

Experiencing the MLA Conference Dallas, 2012

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Abstract:

If I had to describe my first MLA conference in one word, I would call it “diverse.” I was struck by the sheer variety of topics presented, from fair use to musical theater to RDA. I also enjoyed meeting a diverse group of people brought together by a common interest in music librarianship, and I was especially pleased by the numerous opportunities for social interaction among librarians at the conference.

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Article:

If I had to describe my first MLA conference in one word, I would call it “diverse.” I was struck by the sheer variety of topics presented, from fair use to musical theater to RDA. I also enjoyed meeting a diverse group of people brought together by a common interest in music librarianship, and I was especially pleased by the numerous opportunities for social interaction among librarians at the conference.

I began the week at the MOUG (Music OCLC Users’ Group) conference, which preceded MLA. MOUG was a good warm-up for MLA — it was a smaller conference, which gave me a chance to meet a few people before MLA began and to enjoy sessions specific to my interest in cataloging. The first day of MOUG (Tuesday), I attended a session on OCLC and non-MARC metadata and a group discussion on FRBR and FRAD, led by Jenn Riley of UNC Chapel Hill. Wednesday morning was something of a whirlwind, opening with a hot topics discussion with OCLC representatives, followed by a lightning talk session. I especially enjoyed the lightning session, which touched briefly on a number of cataloging specific problems and solutions.

As a new librarian, I found it incredibly helpful to hear more about music-specific library topics that are not often discussed at my work. At the same time, I experienced my first moments of being completely overwhelmed by what I do not know, as I listened to experienced catalogers

talk about RDA and a host of other acronyms with ease, while I struggled to keep up. That was actually part of the beauty of the conference for me, though. I knew that I had not learned everything I need to know in my library and music studies, but I had little idea of where the gaps in my knowledge are. After MOUG and MLA, I have a better idea of where my independent study needs to focus now. Plus, the people I met at MOUG were kind and helpful. I instantly felt accepted into the group, and I know that I can ask any of my colleagues questions at any time.

Since I was a first time attendee of the MLA conference, I was invited to a first time attendee buffet before the opening reception (Wednesday evening). The idea of getting first time attendees together in a relaxed setting before the conference officially begins is an excellent one! I enjoyed reconnecting with people I had already met and meeting others for the first time in a more intimate environment than the later reception would offer. The buffet was also a chance for us to meet officers from MLA and our conference mentors. If you have never heard of the mentor program at MLA, it is a chance for “experienced” members to mentor first time attendees for the duration of the conference. I found having a mentor (Amanda Maple of Penn State) to be an invaluable part of my conference experience. Amanda put me at ease at the crowded opening reception and introduced me to people I would not otherwise have met. Throughout the conference, she checked in on me, sitting with me at sessions, meeting for meals, and introducing me to still more people. If you have not attended MLA yet, I highly recommend taking part in the mentor program when you do. If you have attended MLA, I suggest becoming a mentor at some point, as I hope I will in the future.

MLA began in earnest on Thursday morning with a plenary session focused on the jazz collections at the University of North Texas (UNT). The session combined work by librarians, professors, and student researchers with performances by students in the UNT jazz studies program. I especially enjoyed the use of live performers, which vividly illustrated the impact that the materials held by special collections can have on performance style.

The session that I still hear people raving about (myself included) more than a month after MLA is “Demystifying Fair Use.” Copyright and fair use are confusing, and they hold special interest for music librarians, who must deal with printed and recorded media and live performances. The session was standing room-only and could have easily run for twice its one and a half hour time allotment. The session made the topic of fair use a bit more accessible and emphasized that we, as librarians and scholars, have more freedom when it comes to using copyrighted materials than we might think. Fortunately, for those who missed the session, the newly released Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Academic and Research Libraries can be downloaded in its entirety from <http://www.arl.org/pp/ppcopyright/codefairuse/index.shtml>.

Friday, much like Thursday, was packed with options, both professional and social. As far as sessions went, I particularly enjoyed “Generation What? Keeping Music Librarianship Education Relevant in an Age of Change.” It was sponsored by the Education Committee and served as a kick-off of sorts for the newly-formed Music Librarianship Educators’ Roundtable. As a recent graduate of a library program and a professor of a newly-minted music librarianship course, I was drawn to this session and the roundtable. I was reminded of the importance of the professional networking we can do at MLA, where I got to hear from and speak with people doing the same work I am. Though I have taught for years, this semester has been my first time

teaching music librarianship, which has not been offered at UNCG for quite some time, if ever. The professional support of the roundtable has already provided me with connections I can turn to with questions and ideas, and as the group matures, I know there are other helpful projects in the works like a collection of syllabi from various music librarianship classes all over the country.

“Get Involved in MLA” on Saturday morning was an opportunity for anyone, from new to long-term members, to explore roundtables, committees and subcommittees, Notes publication opportunities, and other ways to get involved with MLA. Representatives from the different groups sat at tables in one of the hotel ballrooms. The session was run speed-dating style, so every five minutes a gong sounded to prompt us to move on to a new table. I enjoyed the combination of structure (everyone in one place with a set amount of time for interaction) and freedom (I got to choose which tables I visited). I made contact with some committees that I hope to someday be involved with, and I got to know some editors at Notes, which has already resulted in some publication opportunities.

After my time as a nonprofit director, I tend to attend business meetings with trepidation. SEMLA’s meeting was enjoyable, though. I had the opportunity to meet up with some folks who I met in October and meet a few new people. The discussions of conference locations, chapter projects, and even finances were interesting. MLA’s strategic planning discussion and business meeting, which occurred back to back, were also fascinating. As a larger organization, MLA has some different concerns and priorities from SEMLA, but a lot of the basics still overlap.

In all, my first MLA experience did not disappoint. I attended a variety of presentations covering numerous topics. I got to meet new people from all over the country and reconnect with friends from SEMLA. The balance of scholarly and social activities felt just right for me. (I did skip a morning and go to the Dallas World Aquarium, after all.) Though it lacks the intimacy of a SEMLA conference, MLA still provides the opportunity for us to connect with colleagues while growing professionally. I am already making plans to attend MLA next February and SEMLA in October, and I hope that I will see many of you at one or both of those events.