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### "First-Time Attendee: How to Get the Most Out of Being a Student at a Music Library Association Meeting" in *Careers in Music Libraries IV*

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**mla**

# Careers in Music Libraries IV

Edited by  
Misti Shaw and  
Susannah Cleveland



# CAREERS IN MUSIC LIBRARIES IV

**Music Library Association  
Technical Reports and Monographs  
in Music Librarianship Series**

Anna Kijas, Series Editor

VOLUME 39

One of three monographic series co-published by A-R Editions and MLA, the series publishes books on aspects of music librarianship and the profession. The format allows authors to explore subjects in depth, with each book intended as a self-contained reference. Topics addressed include trends in music research, the history of music librarianship, new media technology, metadata and cataloging issues, collection development, preservation, and facilities management.

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# CAREERS IN MUSIC LIBRARIES IV

Edited by

**Misti Shaw and Susannah Cleveland**

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While grappling with gaining education and experience to enter into a career in music libraries, students may find attendance at an MLA meeting to be particularly beneficial. Going to an MLA meeting as a student is a fantastic experience that facilitates a better understanding of the profession and creates the opportunity to make connections that can lead to greater success when entering a career in music libraries. From plenary presentations to informal gatherings, there are numerous opportunities to immerse yourself and learn about salient topics in music library work while also meeting potential collaborators, mentors, and future colleagues.

In this new chapter, Taylor Greene and Zoua Sylvia Yang draw upon their experience attending national and regional MLA conferences as former student attendees and current music librarians. They provide guidance to help future music librarians and first-time attendees figure out what to expect from MLA national and local chapter meetings and to understand the importance of networking, with tips on doing it (even if you don't want to!). They also provide advice for getting the most out of your MLA experience and pivoting from the conference to the job market.

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# FIRST-TIME ATTENDEE: HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF BEING A STUDENT AT A MUSIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION MEETING

TAYLOR GREENE AND ZOUA SYLVIA YANG

### INTRODUCTION

When you are a student in library school, the thought of attending a Music Library Association Annual Meeting can seem both daunting and logistically challenging. You might feel unsure about how to socialize with professionals or worry that your presence will be unwelcome. You may be concerned about negotiating the time off from classes and your library job(s) and wonder if you should just avoid that hurdle altogether. On top of that, the cost of lodging and travel could be a serious strain on the student budget. While all these concerns are perfectly valid, you may find that the benefits of attending MLA as a student far outweigh the costs.

Going to a Music Library Association meeting as a student can be an educational experience that facilitates a better understanding of the profession and creates the opportunity to make connections that can lead to greater success when entering the field of music librarianship. From plenary presentations to informal gatherings, there are numerous opportunities to completely immerse yourself and learn about salient topics in music librarianship, while also meeting potential collaborators, mentors, and future colleagues. In this chapter, the authors draw upon their experience attending national and regional MLA conferences as former student attendees and current music information professionals to help future professionals and first-time attendees figure out what to expect from MLA national and local chapter meetings, with special attention paid to networking, getting involved, seeking professional development opportunities, and learning about current issues in the music information profession. Though the focus is specifically on MLA meetings, the advice in this chapter may also be useful as an introduction to conference culture in general. Each conference will have its own version of events and will have a culture all of its own, but much of the experience overall will be similar to what a student would encounter at an MLA meeting.

MLA Annual Meetings are not only where music library professionals share ideas, but also where the Association performs a significant amount of business. Attending, therefore, not only provides students the opportunity to learn from those in the profession about music libraries and librarianship but also to find opportunities to actively participate in the Association.

### ABOUT THE MLA ANNUAL MEETING

Each year, between January and March, the Music Library Association holds an annual meeting. As former *Newsletter* editor Michelle Hahn states, the official title of the event is the “Annual Meeting,” but you may hear this meeting referred to as the “conference” or the “convention.”

As Hahn points out, “It is officially called the Annual Meeting, but it is run by the Convention Manager. . . . And it is referred to colloquially as the MLA Conference in many instances.”<sup>1</sup> You may even hear it referred to as “attending MLA.”

Usually a face-to-face event, the MLA Annual Meeting typically takes place over the course of four days; this does not include pre- or post-conference opportunities. The first day there is no regular programming, but there are great opportunities to meet and mingle at the First-Time Attendees Reception and the Opening Reception. Programming starts on the morning of the second day and continues through the fourth day, ending with the Business Meeting in the afternoon. But you’ll definitely want to stick around for the Closing Reception, which features food, drinks, and live music.

