

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM) Digital Center Team. RISM Online

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Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM) Digital Center Team.

RISM Online.

Bern: RISM Digital Center, 2021. Accessed 26 July 2023.

rism.online.

Many scholars of early modern music will likely already be quite familiar with the Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (rism.info), a non-profit organization that has been documenting and indexing musical manuscripts, printed music, treatises, libretti, and more since 1952. As of July 2023, the RISM database references and describes over 1.4 million sources, the majority of which are manuscripts of Western notated music, primarily but not exclusively from the period between 1600 and 1850.

The public was given online access to RISM's data in 2010 with the release of the RISM Catalog (opac.rism.info), which quickly became a highly valued tool for music researchers, librarians, educators, performers, and others wishing to discover musical sources and learn where they can be accessed. The subject of the present review, however, is RISM Online, a newer resource launched in 2021 that builds upon the services offered by the RISM Catalog and is both free and openly accessible. RISM Online enhances the sophistication and ease of queries that can be made of the RISM data, and it facilitates access to materials that are themselves digitally available online.

From my particular perspective, one of the nicest aspects of RISM Online is that it permits searches for sources based not only on metadata but also on musical content, at least to a certain extent. Many of the RISM source records include symbolically encoded musical incipits, which is to say the sequences of notes comprising the beginnings of pieces or major sections. RISM Online often encodes incipits as MEI (music-encoding.org) data, which, in addition to letting them to be searched using musical queries, allows them to be rendered graphically in RISM Online using musical notation or downloaded directly as MEI files. As seen in Figure 1, RISM Online includes a graphical keyboard interface that can be used to specify incipit queries, or queries can be entered directly as Plaine and Easie Code (iaml.info/plaine-easie-code) text. These queries can be performed such that only exact pitch matches are returned, or more permissive searches can be carried out where chromatic interval or pitch contour matches are sufficient. Text incipits for vocal music are also, or alternatively, often available and searchable as well.

Incipits

Clef: G-2 (treble clef)
Time signature: None
Key signature: None

Number of results: 2,354,857

Plaine and Easie Input: Queries must be longer than three notes

Query mode: Intervals

Keyword query: Words anywhere

ADDITIONAL FILTERS

Clef, key signature, time signature

Clef Show all 27 values

☐ G-2	1,011,132	☐ C-4	80,971	☐ G+2	12,324	☐ g-2	6,861
☐ C-1	510,551	☐ C-3	57,229	☐ G-1	10,348	☐ C+4	6,439
☐ F-4	199,744	☐ C+1	23,294	☐ C+3	7,433	☐ F+4	5,374

Key signature Show all 58 values

☐ n	897,836	☐ xF	249,716	☐ xFCG	118,022	☐ bBEADG	8,124
☐ bB	340,369	☐ bBE	218,926	☐ bBEAD	38,743	☐ xFCGDA	3,447
☐ xFC	256,175	☐ bBEA	175,359	☐ xFCGD	38,135	☐ bBEADGC	2,719

Time signature Show all 157 values

☐ c	760,890	☐ 2/4	252,836	☐ 4/4	50,503	☐ 12/8	15,205
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Fig. 1. RISM Online's incipit search interface, allowing queries by musical content to be combined with metadata searches.

Searches can also be carried out based on clef, key signature, or time signature. Of course, these kinds of content-based queries will only return records for which the queried information is available, which is only the case for a fraction of all the sources indexed by RISM, so one cannot assume that search results will be comprehensive. But, given that there is a not insubstantial range of pieces that do include musical incipits in the RISM database, these types of queries are nonetheless invaluable, especially when working to identify

unattributed music, for example, or when trying to discover how certain pieces may have been influenced by others.

Putting all of this aside for the moment, however, the simplest way for most users to begin a search of sources will be to enter text in the “words anywhere” search box. An example of this approach is shown in Figures 2 and 3. Structured metadata filters can be applied from the beginning, if desired, and searches can also be further refined as they progress using faceted navigation. There is a good range of metadata fields to choose from when refining searches for sources, including source type (e.g., manuscript or print), content type (e.g., notated music or libretto), composer/author, other related person, “subject heading” (e.g., genre), language of text, publication dates, “format/extent” (e.g., number of parts), holding institution, and more.

The screenshot displays the RISM Online search results interface. The top navigation bar shows the search type as 'Sources (25)', with filters for 'People (1)' and 'Incipits (9)'. The results are sorted by 'Most relevant' and show 40 rows per page. The search results list includes several entries, each with a title, source information, and a 'Has incipit' status. The right sidebar contains faceted navigation options for 'Source contents', 'Subject headings', 'Language of text', 'Publication details', and 'Holding institutions'. The 'Source contents' section includes a 'Scoring summary' and a 'Subject headings' table. The 'Publication details' section includes a 'Dates' table and a 'Format, extent' table. The 'Holding institutions' section includes a 'Sigla' table.

