

MUSIC REFERENCE AS A CALLING: AN ESSAY

David Lasocki

Not long ago, I answered a routine reference question for a graduate student who is a regular user of the library. He did not thank me immediately but moved away and paused for a moment, looking a little embarrassed. Then he walked back to me and burst out: "People like you are worth their weight in gold. Thank you for your calling into this area." It was my turn to be embarrassed, and I mumbled an inadequate "You're always welcome." Now, I am used to people being effusively grateful for small favors at the reference desk, so I was not entirely surprised by the level of thanks. But I had not thought of music reference as a "calling" before, and his comment spurred me to think more deeply about what I was doing in my job. This essay is the product of that thinking. I reflect on my own experience of music reference, draw conclusions that I believe can be applied to any reference desk, and discuss the style and philosophy of reference that I have developed over the years. All the questions and dialogues quoted are verbatim reports from conversations at our reference desk (honest!).

A Certain Logic

It is a commonplace of teaching about "the reference interview" in library schools that users often do not know what they need, or if they do, they often do not know how to express it. What library school did not prepare me for was the variety of means users employ to evade the question and the reasons why they evade it.

A common opening gambit at the reference desk is some variant of "I know this is a stupid question, but..." What the user generally means by employing the word "stupid" is: "I think I ought to know this already, so I'm embarrassed to ask." Underneath, there is a fear of appearing stupid which the user begins to address by using the word itself. It is customary for librarians to laugh at the "stupid" questions they receive, and I have seen several lists of them circulating on e-mail. Typical examples: "Do you have a list of all the books I've ever read?"; "I need to find out Ibid's first name for my bibliography." OK, these questions can be fun, but they usually have a logic of their own, and most are far from stupid. Let us rather laud the questioners for their bravery. Here is a recent example:

Undergraduate:

"I have a really stupid question..."

Me:

"What would you like to know?"

Student:

"Well, a friend of mine told me that you have a score of all Mozart's horn concertos on this floor and I can't find it."

This is a good question. Most of the scores are on the floor above the reference desk. The score

he has in mind is in the *Neue Mozart Ausgabe*, which is shelved on the same floor as the reference desk.

How about this dialogue, which begins with a question that is apparently ludicrous in a music library?

Undergraduate:

“Do you have music in this library?”

Me:

“We have lots of music in this library — scores and recordings. What kind of music are you looking for?”

Student:

“I’d rather not say.”

Me:

“Well, are you a singer or an instrumentalist?”

Student:

“No.”

Me (sizing her up and cutting to the chase):

“Are you looking for a song from a musical for an audition?”

Student:

“Yes.”

Me:

“You’re a singer, then.”

Student:

“No, I don’t think I’m good enough to call myself a singer.”

The student is probably a freshman and has clearly never been in the Music Library — perhaps any music library — before. She tries an “ice-breaking” gambit. I try to get her to the point. Her reply throws me for a moment, then I try a direct question. Again, her reply throws me at first. What does she really want? Something about her age and demeanor tells me she is a singer, and it is common to have inexperienced users looking for songs for auditions, so I try that. My informed guess turns out to be correct, and her reply fills in the logic of her bashful “No” and “I’d rather not say.”

Here is another recent question that is often found on “stupid question” lists:

Undergraduate:

“Do you have books in this library?”

This is actually a fair question in a music library. Perhaps the user has experience of such libraries that contain only scores and recordings, the books being in the Main Library or somewhere else on campus.

Sometimes the opening gambit is amusing:

Undergraduate, probably a freshman doing an assignment:

“Do you know any stuff?”

Me:

“Some. What kind of stuff do you want to know about?”

Yes, he is a freshman doing an assignment. He has been given a list of questions to ask about several buildings on campus. In this case he wants to know such things as “What is the name of the Dean of the School of Music?” and “Are there any classrooms in this building?” Why does he not come right out and ask them? Probably because I am a member of an older generation and he wants to be sure that I am the right person to ask.

