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Naxos Music Library Mobile Application [Review]

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DIGITAL MEDIA REVIEWS

EDITED BY ANNE SHELLEY

For information regarding the scope of this column, consult the headnote in the September 2012 issue. The dates of access for each review of an online source indicate the dates during which the reviewer was evaluating the resource. All Web sites were last accessed to verify availability on 1 February 2013.

Naxos Music Library Mobile Application. Naxos Digital Services, 2009–.

<http://naxosmusiclibrary.com/> (Accessed October–December 2012). [Requires a subscription to Naxos Music Library, a mobile device running Google Android (2.1 or later) or Apple iOS (3.2.2 or later), and a data plan. Pricing: free with Naxos Music Library subscription.]

Since late 2009, Naxos has offered a mobile application, or “app,” for the iPhone that allows users to access content in Naxos Music Library (hereafter referred to NML).¹ Beginning one year later, the app has also been available for Android devices. The NML app allows users to stream the entire NML catalog to their mobile devices, as well as access custom and institutional playlists. Users must have a personal subscription to NML, or have access to an institutional subscription, in order to use the app. Users access the app through NML’s playlist function.

¹ Reviews of Naxos Music Library were published in this column in 2004 and 2005. See Ned Quist, Darwin F. Scott, and Alec McLane, “Digital Media Reviews: Naxos Music Library,” *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 61, no. 2 (2004): 512–16; and Darwin F. Scott, “Digital Media Reviews: Naxos Music Library,” *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 62, no. 1 (2005): 192–8.

To use the app, users must go to NML and create or log in to their existing “student playlist” account, which requires a user to enter his/her name, e-mail address, and to create a password. The app gives users access to both personal and institutional playlists, which means students who attend a university that subscribes to NML may use the app to listen to any personal playlists they may have created, in addition to any course- or topic-specific playlist created by professors or account administrators at the institution. Users can create an unlimited number of playlists, but each playlist is limited to sixty tracks or four hours—whichever comes first—to optimize streaming. The login that the user created for the playlists is the same login he or she will use to log in to the app. Through the app, users may browse, search for, and listen to tracks much as they can through a browser, but building and editing playlists can only be done through the browser version of NML. Because users authenticate to the app through Naxos playlists and not via IP address or an institution’s proxy server, there is theoretically little responsibility for account administrators to have to troubleshoot questions about the app. It is safe to assume, however, that a user having difficulties with the app is more likely to approach his or her music librarian than Naxos technical support. Fortunately, Naxos has created both text-based² and video³ tutorials to help users (and librarians) become better acquainted with the app and its features.

Users who are logged in to the NML app count toward an institution’s allocation for simultaneous users. The fact that a user must log out of the browser version of NML to release his or her spot has long been an inconvenience to institutions. Thankfully, this is not the case with the NML app, as quitting the app logs the user out automatically. In

² <http://naxosmusiclibrary.blogspot.com/2010/12/nml-app-for-android-is-live.html>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vefzi2lC2yQ>

addition, ten minutes of inactivity causes the app to log out.

Both versions of the app were tested for this review. The Android app was installed on a HTC Droid Eris running version 2.1 with a data plan through Verizon Wireless. The iOS version was installed on an iPad2 running iOS 6.2.1. I was not allowed to be logged in to both the iOS app and the Android app simultaneously; one of the apps would quit when the other app opened. There are a handful of differences between the Android app and the iOS app. One difference is the ability to view the app in landscape view—this is possible on the Android app, but not on the iOS app. The difference in file size between the two platforms is notable: the iOS app is 2.3 MB, while the Android app is only 359 KB. The iOS app may be installed on the iPhone, iPod Touch, and the iPad. If installed on the iPad, the app will initially appear sized for the iPhone or iPod Touch (1x), but may be resized to fit the screen of the iPad (2x) with enough loss of resolution to be noticeable—the text is pixelated but legible and the album art is grainy—but not enough quality loss to keep me from using the larger view.