Subject headings			
☐ Arias (voc.)	8	☐ Cantatas	5
☐ Madrigals	5	☐ Sacred songs	2
☐ Canzoni (voc.)	2		2

Language of text	
☐ Italian	18
☐ Latin	1

Publication details			
Dates			
*	TO	*	
Format, extent			
☐ 1 score	8	☐ score: p.142-153	1
☐ score	3	☐ score: p.10-14	1
☐ 1 parts	2	☐ score: p.1-3	1
☐ score; parts(s)	1	☐ score: f.19v-21r	1
☐ score: f. 62-68v	1	☐ score: 92 p.	1
☐ score: 4p.	1	☐ score: 41 f.	1

Fig. 2. The results of an RISM Online free text search of sources using the unstructured text query “Barbara Strozzi.”

The screenshot displays the RISM Online interface. At the top, it shows search results for 'Sources (25)', 'People (1)', and 'Incipits (9)'. The main list on the left contains several records, with the fourth record highlighted in blue: 'Non s'è più fede-A minor (Arrangement); Manuscript copy; MagS 8.08; D-B Mus.ms. 22285' by Strozzi, Barbara (1619-1677). The right panel provides a detailed 'Record preview' for this specific record. It includes a 'Full Record' link, a collection note, and a 'Title and content description' section with fields for Composer/Author, Source type, Content type, Key or mode, Standardized title, Title on source, Scoring summary, Total scoring, Language of text, RISM ID number, and Subject headings. Below this is the 'Incipits' section, showing the first movement 'Moderato' with its title, text incipit, key, clef, time signature, and voice/instrument. A musical notation snippet is provided. The 'Material description' section at the bottom indicates the group and source type.

Fig. 3. An example of an RISM Online record preview, in this case accessed by selecting the fourth record returned by the search shown in Figure 2. Notably, this particular record includes a musical incipit.

Searches can alternatively focus on people or on institutions, each of which also have their own records in the RISM database. For example, Figure 4 shows the record for Barbara Strozzi. RISM Online allows filtering of people based on attributes such as dates, places associated with individuals, gender, and roles or professions (e.g., composer/author, copyist, or dedicatee). Additionally, authority files are used to recognize the correspondence between different ways of writing the name of or referring to a person. In the case of institution-focused searches, filters such as city and source relationship (e.g., printer or owner) can be applied. There is also rich information on relationships between people and between institutions.

Speaking generally, a particularly nice thing about RISM Online is that it simply, clearly, and prominently allows AND or OR Boolean operators to be applied to queries involving a broad variety of fields. Additionally, searches can be limited to collections in specific countries, and RISM Online itself has an interface that can be operated in any of seven languages. It is also notable

that, in addition to being entirely free to use, information accessed via RISM Online is all open data released under a Creative Commons CC-BY 3.0 license. Additionally, the information is structured as linked open data, with each resource assigned a unique, permanent Uniform Resource Identifier (URI). Stable URLs are also generated for each query, such that they can be easily bookmarked and returned to and further refined later. These aspects are helpful in referencing, building upon, and collaborating with information accessed via RISM Online.

RISM **Strozzi, Barbara (1619-1677)**
 Description Sources (25)

Years of birth and death 1619-1677
 Other life dates 06.08.1619-11.11.1677
 Gender Female
 Profession or function Composer
 Singer

Name variants
 Uncategorized Barbara di Santa Sofia
 Valle, Barbara

Relations
 Place of birth Venezia
 Place of death Padova
 Place active Venezia

References and notes
 General note Adoptivtochter von Giulio Strozzi

Related resources
 Barbara Strozzi, composer
<http://barbarastrozzi.com/>
 Other standard identifier Virtual Internet Authority File (VIAF): 90679853
 Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico: SBLV269103
 Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND): 119181045
 Wikidata: Q232235

Record URI (Permalink): <https://rism.online/people/30009879>
[Report an issue](#) Created on: November 9th, 2016
 Last modification: June 9th, 2022

Fig. 4. The person record for Barbara Strozzi in RISM Online.

There is another aspect of RISM Online that I personally find especially useful: many of the sources indexed by RISM are made available online as digital images by their host organizations, and RISM Online links to these. Of particular utility, that subset of sources for which an IIIF manifest is available can be viewed directly in the RISM Online framework (see Fig. 5). Helpfully, searches can be constrained to only return results for which digital images and potentially IIIF manifests are available. Similarly, searches of sources can be constrained to only return items for which incipits are encoded in the RISM data, although it is unfortunately not possible to limit results only to cases where MEI musical content is available for incipits or, alternatively, cases where incipits consist only of text. Also, even in cases where MEI-encoded musical incipits are available, some are more minimalist than others in what they specify.