Even the following has some kind of logic:

Me:

“Can I help you?”

Undergraduate:

“Probably not — I just have a question.”

He is looking for the Lost and Found for the building. Since he is in the Music Library, he is rightly unsure whether we will have items for the whole building (we do not — that is in a separate place).

Of course, the user’s expectations can be clearly logical but entirely unrealistic.

Alumna, who wants to make a novel CD:

“Do you have any source to look up whether a piece has ever been recorded or not?”

She does not want to spend time looking in discographies, so she settles for a quick search in WorldCat.

At least these users realized that they could get help at the reference desk. What about this one?

Graduate student to me sitting at the reference desk:

“I didn’t know you were here to help us. I just thought you were doing something for the library. But my husband and two teachers told me to come and talk to you. They said, ‘He’s the man.’”

Do you post someone knowledgeable at the reference desk and risk some users being reluctant to ask questions? Or do you post someone less knowledgeable whom users are more inclined to approach (and have the knowledgeable person on call in the back room)? Having tried to work both ways, I much prefer the former. Why? Because users can be “trained” to approach the desk. Even the person I have quoted did make her way to the desk eventually, because others knew I was approachable.

Moreover, it is surprising how many times an apparently “easy” or “short” question turns out to be difficult or time-consuming — something that it may take the reference librarian to assess. When I have been working with a user at the desk and another user comes up, my experience is that the newcomer will not hang around for more than a minute or two before going elsewhere, for better or for worse (“Oh, it’s OK — I’ll just go and look for it in the stacks”). I have tried asking users: “Do you have a short question or a long question?” But I now realize that is not a fair question from me. When I go on to do a short reference interview to discover the nature of their question, the user has been wrong at least half the time about how much time it will take to answer it (“Oh, it’s quick: I just need to find twenty articles and dissertations on the role of the orchestra in the 17th century”). Now I do not ask for an assessment. I say “Can you come back in five minutes”?

Reference as Teaching

I have jokingly told people in library meetings that our reference policy is “to not answer reference questions.” That wakes up the meeting. In a sense, it is also true. When I started working here, we had no reference policy. When my colleagues and I sat down to write one, the then Head of the Music Library, David Fenske, rightly insisted that it should emphasize the teaching role of the reference desk and de-emphasize the answering of questions. Our policy begins:

The mission of reference service in the Music Library is to provide training and assistance to users, enabling them to use the library successfully and conduct their own research on musical subjects. This mission is therefore inseparable from providing “bibliographic instruction” or instruction in “information literacy” in the field of music.

After defining which users we serve, it continues:

The Music Library will:

- * Assist users in finding the items and information they need.
- * Train users to use the library, reference sources, and reference databases.
- * Provide “ready reference” assistance (brief pieces of factual information such as composers’ dates).
- * Assist users in using the computers in the microcomputer lab.
- * Provide music bibliographic instruction or instruction in music information literacy for Indiana University classes upon request.

The Music Library will not:

- * Supply answers to students' homework.
- * Do users' research.
- * Research incomplete or inaccurate call numbers and citations for reserve items.
- * Compile bibliographies.

Every encounter at the reference desk is an opportunity to teach and to train — from the layout of the library to the nature of the bibliographic universe, the principles of database searching, and caution in using sources. Whenever I am tempted to simply hand out an answer to a user, I think of our mission, to create resourceful and independent users.

Me, catching the eye of a passing student:
 “You haven’t stopped by the reference desk in a long time.”

Student:
 “No, that’s true. You taught me how to use the library, so I don’t need to come here now.”

I am surprised, touched, pleased, a little skeptical. After all, learning “how to use the library” is a continuing challenge for me as well as our users. Still, it is heart-warming to feel that you are getting through.