Just a simple search box is provided for the full NML catalog. It does not appear to accept certain common limiters, such as quotation marks. The same search performed in both the NML app and through a desktop browser yielded a different number of results. Search results on the app include all the same results as what is displayed through the browser, but the app results list includes additional albums from labels like Naxos Historical and Naxos Classical Archives, which cannot be streamed in the United States.⁴ Clicking on one of these albums brings up the cover art, label name, and catalog number, along with a bold, large-font note: “Due to copyright law, this album is not available in

⁴ Scott, 196.

your country.” On the Android app, loading just about any list that requires either a canned search (new releases, recent albums, playlists, etc.) or a custom search performed by the user took about eight seconds on average. Retrieving search results on the iOS app took about half as much time, most likely because my iPad is connected to a wireless network and my phone is relying on a slower 3G network connection.

In searching the catalog for a misspelled word (Iulu—a silly combination of “*Iolanta*” and “*Lulu*,” but one that is difficult to detect in error on a tiny screen) in the Android app, I was only presented with a blank screen. Because there is no text on the screen informing me of my spelling error (the NML website offers a “Did You Mean...” prompt) or letting me know that no results were found, I might assume that NML does not, in fact, contain any recordings of *Lulu*. Thankfully, the iOS app does display a message of “No results found” in this situation.

The audio player is simple, with a play/pause button and buttons to advance to the next track in the playlist or go back to the previous track. Unfortunately, scrubbing—moving the cursor to certain points on the track timeline—within a track is not allowed in the app, though it is in the browser version of NML. On the Android app, there are additional buttons for looping a track that is currently playing, or advancing automatically to the next track. Like many other apps that play audio, the NML app conveniently allows the user to multitask, or listen to tracks from NML while simultaneously using another app.

There is very little “added value” content accessible through the app—liner notes, composer biographies, the Naxos Online Library Curriculum Project (K-12), glossary, pronunciation guide, opera synopses, and more tools that are part of the NML website are

noticeably absent from the app. In addition, the app does not include many browsing lists that are available on the NML website, including Composers, Artists, Genres, and Labels. The only element from the “Resources” tab that is present on the app is the Graded Music Exam Playlists. The practice of not including all full-site features in a corresponding mobile app is typical, as the greater the number and quality of files (audio, video, graphics, and text) are included in an app, the larger the app becomes and the more bandwidth it requires to run, increasing the chance and frequency of crashing or lengthening load times. While it is possible to call up and play a track using the NML app and simultaneously look up a synopsis or pronunciation on the NML website using the mobile device’s browser, such a process is convoluted and asks a lot of the user.

User reviews in the App Store and on Google Play report tracks skipping and the app “crashing,” or quitting unexpectedly, but with the paucity of details (for instance, the type or number of apps that were running simultaneously when the NML app crashed) typically included in these reviews, it is hard to know whether the failure is user-driven or the app truly has a chronic problem. Naxos appears to have responded to suggestions for improvement from its users in some ways, but not others. While the ability to multitask was added about a year after launch, scrubbing is still not possible. Since students often need to replay certain sections of pieces for listening and analysis assignments, scrubbing seems like it would be an improvement to prioritize. Like most applications that survive the 3-year mark in Google Play and the App Store, the NML app has received several feature enhancements as well as bug fixes since its release. Some of the major enhancements were the ability to search and stream the entire NML catalog, the ability to contact Naxos support from within the app, and multitasking. The latest update (March

2012) for both versions fixed an authentication issue in which log outs were not correctly reported the NML website; the issue prevented other users from logging in because the system had reached a point of too many simultaneous users.

As the lives of library users become increasingly mobile, so do their expectations for library services to accommodate their needs regardless of time or place. Like many other streaming services, NML's audio tracks are delivered through Flash and therefore cannot be accessed through browsers on iOS devices, so developing an app for this database was a critical step on the part of Naxos Digital Services. The NML app serves as a mobile gateway to a frequently-used resource and, while I and other users look forward to future improvements, overall the app has been a welcome feature of Naxos Music Library.

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