The meetings are held at conference hotels that feature rooms designed for meetings, exhibits, and receptions. Some events may occur outside of the hotel, but the regular programming occurs within the hotel conference area. You aren’t required to stay at the conference hotel in order to attend the conference. Most attendees choose to stay at the conference hotel for convenience, plus it helps MLA to meet their room booking requirements, but others prefer to stay elsewhere and commute or walk to the meeting each day.

Typically, attendance at the MLA Annual Meeting is around 400 people. That may sound like a whole lot of people, but you’ll quickly learn that many people seem to know each other. As Hahn describes, “MLA is a very welcoming and friendly group, and won’t even give you much opportunity to get lost! In fact, if it’s your first time, you get a special ribbon to add to your name badge, and you will get an abundance of welcomes, invitations to meals, and new friends!”<sup>2</sup>

At MLA Annual Meetings, like many other professional and academic conferences, there are a mixture of presentations, committee meetings, interest group meetings, and receptions. If you have ever attended a learned society meeting, such as the American Musicological Society meeting or a Society for Ethnomusicology conference, you may have experienced a different type of presentation than what you might see at MLA meetings. Typically, at a musicology conference, a presenter is expected to read a lengthy research paper word-for-word from the pages sitting on the podium. While this is sometimes the case for MLA presenters, more often, one can expect a more casual presentation using PowerPoint slides and possibly some degree of participation from the audience.

A great way to see what takes place at the MLA Annual Meeting is to view the programs from past meetings, which are available on the MLA website.<sup>3</sup> You will find a program that lists all of the conference presentations with abstracts, committees and interest group meetings, receptions, and any other opportunities (including the Annual Organ Crawl or a tour of a local public library). One of the most important resources for finding out information about MLA Annual

1. Michelle Hahn, “MLA as a Quasi-Experienced Professional,” in “I’m at MLA . . . Now What?,” eds. Michelle Hahn et al., special issue, *MLA Newsletter* (2019): 14, <https://www.musiclibraryassociation.org/page/newsletter>.

2. Michelle Hahn, “General Advisement,” in “I’m at MLA . . . Now What?,” eds. Michelle Hahn et al., special issue, *MLA Newsletter* (2019): 19, <https://www.musiclibraryassociation.org/page/newsletter>.

3. Music Library Association, “Annual Meetings,” accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/page/Meetings>.

Meetings, MLA chapter meetings, and all kinds of other information related to the world of music libraries is to join the MLA-L email distribution list. Joining MLA-L will allow you to know what opportunities there are to submit proposals for the national and regional MLA meetings (often referred to as a “Call for Papers”) and also when there are opportunities to apply for other special opportunities for the MLA Annual Meeting.<sup>4</sup>

Students and emerging music information professionals who plan to attend the Annual Meeting should become familiar with the special opportunities that can greatly assist them in attending and getting the most out of the MLA meetings:

- Kevin Freeman Travel Grant: If you are a student, a recent graduate from library school, or if you’re just starting out in your music information professional job, you should definitely be on the lookout for the call for applications for this grant, since the Kevin Freeman Travel grant is awarded each year to cover conference registration fees and a cash award up to \$750 for attendees in one of those categories. In addition to the financial assistance, you also receive acknowledgment at the MLA Business Meeting, which will help people in the profession learn who you are.<sup>5</sup>
- Reduced Registration Program: In addition to the reduced membership and reduced conference fees that you will already receive as a student, you may also decide to participate in helping out with the conference in order to receive further cost reduction. You will see the information on the reduced registration for working at the conference through the MLA-L distribution list.
- Conference Mentoring Program and the First-Time Attendees Reception are discussed below in the section on networking.<sup>6</sup>

### ABOUT MLA REGIONAL CHAPTER MEETINGS

MLA’s regional chapters are subgroups of MLA that provide opportunities for local collaboration and discussion of matters of local significance to music library professionals.<sup>7</sup> Currently, there are ten regional chapters (Atlantic, California, Greater NY, Midwest, Mountain-Plains, New England, New York State-Ontario, Pacific Northwest, Southeast, and Texas). Each chapter has separate membership and holds a regional meeting of their own each year. Regional chapter meetings can be a great way to gain some experience with an MLA meeting before the national meeting. Because of the small membership, you’ll likely find it easier to make connections with the people you meet.

