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Feature Article by Andrew Quint

The MusiCHI Suite and the Zen of Cataloging CDs

Serious Record Collectors have seriously large and complex record collections. Many have tried heroically to organize and facilitate access to their holdings with file cards, numbering systems, and other analog approaches that have generally fallen short. Even with the arrival of the Information Age and the utter ubiquity of the home computer, cataloging a big collection is not easily accomplished. The problem is that classical music (and to a similar extent jazz) is, and will always be, a niche product, and off-the-shelf music-organizing programs, the kind that come with a PC or Mac, are fine for pop and rock, but not for the intricacies of 400-plus years of Western art music. The classical collecting world is ready for music management software designed for classical devotees. MusiCHI may be the best solution yet for this unmet need.

The “CHI” of MusiCHI, by the way, refers to the concept in traditional Chinese culture that there is a life force or “active principle” that is integral to every living thing. If this sounds a little cosmic ... well, hang in there. This idea does touch on a Zen-like aspect of our passion for collecting music that goes well beyond rational thought. But with our feet planted firmly on the ground, before getting to the particulars, let’s begin with what you end up with when you employ the MusiCHI product with your music collection. Or at least what *I’m* ending up with, as the software is endlessly adaptable and no two implementations will be exactly the same.

I have lived with MusiCHI now for roughly two months and have tagged and ripped approximately 300 CDs (and also processed a small number of lossless downloaded music files) representing about 75 composers and more than 400 compositions, many in multiple versions. I have a modest Hewlett-Packard desktop computer—Pentium Dual-Core processor and 4 GB of installed RAM—that’s connected to the Internet. The computer’s soundcard has been bypassed; output to my audio system from the HP is via a USB-to-S/PDIF interface, a Halide Bridge, to be specific. My preamp/processor thus accomplishes the digital-to-analog conversion, not the computer.

When I sit down at my PC—a 21-inch diagonal monitor is a good idea—there’s an icon labeled MusiCHI Library Manager sitting on the desktop. I click on it and a screen opens up with one of the two music libraries I’ve been assembling. (One’s for opera, the other for everything else.) A series of five vertical columns appears. On the left is an alphabetical list of composers. I choose one and move to the next one to the right, a breakdown of non-operatic “genres” that I find useful: Symphony, Orchestral-Miscellaneous, Orchestra with Voice, Orchestra with Chorus, Instrumental, Concerto, Chamber Music, Piano, Organ, and Choral. Let’s say I have chosen Hindemith and then Orchestral-Miscellaneous. Off to the far right is a column listing such works I’ve added to MusiCHI to date: *Mathis der Maler*, *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes of Carl Maria von Weber*, and 10 other compositions. I click on *Nobilissima Visione* and on the bottom part of the library screen appears the nine tracks representing the three versions of the piece (three movements per version) I have: James DePreist (Delos), Yoel Levi (Telarc), and Herbert Blomstedt (London). I click on the performance I want and sit back to listen to sound that is *better* than that of the CD that was copied with MusiCHI onto the HP’s hard drive. Pretty sweet.

The man who is MusiCHI is Philippe Watel. Watel was born in Marseille and came to the United States at the age of 22 to complete his education. He remained in America for two decades, eventually working as an IT expert on Wall Street. Not long ago, he returned to Europe—Watel is now based in Athens—where he has effectively combined his computer expertise with an enthusiasm for classical music that developed in young adulthood.

Watel’s MusiCHI software is actually a suite of four independent software applications—a ripper, a tagger, a player, and a library manager. Key to understanding what MusiCHI does, and why it does it so well, is an understanding of the concept of *metadata*. Metadata is “data about data” and, in the context of a CD or download, it refers to the information that describes the actual musical content—the composer, the name of the piece, the length and number of tracks, the record label, the ASIN number, and potentially dozens of other identifying pieces of information. That information takes up very little room on a CD or hard drive, compared to the actual music. The metadata also exists independently of the CD in a number of databases. One such database that has been commercialized is Gracenote (a license is required for access to the information) that is used by iTunes, among others. It holds more than a billion files. Another is FreeDB, a large database—millions of CDs are represented—that relies on user submissions and does not charge any kind of licensing fee. FreeDB’s main drawback for classical music is that its specifications do not include a data field for the composer. But that drawback notwithstanding—the user can always add the composer—along with Amazon’s database, this is the main source of information for MusiCHI’s tagging function. What MusiCHI does is to allow the user to quickly and usefully massage the metadata from these sources to organize a large number of music files.