Relationships

When you first encounter a user, you can never tell whether the relationship is going to last five seconds (a brief directional question) or the rest of your life. So building the relationship needs to start immediately, through focusing on the user and giving your full awareness and attention to the question. When you get to know your users as people, you can encourage them to overcome their reluctance to approach the reference desk, help them more, teach them more — and also be rewarded with a wider variety of questions. Users know when you care about them. Or to put it another way, reference is more about building relationships than answering questions. I was once giving a tour of the library to the man who managed the circulation facilities in our Main Library, greeting user after user in passing and pausing to have a few words with a voice student about her upcoming recital. My colleague expressed his astonishment: “Wow, it must be great to work in a place where you can have a close relationship with your clientele. I never see mine.”

In the interests of promoting the relationship, I am willing to help with any subject that is posed to me, whether or not it is strictly a “music reference question.” Over the last year or so, I have been jotting down examples of questions that go beyond music. When I stopped to view the questions as a group just now, I was surprised at the identity of the users. The international students were all doctoral candidates and the American students all master’s candidates. Coincidence? Or perhaps a reflection of the needs of people at certain stages of their careers. A Polish cellist asks me to look over a job application he has written, because he believes that Polish prose style tends to be more wordy than American. His letter is certainly prolix, so he sits down and we work on constructing simpler sentences. A Costa Rican music theorist often stops by to ask me the exact nuance of an English word or punctuation mark. I wish that more native

speakers were as fastidious as he is. A Chinese pianist wants me to help her architect boyfriend find a job, so they can be together in the United States. We search the Web together and find some promising leads. A Korean organist tells me she is thinking of getting married and asks me whether I think it is a good idea for her. Naturally, we have a long chat about relationships, and I end up lending her a copy of Sam Keen's *To Love and Be Loved*, the best book I know on the subject. A Taiwanese music education major comes back again and again to show me papers she is submitting for a conference or for publication, letters of application for grants or jobs, or requests for a reference. Yes, such students could go to the university's writing tutorial service (if they can get a timely appointment) or hire an editor, but some prefer to come to me for the combination of musical and writing experience I can offer. An American composition student has had a falling out with a musicology professor and asks for my advice. I put her in touch with a third party who agrees to arbitrate.

Many performers want to know which professors they should put on their committees for recitals or examinations or doctoral documents. This is treacherous ground. I probe deeply. I consider the personalities, styles, and interests of teachers and students, the subject of the document, the time frame — anything that would give me some context — then make suggestions. I am in a fortunate position between the School and the students. I know the student who has failed the Styles Examination twice already and the musicology professor who is on 29 doctoral committees, so I can keep both their interests in mind.

Particularly since I have been teaching bibliography, but even beforehand, students ask me to be on their committees for doctoral documents (as we call mini-dissertations here). The School of Music seems happy for me to fulfill this role, and has allowed me to be the sole research director for two documents, one close to my own research field (the violin caprice in the 18th century), the other not (style changes in Poulenc's vocal music). At this moment I am on twelve doctoral committees, including three as co-research director — for students in band conducting, clarinet, flute, harpsichord, horn, piano pedagogy, viola, violoncello (two), and voice (three). I value this role for the opportunity it affords me to affect the quality of doctoral research.

This relationship-based style of reference has been developing for me for several years, but I cannot claim to have culled it only from my experience on the desk. My predecessor, Kathryn Talalay, who now works as an editor for W.W. Norton, was a wonderful role model. I was constantly amazed by the steady stream of users and staff in and out of her office, the invitations she received to recitals and parties and chats at the local restaurant, the papers and documents she fixed up, and the empathy she had with the plight of all users.

Language Barriers

We have many users — especially, but not only, international students — whose English is not fluent. Even fluent users may use transliterated terms from their own language, such as asking for the “notes” or a “partition.” I find that the student workers at the circulation desk tend to talk too fast to foreigners and to use too much slang. Most of our international users are overpolite, nodding and walking away before they really understand what has been said to them. Sometimes they return, after wandering around the library for half an hour, and find their way to the reference desk. I counsel the student workers to speak slowly (but not condescendingly), avoid slang, listen hard, and be prepared to make educated guesses about what such users want.

