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Music copyright after collectivisation

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Abstract

More than two decades ago, Helen Wallace highlighted the differences between book and music publishing. 'Unlike book publishing', she said, 'the physical sale of the music itself is not the core business; the central asset is the copyright which, again unlike book publishing, rests with the publisher'. Such a commercially significant difference left distinctive marks in music copyright throughout the twentieth century, and was

particularly evident in the constitution of the Performing Right Society (PRS). As is well-documented in standard histories of copyright, the music publisher William Boosey (1864-1933) from Chappell & Co. was behind the move that established the collecting society. Although the history of the Society is often told as a success story, the first decades of the Society were highly controversial, full of conflicts and hesitations over its methods of operation and constitution. Even for closely-related music publishers, the Society was not the only (or the best) way to conduct business. For instance, his cousin's company, Boosey & Co., was initially reluctant to participate in the new society. Likewise, Novello & Co. did not join until 1936, two decades after its birth. This essay traces the initial struggles of the collective to explore how music copyright was constituted in the twentieth century and how it handled the transition from recognition to distribution, from rights to royalties in a context of rapidly changing technologies. In so doing, it follows initial controversies around the ways in which specific tariffs affected musical labour to argue that copyright and collective management were constitutive of distinctive business activities that triggered what came to be defined as the 'music industry'. More specifically, our suggestion is that music copyright in Britain was anchored in practices and strategies developed by this emerging collective subject built around copyright that, in turn, shaped the ways in which the industry imagined itself.

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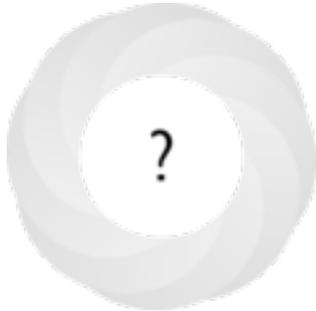
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