

Hot Topics in Music Librarianship

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Abstract:

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Hot Topics in Music Librarianship

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Moderator Ruthann McTyre (University of Iowa) brings a cool head to Hot Topics in Music Librarianship, as do many of her MLA colleagues, 162 of whom attended this session

of the 2007 annual conference. McTyre's talent for engaging such a large audience in vibrant communication made for an intense, well-paced ninety minute discussion.

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voice: **"Weeding LPs. . . Is there an easy way?"** This brought forth immediate warnings against the tendency to try and save everything. Then followed a "quick and dirty" approach: go to the MLA-L Archives, where an excellent discussion of this
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Plenary III continued . . .

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for example, video recordings allow the viewer to see other cultural aspects of musical performances. *A Basic Music Library* cannot document everything important in ethnomusicology, so Danielson recommended limiting the focus to a few specific topics and describing them well. For music librarians, she suggested limiting the scope of collections to primary source materials.

The final speaker, Ed Komara, commented further on plans for the fourth edition of BML in his presentation, "A Basic Music Library and the Challenge of Musical Canons." Komara stated that the first three editions of BML served as an acquisitions guide and tool with which to assess their collections. The purpose of his talk was to initiate discussion as to whether the fourth edition should be "basic" or "canonical" and whether there was a difference between the two terms.

The first section of Komara's talk described the circumstances that lead to selectivity and may make canonicity inevitable. Librarians cannot buy everything, and sometimes cannot catalog what they do have. Among researchers, every article of music could be important to someone, but realistically, some will be mentioned more than others, and some will be more influential than others. Choices

must be made about which works to discuss.

Komara made the point that whereas selectivity is inevitable, canonicity results from the adoption of a particular collection of works by several people, either through inclusion in a syllabus or in an anthology. Furthermore, those works not in the canon become "extra-canonical" and are at risk of being rejected as such. Komara recommended not rejecting these works outright because if nothing else, they are useful as context for the canonical works.

Komara did not reject the idea of canonicity as inherently bad as it can show the derivation of a community's values and culture. He used the example of Robert Johnson's guitar blues, which are viewed as canonical by most modern blues and rock guitarists while the piano blues on which Johnson's are modeled are not. Komara accounted for the difference by stating that guitarists are mostly aware of the guitar repertory and not so much that of the piano.

The second section of his talk addressed ways in which "canonical" does not mean "basic." A canon is assigned value and greatness by consensus and has its roots in ecclesiastical study. The notion of a musical canon has been built in the history of the Western tradition; is it appropriate to consider this for non-

Western musics? "Basic" as applied to music refers to its properties: time, melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, forms and structures. In order to create a basic music library in the truest sense of the word, music librarians can either be complete and collect everything, or be comprehensive and collect throughout the whole field representatively.

Komara discussed why BML should not be mistaken for a canon. BML could be considered a canon of MLA, though with 11,000 citations, it would be more practical to view it as a collection of canons. Even as a collection of canons, not everyone would divide the citations among the same groups.

Komara concluded by explaining that "basic" as a basis of acquisitions may be categorical according to the properties and genres of music rather than canonical. The materials would have to support more than just one group of patrons, be they undergraduates or graduate students, or performance, history, or theory majors. In his words, the fourth edition of *A Basic Music Library* is broadening its intended scope from the third edition by recommending materials that are needed to gain comprehensively a basic understanding of individual aspects of music as they are performed and exercised around the world.

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issue took place a few years ago. Also noted were some problems presented by LP recordings of solo literature: CD replacements are often unavailable, and those that are re-issued soon go out of print. Scott Landvatter (University of Chicago), who is now in the final stages of a 50,000 LP project, offered a good rule of thumb: “Keep the rare stuff—and prepare for the big challenge of making it accessible.”

Re-visiting a hot topic from last year’s session, Christine Clark (Theodore Front Musical Literature, Inc.) responded to the question, “**How do libraries go about buying rental scores?**” She explained that there was a “surge of hope last year when requests were submitted,” but added with regret that a number of librarians have been unsuccessful in their subsequent attempts to secure scores. Clark is currently working to make rental scores available for purchase. In her capacity as a go-between for publishers and libraries, she hopes to secure regular print copy, or, at the very least, copy on demand. Bonna Boettcher (MLA President, Cornell University) said that this issue will be raised at the spring Board meeting with publishers.

Library instruction, in all its variety, was perhaps the most pervasive of the hot topics discussed. **Undergraduate bibliography and research instruction: successes and failures** elicited numerous comments, some of them quite impassioned. McTyre introduced this subject with her own brief tale of woe (which she somehow made funny) regarding the failure of a one credit offering in arts research at Iowa. Alas, only one student signed up, so the course was scrapped. On

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a happier note, John Redford (Biola University) described in detail his full semester research course for undergraduates with an eye toward later graduate study. This is a semester-long offering, featuring a 100 item annotated bibliography as the main project. As John’s students only have immediate access to a small undergraduate library, he arranges field trips to larger research institutions in his region. Linda Fairtile (University of Richmond) builds her research goals into a required senior project, a substantial undertaking in which students develop a proposal, write an abstract, and conduct research under the guidance of a faculty advisor. “**What happens when students claim they know research well enough, having learned it elsewhere?**” An unidentified voice in the crowd answered this question bluntly: “If research is not on their transcript as a graduate course, they have not taken it.”