Sometimes, the shoe is on the other foot. As a former Brit myself, I am amused when an enthusiastic British or Commonwealth student, throwing out unfamiliar terms and glottal stops left and right, leaves a student worker reeling — “Ow, a’ pu’ i’ ba’ on th’ trolley. Cheers, maite.” Then I try to step in and translate (“He put it back on the cart”).

Doing a reference interview can be taxing, even for the experienced librarian, if the user’s level of spoken English is low enough. Being a parent has taught me how to simplify my language and make educated guesses about what the user is trying to say. If the user does not understand what you are saying in English, sometimes writing it down helps. Certainly, asking users to write down what they need is usually productive, as it avoids the pronunciation barrier. My French and German, even Italian, have come in handy many a time. If all else has failed, sign language has come to my rescue. I was gratified the other day when a Chinese student said to my wife about me (in Chinese), “No matter how broken my language, he can always understand me.” This is my goal.

The relative ignorance of foreign languages of the average native English speaker, particularly younger ones, poses constant reference questions.

Undergraduate:

“I just found this article in German. Can you please tell me where I can find the English translation?”

Note the expectation that there is bound to be a translation.

Graduate student:

“You know, if you wanted to make a lot of money, you could translate all the articles in German in the Music Library.”

Needless to say, I have not embarked on this project. Every other day someone asks me to translate little bits of German, which I am happy to do. At the same time, I try to encourage students to learn at least that language, and some actually do.

The language barrier is sometimes mine. I have an article in Hungarian or Serbian or Swedish and I need to know more of the meaning than I can discern from a dictionary. Or I am translating titles for a bibliography and I find a word that is not in my dictionary (e.g., *organici*, which turns out to be modern Italian for “ensembles”). Then I am grateful for working in an academic community with plenty of foreign teachers and students to whom I can turn for help.

Sometimes the user’s language barrier is bibliographic, underneath it betraying an unfamiliarity with the complex bibliographic universe of music. Hardly a day goes by without someone coming to the reference desk with a printout from the RILM Abstracts database and the perennial question, “How on earth do I find this item in our library?” The level of bibliographic knowledge can be minimal — users who have not yet learned that articles are found in magazines, let alone journals. Now I never assume any knowledge. The most common bibliographic confusion is: “How can an article be in a book?” I patiently explain about Festschriften, collections of essays, and conference reports. When users begin to get their hands on such books, it all becomes clear. Before that, I see much head-shaking. Another frequent

cause of trouble: complete works that are divided into series as well as volumes, not to mention parts or critical reports. Yet another cause, which causes much merriment among my colleagues in other disciplines, is music students' inability to conceive of call numbers that do not begin with M in the Library of Congress classification. A student thrusts a little piece of paper in my hand that reads GV1585 .C5. "What is this? It can't be a call number...."

Reference books have their own language barrier, usually created by abbreviations that are far from intuitive. A student shows me the pages of sources for the *Goldberg Variations* in the *Bach Werke-Verzeichnis*. She had two years of German in high school but here is all at sea. I show her that there is actually an English version of the preface that explains the abbreviations used: ① for autograph manuscript, ② for copyist's manuscript from the first half of the 18th century, ③ for copyist's manuscript from the second half of the 18th century, etc. Then I take the opportunity to talk to her about the importance of copyists' manuscripts from the circle of a composer. The same day, an English trumpet student shows me Richard Charteris's thematic catalog of the works of Giovanni Gabrieli, ruefully explaining that he went to the Royal Academy of Music and never had any academic training in music. Now he cannot make head nor tail of all the library sigla, references to RISM, and abbreviations for writings on the *Symphoniae sacrae*. The opportunities for one-on-one training in small increments are endless.