4. Ibid.

5. Music Library Association, “Kevin Freeman Travel Grant,” Music Library Association, accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/page/FreemanGrant>.

6. Music Library Association, “Conference Mentoring Program,” accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/page/ConfMentor>.

7. Music Library Association, “Regional Chapters,” accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/page/RegionalChapters>.

An effective way to engage in MLA is to become more involved in your local chapter. It's a great idea to attend your local chapter's meeting at MLA and also to attend the chapter's own separate meeting later on. Chapter meetings are often shorter than national meetings, less formal, and offer the advantage of meeting local music information professionals in a smaller setting than the MLA national meeting.

### **YOU WON'T LEARN THIS IN LIBRARY SCHOOL: INSIGHT GAINED FROM ATTENDING CONFERENCE PROGRAMMING**

An immediate benefit to attending a national or regional MLA meeting is the opportunity to learn about salient topics important to music information professionals. Through attending technical talks, panels, and presentations, students gain the opportunity to learn about new issues, trends, and a variety of specialties within the field that they may not have had experience with previously. Some examples of topics you may learn about include: archives and special collections, diversity and inclusion, cataloging and metadata, emerging technologies, public services (instruction, reference, access services, and outreach), resource sharing, and collection development.

Attendees will find a large variety of session types and presentation styles at the national MLA meeting:

- Workshops: Pre-conference and post-conference workshops are open to MLA members and non-members and are opportunities for continuing education and professional development for music information professionals. Students and emerging information professionals are welcome to join any of the pre- or post-conference workshops. These workshops often offer opportunities to gain hands-on experience from specialists in the field. Pre- and post-conference workshops are not necessarily offered at every Annual Meeting (with the exception of MOUG), and once they are offered, you may not see the same program again, so make sure you jump on the opportunity to participate if you are interested in the event.
  - › MOUG (Music OCLC Users Group) Pre-Conference: MOUG meets each year for several days before the main MLA Annual Meeting. If you have an interest in music cataloging, this is a great opportunity not only to get to know the catalogers of the profession but to learn about the nitty-gritty issues that get worked out before the full MLA meeting begins.
  - › Examples of past pre-conference workshops include: Up-to-date on Music Binding and Preservation (2019), Cultural Competency Training for Librarians (2018), The Beat Goes On-athon: Creating Linked Data for Music with RIMMF (2017), and An Introduction to Archives and Special Collections for Music Librarians (2015). Sylvia participated in An Introduction to Archives and Special Collections for Music Librarians in 2015 and gained a better understanding of archives, archival practice and core principles, appraisal and acquisitions within archives, and the arrangement and preservation of archival materials.
  - › Examples of post-conference workshops include: THATCamp (The Humanities and Technology Camp) Music Library Association (2015) and the MLA Wikipedia

Edit-a-thon (2019). Taylor participated in the Wikipedia Edit-a-thon in 2019 and gained experience that directly benefited his teaching for graduate students, who complete a Wikipedia project in his seminar class. This workshop could have been an eye-opening experience for a student, as it offered a counter narrative to what many students in library school may be taught about the value of Wikipedia.

- On standard main conference days (usually Thursday through Saturday), at any given hour, there may be several presentations and meetings scheduled at the same time; part of the fun is determining which presentation you will attend.
  - › Plenary Sessions: Plenary sessions are scheduled to enable all conference attendees to attend. At the plenary sessions, you'll often learn about issues or culture related to the city in which the conference is held. Typically, there is a plenary session at the start of each morning of the conference.
  - › Program sessions: There are endless possibilities when it comes to types of sessions and the kinds of topics covered. Some will be entirely practical (e.g., a panel on the use of new technologies for in-class instruction), others will be inspiring (e.g., historical perspective on social issues related to music librarianship or archives), or informative (e.g., musicology papers that touch on particular use of archives or other bibliographical resources). Many of the program sessions will be sponsored or co-sponsored by committees or interest groups. The full list of sessions will be published well before the start of the meeting so that you can plan on which sessions you will attend based on your own interests or career aspirations. Some sessions will have an interactive element in which participants are invited to collaborate on ideas together with those seated nearby. These types of sessions can be a great way to make connections with other conference attendees.
  - › Poster sessions: Poster presentations are visual representations of projects, initiatives, or ideas. The poster presenter(s) will stand next to their poster during the session period to talk about their project, answer questions, and distribute handouts. Poster sessions are a great way to learn some new things and also to get the opportunity to talk with music library professionals one-on-one about their projects.
  - › Town Halls: A Town Hall is a forum for sharing information on important topics while also allowing questions and participation from the members in the audience. Special topics for discussion in the past include the newly published version of the RDA Toolkit, findings from the Library of Congress pilot of BIBFRAME 2.0, and the recent work of the MLA Linked Data Working Group in evaluating the PMO (Performed Music Ontology) that was created as part of the LD4P (Linked Data for Production) project. There are also public services town halls with discussions related to sharing practices around reference and instruction, and more general town halls, such as the one where there was recently a lively discussion about the MLA-L email distribution list.

