

The real cost of acquiring pictures for the Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music (DIAMM)

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DIAMM is the only musicology project that travels around the worlds' archives with very high-quality digital camera equipment taking digital images of the sort of quality that you would usually only obtain from a fixed imaging installation. DIAMM photographers have gone through hell and high water to obtain some of the images that sit placidly on our website. The sensitivity of the equipment and the use of long exposures means that sometimes we have to set up again and again to find a site that does not vibrate with passing foot or mechanical traffic. I set up six times in Lambeth palace before we found somewhere that did not wreck the image every time a bus passed by, and the town council in Mechelen was on the brink of closing the centre of the town to traffic when we finally found a room in the town hall that was stable enough for us to work.

Traffic is not the only hazard: for some time most of our location photography has been undertaken by Lynda Sayce, who go to extraordinary trouble to get our images. Recently she set up to do a long shoot at Peterhouse, Cambridge, only to find that the room she had been allocated was adjacent to the college kitchens. At 7am they started up their industrial air-conditioning, and the vibration meant that imaging was impossible. Unable to find another room, the only answer was for her to sleep during the day and shoot images all night.

Regardless of the difficulty of working in sometimes odd places (one library could only find us working space in a rather rank-smelling basement toilet, see Figure 1) the simple traveling and mobile set up can present unique problems. I was woken one morning by a phone call from Lynda, speaking from Italy. "I've had a bit of an accident" was her opener. It seemed that during the calibration part of the setup process, the heavy and extremely expensive PhaseOne FX scanning back, mounted on a medium-format Fuji camera (total cost around £36,000) had sheered off its mounting block and smashed to the marble floor, cutting a neat round hole through the double layer of felt

that had been laid out ready to receive the MS that Lynda was about to photograph. The camera body was bent out of shape, the lens though not smashed was unusable, and the scanning back had been ripped from the welded adapter mounting it to the camera body and was “dead” (a technical term).

This was obviously something of a problem, since Lynda was in the middle of a trip around Europe that had been months (and in some cases years) in the planning. We couldn’t really afford for her just to turn around and come home, so I got on the phone to ICAM, our equipment supplier, who suggested that Lynda try the scanning back again, but with something covering the scanning aperture, as sometimes these sensitive scanners wouldn’t function if they were getting too much light. This seemed to do the trick, and we established that this precision piece of equipment was still working, despite having been slammed into a marble floor from a height of about 1.5 meters.

ICAM however could not provide me with a replacement for the camera body. I did a hurried internet search and found professional camera-hire place in London who said they had a camera that would fit the FX. I got onto the first train and picked up an old-fashioned large-format camera that looked as if it came out of a Victorian melodrama and weighed far more than I wanted to think about. By an extraordinary stroke of luck British Airways was running a promotion on Paddington Station, so while I awaited a train back to Oxford they booked me a return flight to Pisa and checked me in. By now time was getting a bit tight: I tore back home, ran into the house, grabbed my passport, and ran straight out. Locals will know that it takes a good two hours to drive from Oxford to Gatwick. I made it in 1 hour, 15 minutes. Naturally I parked at the wrong terminal and had to run lugging the monstrous camera across the airport to the transit, convinced I would miss the flight. I got there just in time for boarding—or would have done: the plane was delayed for two hours. I finally met Lynda at Pisa at 11pm, and she was still shaking, partly from the shock of the accident and partly from the thought of what would have happened if the manuscript had been under the camera when the mounting gave way.

We drove for hours through the night to Siena, Lynda’s next scheduled venue, arriving at 1 am. Thank goodness the hotelier was able to give us a second room, and was prepared to stay up late enough to let us in when we

got there. However we couldn't sleep yet: we set the camera up and tested it to make sure we could take pictures the next day and that the FX was actually working. Everything seemed to be okay, though the camera body kept jamming since it was designed to be used horizontally, and we were using it vertically. The jamming made focusing very difficult but we reckoned we could work with it. We got some good pictures the next day, and packed up shortly after 1 pm. Lynda drove me back to Pisa, dropped me off, and headed off for her next library: Geneva.

I had an uneventful late flight home, but discovered belatedly that I had left my key ring in Italy. I had to get a bus home and return the next day to collect the car with my spare keys which I had picked up from irritated neighbours at around 2am that morning.

However, compared to Lynda's, my time was uneventful. She had set off to drive from Pisa to Switzerland and had climbed the lengthy route up from Turin to the Mont Blanc pass over the Alps, only to find it closed by snow. She had to drive all the way back down to the valley and up another route before she could finally cross over, a round trip of about six hours. By 7am she was in Switzerland, but too exhausted to continue and had to pull over to rest, still several hours short of Geneva. She got to Geneva that afternoon, but her first attempt to focus the camera left it jammed solid, and in desperation she phoned me again. We decided to abandon the shooting in that library, and Lynda set out around the city with the recalcitrant hire camera to try and find someone to fix it. She succeeded eventually by finding her way into a rare instrument museum, where a curator had the right tools to fix the fiddly mechanism. However we had lost a day, and had to cancel a day's work in Brussels to catch up. If you think that was the end of it, well...yes, Lynda had car trouble on her way home and missed the ferry, but she did get back eventually and we have the images to prove it.

We occasionally train new photographers and assistants to work on imaging, and apart from teaching them about the software, the hardware, how to take a "perfect" digital image, how to deal with disasters and how to handle manuscripts the right way, we also have to give them a list of words or remarks that they should **never** say in front of a librarian. These might apply to anyone handling rare books, and I share it here.

Glossary of terms that must not be used in front of a librarian while handling manuscripts for photography:

Burn	Oops
Cut	Rip
Damp	Scissors
Drop	Sellotape
Glue	Sticky
Hot (in relation to lights)	Tear
Hot spot (in relation to lighting pool)	Warm up (in relation to lights)
I didn't like the sound of that	Was that bit loose before?
It's okay, it's only chocolate	Was this bit important?
Knife	Wet
Oh dear	What's this bit lying over here?



Figure 1. The type of beautiful, romantic European library setting where DIAMM's photography is likely to take place.