As my example of the freshman seeking a song from a musical showed, the final language you need to read at the reference desk is body language. Before users arrive at the desk, I have a fair sense of who they are and what kind of question they may have. Is the user a freshman or sophomore, an upper-classman; a graduate student, a staff member, a faculty member; a visiting scholar; a music-lover from the city; a parent looking for the Music Admissions Office; an instrumentalist or a singer (but see my example), a string player or a wind player; a first-time user of the Music Library (generally quite apparent), an experienced library user, or one of the many students who come to the Music Library to check their e-mail? You start with the obvious clues of age, grooming, clothing, and demeanor; instruments and composition portfolios; marks on the neck from violin or viola playing. Learning to "place" the user helps to make the reference interview more efficient.

E-mail

Although e-mail is a wonderful vehicle for correspondence, especially of the informal kind, it is difficult to handle for reference questions and makes it harder to develop a relationship with the user. In the first place, unsolicited questions like the following can appear on your screen:

An entire question from an anonymous user:

"Could you please send me information on Renaissance music?"

Or — fuller, but just as dismaying:

"Dear Sir. My name is ___ and I am looking for articles about music critics and the connection between music and political criticism. I would be happy if you can help me."

If you do embark on answering such a question, the dialogue can be as obtuse as the following:

An entire question:

“You have been recommended to help me locate a score written by Beethoven, his ‘9th Symphony’. Proper terms were never taught to me thirty five years ago yet I read and perform music on the 6th level.

I have been told by other musicians not to take proper lessons due to the possible hindrance of my personal presentation. Please recommend a book that could help me with identifying markings, etc. on classical music.

Thank you.”

My reply:

“You can buy a copy of a miniature score of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony from any good music store. If you are having trouble finding such a store, get in touch with

_____. There are many small dictionaries of music that would help you identify markings (if you mean tempo markings, etc.), for example, the *Norton/Grove Concise Encyclopedia of Music*. You should be able to buy this through any good book store.”

User’s entire response:

“Hearing the orchestral presentation of Beethoven’s 9th, I feel that this writing is not for Piano solo. May I please request your opinion on this.

Also, what do you mean by a miniature score – level or the full writing?

Thank you.”

Clearly, “the reference interview” can become protracted....

Anxious to Help

My reference interns take several weeks, even several months, before they feel comfortable being on the reference desk by themselves. In my present job, I started out answering “the most difficult” reference questions from a back room, long before I was scheduled on the reference desk, where previously only graduate students had been employed. The first time I sat at the desk myself, I felt more naked than in the high school showers. The main fear is that someone will ask you a question you will not be able to answer, and the “performance anxiety” can be as real as any stage fright.

On the other hand, some of the students we employ at the Music Library circulation desk do not seem to experience reference anxiety. When a user asks them a question, they eagerly answer it, whether they are familiar with the subject or not. It reminds me of what is reputed to have been the British Civil Service policy in India: a letter must be answered on the day it is received, no matter how inadequately. Here the principle employed is: a question must be answered immediately by the person to whom it was addressed, no matter how inadequately. I have dubbed this principle “enthusiastic ignorance” (or perhaps it should be, “ignorant enthusiasm”). The enthusiasm for answering the question outweighs any knowledge of the answer — so much so, that users are often persuaded they have received an adequate answer.

It takes experience, for reference staff at all levels, to realize that it is all right if we do not

know the answer to every question, especially at the time it is posed. The sky will not fall down and we will not be fired ... yet. Students learn to refer such questions to the reference desk (or, when there is no one at the reference desk, to their supervisor). Reference librarians learn to take a question away to work on, to persuade the user that the information requested simply does not exist in a convenient format (“Is there a list of all the opera performances there have ever been?”), or to refer questions on an unfamiliar subject to someone else who may know the answer. The knowledge that you can delay or refer a question, or say that it is unanswerable as posed, goes a long way to overcoming anxiety.

In presentations, I used to worry about whether the equipment would work correctly. But it has failed to work on a number of important occasions — for example, the last time I talked to the freshman theory class (one section with 150 students) — and I have managed to get through the session with some inventive talk. I have also survived several occasions in which the software for a database had been changed a day or two before my session, so what I saw on the screen was completely new to me and my class. I have just joked about constant change and tried to use the session as an opportunity to teach the principles of database searching rather than the specifics of any given database: “OK, let’s see whether they have keyword searching ... how they deal with truncation ... what kinds of subject terms they have ... etc.”