Place a CD in the disc drive of your computer and click on the MusiCHI Tagger application, another icon present on your desktop after installation of the software. The selections on the CD will load, listed by track number only. The Tagger then gives you the option of getting the metadata from FreeDB or Amazon (or elsewhere, if you're an advanced user). The Amazon source has the added attraction of providing the album cover, which is easily imported to the tag you are creating but, otherwise, it's utterly unpredictable which database will provide the best metadata. Whichever source you choose, the data is brought into the tagging application with a single click and you are ready to begin modifying this information to your desired form. Whether this is a minute or two of work or a 10-minute process depends upon how good the metadata is (occasionally there is *no* metadata available and the user must build the entire tag from scratch) and how much detail you want the tag to reflect. And how compulsive you are, I guess. But entering lots of information during the tagging process is a good idea; how much of it you choose to display in your library is entirely up to you and something that you can later change your mind about quite easily.

I will not provide a blow-by-blow account of the tagging process—it's definitely a situation where a picture is worth a thousand words. On the MusiCHI website (musichi.eu) there's a free video demo for download, as well as detailed written descriptions of each of the suite's functions, complete with illustrations. But the heart of the enterprise is a tagging screen that has about 15 fields to be filled in at the user's discretion. These include the composer, composition, movement title, genre, artist, publication (that is, label), and others. Some of these will have been filled in with data imported from FreeDB or Amazon—often incorrectly—but many will be blank. You type in entries and corrections until you're satisfied and then click "save." The tags are added to the master grid of files and to the library as well.

The above description gives an overview of the basics of MusiCHI's tagger function. The application has a considerable number of sophisticated functions for more advanced users, including an elaborate text editor. Additionally, the MusiCHI Tagger and Ripper feature a special tool called MusiCHI Clean that facilitates correcting and standardizing a library's entries. This tool, at the very least, will assure consistency in your tags: Rachmaninoff's first name will always be spelled the same way and those pesky diacritical markings will be automatically added to Dvořák and Martinů. Subtler typographic issues are addressed as only computers can. For example, if Brahms's Symphony No. 3 is sometimes "op. 90" and sometimes "op.90," the two instances will be displayed in the library as two different compositions. MusiCHI Clean can be told to always insert a space between "op." and the number that follows—or visa versa—and similarly address dozens of other small formatting details. It saves a *lot* of time. And the better one gets at using MusiCHI's more advanced functions, the faster the process goes.

Once a CD has been tagged, most collectors will rip it onto their computer's hard drive. Of course you don't *have* to digitize your CDs; MusiCHI could be used only to catalog a collection while one

continues to play the CDs on a standard player. Most, however, will choose to employ the MusiCHI Ripper, and it's a good one. Philippe Watel provides the option of creating compressed MP3 files from your CDs, necessary for playback on some portable devices, but for critical listening, users will employ one of the three levels of FLAC (Free Lossless Audio Codec) processing. These result in CD-quality resolution—better, in fact, as bit-for-bit, most listeners hear an improvement when the spinning disc is eliminated from the equation. There is no difference in the sonic quality of FLAC levels 1, 5, and 8—all are lossless, so no bits are discarded—it's just that a music file produced with the higher level of compression takes longer to rip but takes up less room on your hard drive. There is also the choice of ripping to WAV, but Watel advises against it, as this older format doesn't allow one at the metadata for tagging purposes. How long does ripping take? That depends upon the length of the CD, the number of tracks, your hardware, and the format employed. So, on my HP computer, ripping the Karl Böhm Decca recording of Bruckner's Fourth Symphony took 4:30 at FLAC level 8 but 3:00 at FLAC level 1. WAV took only 2:30 (no metadata storage). It's worth noting that ripping to the low-fidelity MP3 format (320 kbps) took approximately *six* minutes—the work of all that compression takes time. Once the disc has been ripped, it's a simple matter to transfer it into a library, and you're done.