- › Exhibit Hall: The Exhibit Hall is a centrally located space that provides a place where Annual Meeting attendees can connect with vendors. Visit the Exhibit Hall to learn about new resources, watch vendors demonstrate how to use new digital and electronic materials, and to stay up to date with music information offerings.
- › Interest Group Meetings: Interest Groups are open to anyone and were created so that members of MLA could address areas of interest collectively that are not addressed by any committees. Attending an interest group meeting might seem a little daunting but will help you establish connections with MLA members who have common interests. There are a number of interest groups, including but not limited to: Contemporary Music, Jazz & Popular Music, Music Industry and Arts Management, Paraprofessional, and more.<sup>8</sup>
- › Committee/Subcommittee Meetings: Unlike Interest Groups, Committee and Subcommittee membership is appointed by the MLA President. Appointments usually follow the annual meeting each year. Consider attending a Committee/Subcommittee Meeting, which are open to nonmembers and students unless otherwise noted, to gain a better perspective of MLA's inner workings. There are a number of committees and subcommittees, including but not limited to: Cataloging and Metadata, Development, Diversity, Membership, Web Committees, Music Library Students and Emerging Professions (MLStEP), and so on.<sup>9</sup>
- › Placement Service Interview Room: In addition to sessions, town halls, and meetings, the Placement Service hosts an Interview Room at annual meetings. This room will be available to institutional representatives who are interested in conducting formal interviews or informal question/answer sessions with job seekers. Representatives from a hiring institution will receive blocks of time based on interview demand.<sup>10</sup>
- › MLA Business Meeting: Don't be put off by the title of this session. Many first-time attendees don't realize that this meeting is open to all conference attendees. At the business meeting, you'll learn about the inner workings of MLA, future plans and initiatives for the association, information on upcoming annual meetings, news about current and past music library professionals, and you might even witness MLA giving awards such as the MLA Citation for lifetime achievement.
- › Closing Reception: The closing reception is a fun social event where you can enjoy a live performance by the MLA Big Band and eat complimentary hors d'oeuvres. Two important things to know about in advance of this event are the dress code and the cash bar. The dress code for the closing reception is a step more formal

8. Music Library Association, "Community Groups: Interest Groups," accessed 30 July 2019, [https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group\\_select.asp?type=12693](https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group_select.asp?type=12693).

9. Music Library Association, "Community Groups: Committees," accessed 30 July 2019, [https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group\\_select.asp?type=12582](https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group_select.asp?type=12582).

10. Music Library Association, "The Job Placement Service," accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/networking>.

than the usual conference attire, so be sure to pack something a little dressy for the final day. You certainly won't need a ball gown or tuxedo, but you may feel slightly underdressed in jeans or a polo shirt. There is often a cash-only bar, so bring some cash if you think you'll want to imbibe at the reception, in case there is no credit card option. (Then again, the reception drinks may be beyond the student budget anyway).

