How to Publish Folk Songs on the Internet as High Quality Sheet Music

By Lewis Jones

Introduction.

The Internet offers exciting opportunities for the promotion and dissemination of folk music. The development of the 'abc' musical notation system by Chris Walshaw and others has been followed by the publication of thousands of tunes in abc format on the world wide web. However, abc at its present stage of development has its limitations. Converting tunes to abc format with any accuracy requires quite a bit of expertise. The abc notation system is also probably more suitable for dance music than for folk songs since it is difficult to add lyrics, headings, etc,. so that they print off in the way you want them to. As for the various types of graphics files such as .gif, jpeg, etc., the sheet music which they produce can be inconvenient to display, read and print off.

My own view is that the best and most convenient way to publish folk songs on the Internet is in the form of PDF (portable document format) files. These can then be opened, read, and printed off with a freely downloadable PDF reader from Adobe or (my preferred option) Nuance to produce high quality sheet music. For a sample of the output go to the Mutopia Project at http://www.mutopiaproject.org/ and open some of the PDF files that are posted there.

So how do you create .pdf files, and how do you post them on the Internet?

Stage 1: Get yourself some music processing software, learn how to use it, and create computer files of folksongs.

There are many music processing packages to choose from and there is plenty of information about them posted onto the Internet. When choosing your software find out what kinds of files it can import and export. For example, your package can probably import and export MIDI files, but can it do the same with Music XML, abc and Lilypond files?

Some of the commercial software programmes are expensive so you may prefer to opt for freeware. The Mutopia Project (probably the most important place on the web for newly set music as opposed to scanned images of printed scores) uses the Lilypond format. This produces beautiful sheet music but it lacks a graphical user interface (GUI). You thus cannot see the music you have created unless you open the PDF output file. However, the GUI Programmes MuseScore, Rosegarden, NoteEdit, Denemo, TuxGuitar and Frescobaldi can export files directly to LilyPond. These all run on Linux, and MuseScore and Denemo also run on Windows. These free programmes are excellent and they are driving medium priced commercial packages out of the market place. They all have powerful features including, in some cases, the ability to import and/or export industry standard Music XML files, MIDI files, abc files and, as already explained, Lilypond files. Wikipedia is a good place to start if you want more information on music setting software, both the free programmes and the premium priced industry standard packages such as Finale and Sibelius.

When you have acquired your software you will need to spend some time studying the documentation, help files, etc., and learning how to use it. Then you can start to create files of folk songs, and/or of any other music that takes your fancy.

Stage 2. Convert your folk song files to .ps (postscript) format.

Install a dumb printer that uses the postscript language, such as an Apple Laserwriter. Then print your folk songs to file. The files thus created will be postscript files.

Stage 3. Convert your postscript files to portable document files.

Download and install the latest version of Ghostscript and, if you are running a PC with Windows, the friendly GUI (graphical user interface) Ghostview. For Ghostscript go to ftp://ftp.cs.wisc.edu/ghost/ or one of its mirror sites. Note that, although Ghostscript can be freely downloaded, there are certain restrictions on its free commercial use.

For Ghostview, visit http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~ghost/gsview/

When you have installed Ghostscript and Ghostview load your postscript files into Ghostview and convert them to PDF files by invoking "Print", then "Print to File" in the File Menu. The option you need is "pdfwrite." There are three different resolutions to choose from. I use 300 dpi (dots per inch).

Ghostscript and (if you have a PC with Windows) Ghostview have a wide number of uses and are well worth installing. They will convert .ps files not only to PDF but also to GIF, TIFF, bitmap and many other formats.

Stage 4: Upload your PDF files to your web site or wherever and publish them.

As an aid to musical sight-reading I like to publish my PDF files of folk songs side by side with MIDI files. A Windows or other suitable media player can then be used to open the MIDI files and play audio tracks of the melody lines. In future I may also post Lilypond and abc files of the melody lines since, unlike PDF files, these can be edited. In addition, Lilypond is readily convertible to PDF, and tunes in abc format can be viewed and printed off with ABC Explorer, ABC Navigator and other abc software.

Alternative Solutions.

Here are a few more ideas on how to create PDF files of sheet music.

Some programmes, such as Lilypond and MuseScore, can export direct to PDF.

Alternatively, Go to http://www.cutepdf. com/Products/CutePDF/writer.asp and install the CutePDF Writer and its supporting GhostScript software onto your computer. CutePDF is a driver for a dumb or virtual printer that prints directly to PDF files. You can purchase a professional version but the basic package is free.

But note that the CutePDF Writer only creates files in PDF format whereas GhostView, the friendly Windows GUI (graphical user interface) for GhostScript, can create JPEG, GIF, TIFF and numerous other file types.

There are in addition, for those who are prepared to pay, some excellent commercial software packages. I use the comparatively modestly priced OmniPage Pro but there is also the more expensive industry standard stuff from Adobe.

(*Updated June 2010*)