

A First-Timer's Sampler: Notes from MLA 2014, Atlanta, Georgia

By Deborah Wills

Since November 2012, when I became Liaison Librarian for Music at Wilfrid Laurier University, many colleagues have encouraged me to attend the MLA Annual Meeting. They rightly describe this conference as an invaluable opportunity to meet and to learn from hundreds of librarians, to connect with vendors, and to gain first-hand knowledge of MLA. In particular, I would like to recommend the reduced registration program, with the variety of volunteer activities it provides. It was a privilege to contribute in a small way to the success of the meeting.

The following summaries will, I hope, suggest the range and scope of some of the fine presentations on this year's program.

Unheard Voices: Something Old and Something New in Jewish Music

The session began with Judith Pinnolis (Brandeis University) who presented "something new": "Researching Jewish Music: A Digital Resources Update." She introduced the audience to a large number of online sites for Jewish music: texts, scores, streaming music, and resources for research. The presentation demonstrated the value of online collections in bringing together widely dispersed material. Some highlights: the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (Poland), with collections of sheet music and recordings; the Library of Congress's Yiddish American Popular Sheet Music; the National Library of Israel's Song Indexes in Yiddish and Hebrew, with finding aids in English; the St. Petersburg Score Collection; and the Virtual Cantor, with the complete cycle of liturgical music in sound files. The [presentation](#), along with links, is available at the presenter's web site.

For "something old," Kevin Karnes (Emory University) discussed his research in a presentation entitled "Toward a Multicultural History of Place: A Baltic Situation." In his travels, he has examined places in Eastern Europe where Jews once lived, but live no longer. His work demonstrates how musicology can inform history: specifically, it challenges the notion that between the Bolshevik Revolution and the Second World War, Jews and Latvians lived in separate, isolated communities. Through musical sources, he traces the shared experience and cultural exchange between these communities. The evidence he presents of frequent,

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commonplace encounters provides an important perspective on a time which has been overshadowed by the Holocaust. Karnes was fortunate to find that much archival material has survived.

Common Curricula of the Introductory Graduate Music Research Course: A Survey

Jonathan Saucedo (Rutgers University) presented research which he hopes will contribute to an understanding of the content and pedagogical methods of the graduate music research course. He examined the web sites of 408 institutions and identified 208 instructors to survey. The completion rate was 41%. Some highlights of the results:

- 74% of respondents use a lecture format.
- The most common texts are Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, and Sampsel's *Music Research: A Handbook*.
- About 60% feel it is very important to include information on bibliographies, sources, and library use.
- 72% feel that music-specific databases are very important; *RILM* is by far the favourite.
- For general databases, most include *JSTOR* and *WorldCat*.
- ILL and the library catalogue are judged the most important library resources.
- 75% of instructors who responded agree that students find the course useful.
- Only 9% believe that entering students are ready to begin graduate research.

Saucedo stressed that the survey provides information on the format and content of these courses; it does not describe the ideal course. By knowing more about these courses, librarians have a rationale for approaching faculty with suggestions for improving content and methodology. Saucedo is happy to share his results with others: contact him at jonathan.saucedo@rutgers.edu.

Reference Wrap-Up: Difficult Dance and Troublesome Theatre

The three presenters for this session provided strategies for liaison librarians taking on new subject areas in the performing arts. They all stressed the usefulness of finding commonalities between the known and the new.

Lindsay Hansen (California State University) recommended enthusiasm, but cautioned against misrepresenting one's level of subject knowledge. She stressed the importance of building relationships with faculty over time, by attending performances, becoming familiar with faculty publications, textbooks, and books on reserve for classes. She also recommended joining listservs, studying library subject guides, examining collection policies from other libraries, and keeping up with the academic association for the discipline. [Link to slides](#).

The session continued with Scott Stone (Chapman University) who described his experience as a new liaison librarian for dance, along with some of the specific reference questions he has received. He recommended specific titles, such as *The International Encyclopedia of Dance* and a variety of online resources, including *Academic OneFile* and *YouTube*. He suggested exploring familiar resources such as *RILM*, which proves to have a substantial amount of dance material. For students struggling to find information specifically on dancers, he recommended broadening the search to other performance artists and to athletes. [Link to slides](#).

The session concluded with Erin Conor (Reed College) who discussed her experience with the discipline of theatre. She echoed many of the suggestions made by the other speakers, and described how theatre is highly interdisciplinary, studied both as literature and as performance. Her recommended sources include *The International Dictionary of Theatre*, *ARTstor* for images, and for finding plays, the subscription-based *Play Index* and the freely available *Inter-Play*.

A question following the presentations led to a discussion of how to find music to accompany dance. An attendee recommended browsing *Naxos* by genre and stressed the need for dance students to listen to lots of music. Just like students in other disciplines, as they proceed with their research, they often discover that their needs are quite different from what they first imagined.

Library as Place: What Performing Arts Students Value Most

Joe Clark (Kent State University) is carrying out a comprehensive study of space and services at his institution's Performing Arts Library, the second most heavily used library at Kent State. So far, he has a year's worth of observational data, collected once an hour, as well as survey results. He also plans to work with focus groups. He stressed the importance of using a variety of tools to improve the accuracy of results.

The Performing Arts Library consists of several open spaces, including computer labs, plus four carrels and two state-of-the-art group study rooms. Contrary to survey results, which suggest that students set a high value on shared study space, only 4% of students in the library were observed in group study rooms, and when they were, they were often alone. Both observational data and survey data reveal that a large majority of students prefer quiet, open spaces. Some other interesting findings from the survey:

- Most students prefer PCs over Macs and prefer laptops to desktops or tablets. (The Library plans to provide laptop power cords for checkout.)
- Most strongly agree that "expert help with library resources is important to my success as a student."
- Most also agree that strong library collections are important.

- Soft furniture and large tables are very important.
- Half the students found library events important.

[Link to slides.](#)

Taking a Census and Prioritizing Media Collections for Preservation

At the plenary session earlier in the day (“The Library of Congress National Recording Preservation Plan”), Mike Casey (Indiana University) spoke of the twin threats to preservation: degradation and obsolescence. He estimated that institutions have about 10-15 years before large-scale preservation becomes too difficult or costly. In his session “Taking a Census,” he described how Indiana University has responded to this situation. Suspecting a serious problem, Casey began by conducting a survey to collect quantitative and qualitative data on condition, formats and research value of media collections. However, the survey had a low response rate, and some of the information collected proved inaccurate.

In a follow-up, in-depth study, he and his team conducted one- to three-hour interviews with staff in each of 80 affected units on campus. They identified 560,000 audio, video, and film objects, with 180,000 of these at serious risk. The majority of objects, which are in dozens of formats, are at the Music Library, but many are also held in units such as the Language Center, Athletics, and various archives. His team aims to digitize high-priority items within five years. Prioritization is based on a review of content, with focus on research, instructional, historical, and political value, along with a consideration of condition and risk. To convince administrators of the serious threat to these objects, stories highlighting risk and value have been collected. With support from the Vice Provost for Research, and with the expertise of a post-doc student, about 8% of the total items have been digitized so far.

The digitization project has been relatively inexpensive, but requires curatorial knowledge. Once objects are digitized, the originals should be kept, though there are pressures to discard based on space considerations. [Link to slides.](#)