#### **TIPS FOR A FIRST-TIME ATTENDEE WHEN APPROACHING CONFERENCE PROGRAMMING:**

- Look at the program beforehand and create a personal schedule. Identify programming of interest to you that aligns with your professional aspirations, or deals with topics with which you would like to become more familiar. Remember, unless noted in the schedule, you're welcome to attend any talk or presentation.
- Schedule meals and breaks! Attendees often lose track of time or feel the need to attend every session that even minutely interests them, which results in overextended, *hangry* individuals.<sup>11</sup>
- Consider how you could use conference programming as a supplement to your coursework and how current research trends might impact your future research projects.
- Try to develop networks based on conference programming. If you find a topic particularly interesting, try talking with the speaker sometime at the conference. Depending on the situation, you may have the opportunity to walk up and introduce yourself to the speaker immediately after their presentation. If that isn't possible, keep an eye out for the speaker later on at a coffee break and try starting up a conversation there. You can almost always find the email address for fellow members (either on their presentation, through the MLA website, or by looking at the staff list at their institution), so contacting them via email is also an excellent idea. In fact, even if you do manage to start a conversation in person, a follow-up email is still helpful in developing that connection with the person you wish to add to your network. Just a simple email saying "it was so great to meet you; thanks again for your presentation" or "I very much enjoyed your presentation and would like to ask you about . . ." can go a long way in establishing that connection.

#### **So, How Can Attending Conference Programming Benefit Your Job Pursuits?**

Taylor's Perspective:

My goal for my first MLA annual meeting was to attend sessions from which I could learn about a variety of topics and do my best to absorb the new knowledge and concepts like a sponge. I was still early in my library school tenure, and I knew that there was bound to be a bounty of information of which I previously had no knowledge. I recall being mystified by a talk on fair use, profoundly confused about linked data, and befuddled by something called Blacklight. Not knowing what the future would hold for my career, I purposefully blended my schedule between presentations about public and technical

11. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 19th ed. (2019), s.v. "hangry."



services. I took notes furiously in my notebook and tried to record all of the information and terms that I did not fully understand so that I could look them up later.

After the conference, I returned to real life armed with a powerful new tool that would serve me well in the future: a notebook full of current topics about which I now knew I needed to learn more. Over the course of library school, I would go on to write multiple research papers on fair use, lead a class presentation on FRBR and linked data, and focus a research project on the effect Blacklight would have on music discovery once it was implemented at Indiana University. I had my first MLA annual meeting to thank for helping me to discover these current topics in music librarianship.

Sylvia's Perspective:

I'll never forget my first national MLA meeting. I was completely overwhelmed by the programming, by the number of people, and the possibilities. Do I stay in the conference hotel? Do I go to MLA's Business Meeting? Town Hall? What about interest groups? Committees? Despite feeling overwhelmed and frazzled, I'm incredibly thankful I was able to attend MLA meetings as a student. The national meeting helped me realize what branch of music librarianship I wanted to go into. When I first started my library degree, I thought I was destined for a position in metadata and digital access. After attending a few different sessions and speaking with various people, I realized that presentations about instruction really stuck with me. I couldn't tell you a single thing about the FRBRization session I attended, but I could discuss information literacy or ACRL Framework all day. Attending presentations really helped me develop an idea of what sort of music information professional I want to be.

In addition to helping solidify my career goals, attending the national MLA meeting allowed for me to engage in professional dialogue. I may not have been in a position to implement any of the great ideas I heard, but I was able to engage in conversation and develop a better understanding of the field. This engagement is crucial when you enter the job market and something you won't do in library school.

## NETWORKING

Networking with music library professionals is one of the greatest benefits of attending the MLA annual meeting, but it is understandably very daunting to many students. You may wonder, how do I approach people? What should I say to them? Will they even want to talk to me? It is perfectly ordinary to feel anxious or hesitant, but you will likely find networking to be much less worrisome after creating a networking strategy.

Your networking strategy doesn't need to be an elaborate scheme to climb to the top of the social ladder, but rather a consideration about your built-in networks. Try thinking about the people in MLA that you may already have a connection to, and consider how you may expand your network from there. Your existing networks could be of any number of categories, for instance:

- **Institutional Affiliation:** As a student, you already have a built-in institutional affiliation; talk to fellow students, music library professionals, and alumni from your university.
- **Student Status:** You're not alone—there are many student attendees at regional and national MLA meetings. Seek out other student attendees and learn about different MLIS programs, the experiences unique to particular institutions, and create lasting relationships with others going into the music information profession. Before attending MLA,

consider joining and becoming active within the Music Library Student and Emerging Professionals (MLStEP), which currently has forty-six members.<sup>12</sup>

- **First-Time Attendees:** Each national MLA meeting features a First-Time Attendees Reception for first-time attendees and new members of MLA at the start of the meeting. The reception aims to provide an overview of MLA, an approach to navigating the annual meeting itself, an introduction to members of the Board, and the opportunity to meet other early-career music information professionals
- **Conference Mentoring Program:** The Conference Mentoring Program was developed to assist MLA newcomers with the conference and the profession. The program aims to pair you with a mentor who shares common interests and can answer questions you may have about music librarianship. A mentor can be a great ally and introduce you to members of MLA whom you may not have had the opportunity to connect with at the meeting.
- **Regional Chapter Meetings at the National Meeting:** Most regional chapters will also reserve time to meet at the national MLA meeting, these can be formal or informal meetings, which allows for you to build connections and network with people who work in the same general geographic area.