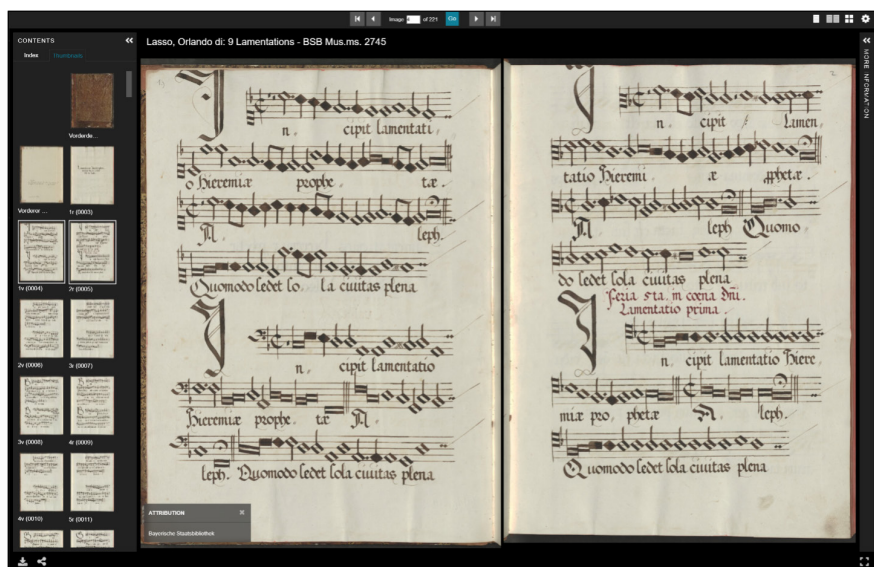


Fig. 5. Images of the 9 *Lamentations* manuscript containing music by Orlando di Lasso, held by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich, as viewed directly in RISM Online using the source's IIIF manifest.

Overall, RISM Online is undoubtedly an immensely valuable framework, but there are a few issues that could be improved upon as the resource evolves.

To begin with, it could be made easier to meaningfully combine the different search modes (by incipit, source, person, or institution). For example, if the user begins searching by source, they cannot through the web interface add search constraints associated with musical incipit content as they refine their search. Things are a little better if one begins with an incipit search, as the user can then add a “words anywhere” string to the query, but composer/author is the only structured field presented that is not associated directly with the incipit’s musical content in this mode of use.

Also, there is no structured way to search sources based on instrument or voice. Although some records do have associated annotations present in various fields using varying notations, and such sources can be retrieved using a free text “words anywhere” search, there are no fields associated specifically with instrument or voice, and there is no controlled vocabulary in use for them. This can be particularly problematic since indications for the same instrument or voice can be specified in different languages, or using a range of different types of abbreviations, with no formal linking of associated terms. Of course, all of this is an issue with the RISM data more generally, not RISM Online specifically, but it can become a noticeable limitation when using the tool.

Finally, certain small improvements could be made to the RISM Online interface and its documentation to improve usability. For example, when one starts a new query, previous search constraints are usually removed, as one would expect; however, the sole exception to this is filtering based on country, which carries on to new searches unless manually removed. This inconsistency can be easy to overlook and can cause confusion. Also, although the interface itself has a number of helpful tooltips, many of them seem to contain documentation only in English, and even in English a number of them only provide unhelpful “No language value found” messages. One also encounters error messages from time to time when following certain links to source images on RISM Online, but this is ultimately understandable considering the reliance on external repositories to hold the actual content that is intrinsic to RISM’s mission. Additionally, detailed manuals and tutorials would be helpful contributions in improving accessibility for new users, although happily the interface is largely intuitive. Finally, RISM Online requires a fair bit of screen real estate, which makes it difficult to use on a phone or small tablet, but one might argue that such devices are perhaps not the best way to approach rich resources like this in any case.

Ultimately, these are all just small gripes in the larger context of the impressive amount of information about musical sources that RISM Online makes available to users and the ease with which users can search the database in sophisticated ways, both deep and flexible. The system benefits from the enormous amount of sources indexed by RISM, and from RISM's long history of learning how to effectively structure metadata about them. As a whole, the interface is easy to use, and searches are impressively snappy given the amount of data involved. The facility with which the musical content of incipits can be searched is a particularly valuable contribution, and the ability to immediately access images of many of the sources is very welcome.

It is also very encouraging to see that very active efforts are underway at the RISM Digital Center to continue substantially improving what is already an excellent tool. For example, at the time of this writing, a new demo version of RISM Online was being presented at the International Medieval and Renaissance Music Conference in Munich that aligned the contents of RISM Online with the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music (diamm.ac.uk), another invaluable digital resource for medieval and Renaissance music scholars, such that both indexes could be searched by RISM Online in a unified way. It is exciting to see connections being made between essential resources such as these, and I look forward to using RISM Online more in the future, both as it is and as it grows.

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