Users sometimes wonder about what it is like to sit at the reference desk.

Undergraduate:

“Don’t you get sick of people asking you questions all day long?”

If I did, I would find myself another job. Of course, some days, especially if you spend the whole day on a busy reference desk, you can get tired and tempted not to devote your full attention to a user. My assistants have tended to get a little upset if a series of students come and ask the same question over and over again on a particular day. Such repeated questions from a class are a sign for me to get in touch with the instructor and see whether we can address them better, especially by some group instruction from the teacher or myself.

Retired faculty member, approaching the reference desk conspiratorially:

“You know what the trouble with being a reference librarian is? You never get to have any fun.”

If I did not, I would find myself another job. I kid around with users, ask about their lives, discuss movies or concerts we have been to or what our kids have been doing. Instruction sessions are the same: I joke with the audience, finding ways to reduce our mutual anxiety and make the subject matter approachable and relevant. It is a higher level of entertainment and not at all escapist.

The Researching Music Reference Librarian

In a previous article, I mentioned my experience of dealing with an “opinionated reference librarian,” who did not merely “answer questions,” but imparted — sometimes strongly — his own opinion on a subject.¹ This attitude has its pros and cons. On the negative side, a strong

opinion can hinder users finding their way to their own opinion, or to potentially helpful sources that the librarian does not happen to like. On the positive side, subject knowledge and experience can be of great assistance to users. I am continually delighted by how many times users will ask me questions to which I already know the answers because of my research (on wind instruments and Baroque music). One recent example: A bassoonist wanted to find some late Baroque French music for bassoon and continuo. Subject headings do not, of course, identify music as Baroque or French, and he was unfamiliar with bassoon music bibliographies, so he had been unable to find what he wanted. I knew that there was no solo bassoon repertoire before Corrette and Dard in the mid-18th century, so I recommended looking at Marais' viola da gamba sonatas, which he discovered with enthusiasm.

This kind of performance can give you a reputation for erudition, which can even be an opening gambit for users.

Undergraduate:

“My friend tells me that you know everything about music.”

Me, teasing:

“That’s a good opening. Keep it up.”

On the whole, I think that such a reputation is useful in persuading people to come to the reference desk, although I imagine that it could also intimidate people who are embarrassed at their lack of knowledge of a particular subject. It can also intimidate you, the reference librarian, as now you may feel that you have to “know the answer.” I see this notion as a reminder to be humble, to take each question as it comes and do your best with it.

In any case, I enjoy using my research knowledge and experience and am always happy to pass it on to users. My research thus becomes another “reference source,” as I know things that cannot be found (or found easily) in any reference book or database about both the substance and procedures of research. This is one good reason for music librarians, and especially music reference librarians, to do research — a parallel with arguments for music teaching faculty to do research.

Researching has taught me to be skeptical about what I read. I constantly ask: What is the evidence for that statement? Is that the best answer we can find? I try to pass this attitude on, too, and not just in my bibliography class: “Well, this is what the book says, but I don’t believe it. Let’s check further.” The user and I go through several sources, with me commenting on the merits and demerits of each one, and eventually a different answer emerges, perhaps not so cut and dried, but more realistic.

Researching has also taught me a kind of serendipity for finding information. Long before I learned how to use databases and indexes, I could wander along library shelves and pull off just what I needed. (I was lucky to be in a library — not like ours — in which the books were rarely checked out.) Or else I was looking something up, say in a periodical, and a more interesting article was right next to it in that issue. Now I do the same thing with reference books. When reference books are in the wrong place, I can often find them anyway. To the surprise of users, I tend to open a reference book at the right page to answer their question. In

some sense, you “tune in” to the subject, and answers will come to you. Even in databases, this principle can apply. Often, after I have shown users how to do a search, they will look at me and ask, “How did you do that? I did the same thing and I didn’t get any result.” “Magic fingers,” I reply.

