruments that are loaned to students and faculty. The area supervisor reports to the music administrator who is responsible for the unit's entire inventory. Inventory software programs are available that can aid in the process. In addition to containing basic information such as name, brand, and model number, such programs assist in keeping track of instrument value and depreciation, accessories, and repair/replacement schedules.

Conclusion

As with any activity, the more time, effort, and attention the music unit devotes to planning for the purchase, inventory, maintenance, and replacement of equipment and instruments, the less time it will have to spend dealing with the ongoing responsibility involved in the day-to-day workings of these activities.