

Six Reasons Why You Should Attend a SEMLA Conference

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Abstract:

For this issue of Breve Notes, my colleague, Jacey Kepich, has written about why one should join SEMLA. I would like to offer a variation on this theme and list some reasons why one should attend a SEMLA conference.

Keyword: SEMLA | conferences | music conference

Article:

For this issue of Breve Notes, my colleague, Jacey Kepich, has written about why one should join SEMLA. I would like to offer a variation on this theme and list some reasons why one should attend a SEMLA conference.

I must begin by saying that I am not a conference fan. As a clarinetist, I attended several clarinet conferences, and I enjoyed many of the performances. However, there was only so much clarinet music I could hear before I started to become, well, a bit bored. Other conferences, in librarianship, musicology, ethnomusicology, and music theory, left me feeling flat. I was uninspired by most of the presentations and found few other activities to hold my attention. Plus, I am shy, so the idea of networking, even at structured events like presentation sessions or banquets, can be intimidating, to say the least.

Enter the SEMLA 2011 Conference. Why, you might ask, did I apply for a travel grant to go to a conference if I dislike them so much? Perhaps I am simply an optimist. Plus, I was scheduled to present some of my research at the conference, so I had a solid reason to attend. The site of the conference, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is just down the road from my home in Greensboro. I knew some of the people who would be attending. I hoped to have a good experience at my first SEMLA conference. In fact, I had a great experience, and I think that many others would, too. Here are my top six reasons why:

1. The conference was interesting. The Program Committee chose a variety of presentation topics that were pertinent to music librarianship. I never found myself wondering why someone thought that a particular topic had anything to do with music libraries. Similarly, I never felt that I was listening to a research presentation that I had already heard. In addition, there were many opportunities for exploring music librarianship and networking outside of the presentations, including library tours, a banquet, and coffee/socialization breaks.
2. I did not have to choose between presentations. SEMLA was not one of those conferences where you have two, three, or more sessions going on at the same time. This had two advantages. First, I did not have to choose between two equally interesting topics. Instead, I got to hear each presentation of the conference. Second, this organizational scheme meant that everyone in attendance got to spend the conference together. This led to a rich social and learning environment, where we all had the opportunity to meet and speak with one another and to hear the viewpoints of a variety of music librarians, students, and scholars throughout the conference.
3. The conference was inspiring. Related to the two points above, I found the research presentations to be interesting, varied, and inspiring. I was also inspired by the variety of people I met. There were a number of what one might call “traditional” music librarians present—professionals who oversee music libraries for colleges or universities. There were also students, publishers, retired professionals, and general librarians with an interest in music in attendance. I was excited to see the variety of opportunities available to those interested in music and librarianship.
4. SEMLA is a community. I was surprised to find that SEMLA is so much more than a professional organization. Some of this is no doubt due to its regional focus—most national or international associations simply have too many members to create a close-knit community. I think that there’s more to it than just size, though. The people in SEMLA are friendly and helpful. Those who knew each other already were excited to see one another and catch up. At the same time, they welcomed those of us new to the organization, making us feel that we were part of this community from the start. As a shy person, I was especially grateful for this welcoming atmosphere. After one conference, I already feel that I am a part of the SEMLA community.
5. The conference is affordable. Many organizations charge hundreds of dollars for an annual membership, then hundreds more for registration at a conference. On top of that, you have to pay for travel, room, and board. SEMLA is not free, but it is far more reasonably priced than many other conferences out there. It only costs \$10 to join SEMLA (\$5 for students). Early registration for the SEMLA conference in Chapel Hill was \$40 (\$15 for students), and even regular registration was only \$50 (\$20 for students).
6. You might be eligible to apply for the Pauline Shaw Bayne Travel Grant, if you are new to the field and have never attended a SEMLA conference before the grant entitles you to free registration to the conference, and you can receive funding to cover most or all of your travel expenses. The Pauline Bayne Shaw Grant made it possible for me to attend my first SEMLA conference in Chapel Hill in October, and I am truly grateful for that opportunity.

It may sound trite, but I am not exaggerating when I say that the SEMLA 2011 Conference was a transformative experience for me. I came away feeling accepted, inspired, hopeful, and excited. I

met a group of intelligent and friendly people who made me feel welcome in their midst. I learned more about music librarianship through others' research and life experiences. I am already excited about attending the conference again next fall and about seeing some familiar faces from SEMLA at MLA in February.