Compassion

Whether we are figuring out what users need, building relationships, teaching one-on-one, or using our research skills, music reference work is a wonderful training ground for compassion. When I wanted to talk about this subject to our music librarianship students last year, I serendipitously found the following quotation from His Holiness the Dalai Lama in a newsletter that had arrived in my mailbox:

“First, some people have the impression that compassion is pity. That is not right. With genuine compassion there is no feeling of looking down.

Second, compassion is sometimes considered to be a sense of caring towards a friend. Very often, I think, that is mixed with attachment and involved with mental projection — something made up by the mind. In any case, that kind of feeling of closeness is biased towards your friend, and when something goes slightly wrong with that friend, that feeling will immediately change. Today, that feeling of closeness. Tomorrow, maybe a feeling of hatred towards that same person.

Genuine compassion exists regardless of the other person’s attitude toward you — whether hostile, friendly, or indifferent. The main thing is that others are just like myself, wanting happiness and having the right to work out suffering. On that basis, a sense of concern, of caring, develops. That is compassion.”²

Compassion sets up a kind of field that spreads out, drawing users to us and us to them. It enables us to go way beyond answering reference questions, or merely experiencing “job satisfaction,” and feel the essential unity of humanity. If we stay open, we can learn to tune in to all our users, with attention, with patience, without judgement — regardless of who they are, what they need, and the level of our relationship with them. From this openness we all reap rewards, users and reference staff alike. It is compassion that turns this job, like any other, into a calling.

Users tend to forget what they have learned. So do we. They find it difficult to keep up with the information explosion and the technology boom. So do we. They have “blank” moments when they cannot see something obvious.

Older man on phone:

“I know that ‘Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge’ helps you memorize the lines on the treble clef. And I know that ‘F.A.C.E.’ helps you memorize the spaces on the treble clef. But what I want to know is: What does F.A.C.E. stand for?”

Another example:

Graduate student:

“Can you help me find an edition of Weber’s piano sonatas?”

Me, looking in the online catalog:

“Here’s an edition of all of them: *Sonaten für Klavier zu zwei Händen.*”

Student, disbelieving:

“But that means, ‘Sonatas ... for two hands....’”

Me:

“You have only two hands....”

Student:

Oh, right....

Are these users any different from the rest of us? They deserve our compassion. We deserve our own compassion.

I tell students on the last day of my bibliography classes that it is still all right for them to come and ask me reference questions. One wag shouts out: “What about ‘Where is the bathroom?’” That serves me right for making jokes about it being the most frequently asked question. But even with jokes, times change: the commonest question nowadays is “Where can I find a computer to do X.” The computer has supplanted calls of nature in importance.

Users stop by, or phone, or e-mail — even still write the occasional letter. All manner of users, from the shy high school violinist to the retired musicology professor who is researching away harder than ever in his late 80s. All manner of queries, from fundamental directional questions (“Where are the photocopiers?”) to advanced research questions (“How can I find out which symphonies by native composers were performed by Scandinavian orchestras over the last 150 years?”), with no easy transition from one to the other. Another user with a “stupid” question. Another user with two minutes to find a score before class. I keep on my toes. I treat each person with full attention. I stay in the moment. I practice compassion.

It’s a fine calling.

David Lasocki is head of reference services in the William and Gayle Cook Music Library, Indiana University. He is grateful to his reference colleagues — Emma Dederick-Colón, Donald Fader, and David Thurmaier — for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. David Lasocki, “Reference,” *Music Librarianship at the Turn of the Century*, *Notes* 56, no. 3 (March 2000): 605-10.

2. From a talk by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Indiana University, 26 July 1996. *Tibetan Cultural Center News*, Bloomington, Indiana, 3, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 2 (English improved). His ideas have since been considerably expanded in His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, *The Art of Happiness: A Handbook for Living* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).