Though maybe not. The beauty of the MusiCHI software is that one can continually modify the way that your data is displayed and thus the way that you access your music. You can decide to display or hide columns like "Instrument" or "Epoque." In addition, Watel has devised an extremely useful field for the tagger called "Grouping" that allows the user to search out files that belong together in some fashion. An obvious example is all my *Ring* cycles that typically come in four boxes of two to four discs, each with their own catalog number. I entered "Solti" or "Knappertsbusch (Bayreuth 1958)" or "Furtwängler (La Scala 1950)" into the Grouping field. Then, in my opera library, when the Grouping column is displayed, I can easily navigate to a specific scene in a specific drama of a specific *Ring*. Better yet, I've been using the Grouping parameter to tag period-instrument performances. Not long ago, I heard John Eliot Gardiner and his Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique perform an all-Beethoven concert that was very exciting. I was in the mood for period instruments at home for a couple of weeks afterward and displaying the Period Instrument column in my library encouraged me to revisit Haydn with Bruno Weil, Mozart with René Jacobs, and Handel with Trevor Pinnock. I've started grouping film scores—the sort of music that Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Copland, or Virgil Thompson wrote often to make ends meet.

One other extraordinary feature that may or may not interest you is the MusiCHI Portable Edition, a separate application that allows one to easily copy all or part of his collection onto a USB drive or external hard drive. That storage device can then be connected to any PC without any additional software installation—one's entire music collection is available to hear away from home. All you need is the necessary cable to connect the host computer to an audio system.

Philippe Watel officially launched MusiCHI in September of 2011 and continues to refine his product,

often based on feedback from customers. In the course of a two-hour Philadelphia-to-Athens Skype call during which Watel showed me some of MusiCHI's finer points, we discovered that the artist field in the tagging application wasn't big enough for opera, especially if a tagger wanted to list a singer's role as well as his or her voice type. This issue most certainly has been addressed by the time you're reading this. Watel continues to work on how best to teach collectors how to get started with MusiCHI. Watel is a knowledgeable music-lover but a professional IT guy, and he thinks like one. The purchaser of the MusiCHI software gets about 20 short videos demonstrating all aspects of the product. They are elegant to watch but, in terms of knowing exactly what to do with that first CD, the average citizen may be at a loss. Repeated viewings help and, better, Watel has also recently created comprehensive PDF downloads that provide step-by-step instructions on tagging, ripping, and all the other features of the suite. You'll get there. Becoming facile with MusiCHI is something that develops over weeks, even months.

One thing no one can complain about is the pricing. For the foreseeable future, the MusiCHI Studio Edition (the four main components of the MusiCHI Suite—Library Manager, Tagger, Ripper, and Player) sells for ¥39, or about \$52. The Ultimo Edition, which includes the portable application as well, is ¥49 (\$66) and the portable application by itself costs ¥19 (\$25). Watel offers a free three-week trial with the fully functional software, enough time to know if MusiCHI is for you.

So, is there a Zen-like aspect of working with the MusiCHI software—can one indeed tap into the “chi” of something when tapping away at a computer keyboard cataloging CDs? Philippe Watel has a lengthy two-part essay on “The Zen of Tagging” up on his website, though this is actually a very practical guide for getting the most out of his product that steers clear of any mention of Eastern philosophy. I found that there is a Zen of sorts to using MusiCHI, at two levels. First, ripping and tagging are profoundly relaxing. If I can't sleep or if I'm getting antsy waiting for my wife to get ready to go out, I'll process a few discs and feel my stress level dissipate. One definitely gets “in the zone.” Also, there's something about using the MusiCHI suite that speaks to our very personal relationship to the music we love. As each disc in a large collection passes through its owner's hands to be tagged and ripped, perhaps touched for the first time in decades, he or she is reminded of a cumulative sense of meaning—wisdom, even—that is a byproduct of years of collecting records. I can't promise, but you just might live longer.

This article originally appeared in Issue 35:4 (Mar/Apr 2012) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

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