Over the course of this spirited exchange on instruction, a few spontaneous hot topics erupted. The “**Busy-ness Problem,**” for example, seems to pervade colleges and universities. It is not uncommon these days to hear that “the kids are too busy.” This prompts librarians to ask the question, “**How do we avoid creating just one more thing for students to do?**” One answer is to require a freshman course in information literacy, with the librarian “built into the course.” Another approach is to forge new curricular connections through comprehensive course offerings. Jane

Gottlieb (Julliard) offers a DMA class in bibliography that includes undergraduates working in partnership with faculty members. Using a variety of new and standard research re-

sources, Brian McMillan (McGill University) combines the instruction of undergraduate and graduate students, both performers and musicologists, in a class devoted to “cutting edge” topics in the scholarly community. Finally, Julie Strauss (University of Cape Town) teaches a comprehensive research course that emphasizes instruction in writing skills. In response to this, there seemed a general consensus that librarians are increasingly in demand as composition teachers.

Further consideration of the librarian’s role as a teacher raised another topic that is clearly heating up in many music libraries: **the curricular impact of Music Industry Studies.** Alicia Hansen (Loyola University, New Orleans) described her interaction with a music industry professor keenly interested in bibliographic instruction who asked her to help him inspire “really great papers with excellent, well-documented pictures.” While such faculty involvement is welcome, it can also be problematic, as Alicia explained by way of another professor’s observation that “Music Industry Studies are taking over the world and stomping on traditional music school curricula.” Economic considerations also apply, as Jon Haupt (Iowa State University) acknowledged in his comment that “arts programs tend to be underfunded, especially in places that emphasize science and technology.” However, for better or worse, Jon added, when arts courses “move toward Music Industry Studies, more money comes their way.”

Also within the context of instruction, Marc Rice (Truman State University) asked the question, “**Are there any good systematic assessment tools?**” Several participants suggested using follow-up surveys that work well as tools for tracking

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students through their undergraduate careers. Also noted was the role of the “embedded librarian” at work with human subjects who might be tested to provide evidence of the educational work librarians do. Alicia Hansen teaches a non-credit, one hour, freshman-level research class inclusive of requisite basic competencies in technology for all students. Beth Macleod (Central Michigan University) approaches assessment through the analysis of bibliographies drawn from student research papers. This process depends on the cooperation of professors who require such papers, as well as the knowledge of which students have taken the bibliography course. The great value of this assessment tool is that it produces good, concrete results.

Copyright may well be a hot topic, but it is also a frustrating one, and it made for tepid discussion at this session. The first issue raised was the problem of gaining permission before placing photocopies of scores on reserve. The challenge here, most agreed, is that there is not an easy way of getting permission—and so much depends on the priorities of individual universities and councils. When the discussion turned to the larger issue of fair use, Gordon Theil (University of California Los Angeles) spoke with conviction about the role librarians should be playing: “We should be doing more. There are guidelines describing the appropriate use of digital materials, and we should argue strenuously for student access to digital audio reserves. We are here to provide modes of access. We are mediators. We are not the problem.” To promote the discussion of these and other copyright issues, the Alexander Street Press has set up an advisory group inclusive of librarians who will “help shape the debate.”

Music Library 2.0 prompted comments on many hot topics, none more burning than **the future of CDs**. The discussion gathered up some familiar questions: “Are people still buying CDs? Why spend money on them when they are on the way out?” Tom Caw (University of Hartford) noted that for libraries with small, non-circulating teaching collections: “Naxos and other streaming options are available, but not all rooms have wireless, and not all professors would go wireless if they could. There are still those who like to pop in and pick up the physical item.” Another argument in favor of CDs is the increasing diversity of the curriculum. In this regard, Rebecca Littman (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee) observed that streaming resources have little to do with courses in global pop music, for example. Further **issues associated with streaming services** were discussed at length. McTyre noted the paucity of cataloging records for these items, to which Tim Savage (OCLC) responded with information on a unit he uses for cataloging. Tim is currently in the planning stages regarding the creation and sharing of the MARC records. Several participants stressed the importance of access to the highest level of streaming, noting that the service is hardly an advantage if it allows only 3–5 simultaneous users. It is important, they added, to determine the value of electronic streaming resources by examining the statistics. And when there are huge jumps in usage, the administrators should hear about it. Gordon Theil concluded this part of the discussion by describing “the problem of perpetual ownership”: “If libraries stop buying certain labels,

they go under and we lose access. There is no JSTOR for sound recordings. Patrons don’t really care whether we own—but we have to have continuity in order to guarantee access.”

As might be expected, **Social Software** inspired a lively exchange. Jenny Colvin (Furman University) explained her use of **MySpace** (<http://www.myspace.com>) and **FaceBook** (<http://www.facebook.com>) in exploratory assignments that “meet students where they are.” Colvin argued for the use of social computing—the virtual aspect of what we are doing in a physical space—as the way of the future. Inevitably, this brought up the possibility of having *too much information*. The potential dangers of librarians “invading student spaces” were on many minds, and a few

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graphic anecdotes were offered. However, Colvin and others emphasized the teaching opportunities inherent in social computing and stressed the importance of contacting students *only* after they have contacted you. In short, they counseled, “be casual but professional.” Regarding other kinds of social software, several participants described their experiences using library blogs in conjunction the course management software of willing professors. They explained that blogging provides librarians a way of posting announcements, asking questions, and getting feedback without the physical presence of students in the library. Also recommended was the use of **meebo** (<http://www1.meebo.com>), and of instant messaging as a favorable alternative to virtual reference. Unfamiliar to many, **Media Site** (<http://www.mediasite.com>)

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