When it comes to networking based on university affiliation, the depth of your networking pool will vary widely based on your institution. For instance, Taylor was an MLIS in Music Librarianship student at Indiana University (IU), which has an especially strong network at MLA meetings due to the number of music library professionals who come from that program. This affiliation allowed Taylor to quickly expand his network to include former students who had entered the music library profession. At any reception, coffee break, lunch, or after-hours get together, there would invariably be someone he hadn't met before who he could connect to through the IU connection. On the other hand, if you attend a library school with a smaller contingent, you may have the benefit of knowing each member from your institution more closely.

Sylvia attended the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UW–Milwaukee) for a coordinated MM/MLIS program. Like Indiana University, UW–Milwaukee has strong representation within the national and the Midwest chapter of MLA, and UW–Milwaukee's then music librarian, Rebecca Littman, was excellent at making introductions and creating connections for the students she mentored.<sup>13</sup> As a student, Sylvia regularly traveled with a cohort group from her institution, splitting the cost by carpooling and sharing lodgings, but found it really easy to meet students with different institutional affiliations.

12. The Music Library Student and Emerging Professionals Interest Group (MLStEP) is a student- and emerging professional-run organization that seeks to connect students, prospective students, and librarians within the first five years of their career with interest in music librarianship. Music Library Students and Emerging Professionals, "Welcome to MLStEP," MLStEP: Music Library Students and Emerging Professionals, accessed 31 January 2020, <http://mlstep.blog.musiclibraryassoc.org>.

13. Rebecca Littman has since left the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and is now the Managing Librarian at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Exploring the network of students at MLA is easier than you might think. Even if you attend a national or regional meeting without a cohort, you'll have little trouble identifying other students. For one thing, when a student attendee picks up their name badge at the start of the conference, they are given a ribbon to attach to their badge that says "Student." Don't feel shy about attaching this to your nametag; you'll find it serves as a beacon for friendly professionals eager to speak with the next generation. MLA is a supportive group, and students are always welcome.

As with student attendees, you can easily identify other first-time attendees by the "First-Time Attendee" ribbon attached to their name badge. MLA members are always glad to see signs of growth within the music information profession, so first-time attendees are warmly welcomed to national and chapter meetings. As a first-time attendee, you'll also have the opportunity to attend the First-Time Attendee Reception, which is a rich experience in itself and a great opportunity to become engaged in MLA. The First-Time Attendees Reception is always held just before the opening reception. This reception provides you with a venue to meet other first-time attendees, make introductions, and start to develop the connections you will need to succeed as a music information professional. You're bound to make a few conference buddies at this event, which can be very helpful in building not only your network but also your confidence.

Sylvia and Taylor both took advantage of the First-Time Attendees Reception organized during their first national meetings, respectively.

Taylor's Perspective:

For me, my recollection of this event is hazy, probably due to the nerves of attending my first conference. What I strongly recall was the warmth and openness I sensed from the music library professionals at the reception. Each librarian I talked to seemed genuinely friendly and open to speaking with students. I left the event with a feeling of excitement and a sense of relief about what I had gotten myself into.

Sylvia's Perspective:

While attending my first MLA meeting I tried to take advantage of all of the built-in networks listed above but want to draw particular attention to my experience attending the First-Time Attendees Reception. I distinctly remember the hesitation and dread I felt about attending the reception. At the time, I was on a restrictive diet, which made receptions a nightmare, but the New Member Forum's Coordinator was so understanding and amenable to my dietary restrictions that I felt really welcomed to the reception and the community as a whole. I remember introducing myself to students and emerging professionals from institutions all over the United States and can honestly say that I have maintained and cultivated relationships with individuals I met that night.

After you have expanded your network via institutional affiliation, fellow students, and the First-Time Attendees Reception, seek out other attendees with similar interests. The nice thing about networking based on interests is that you know you already have something to talk about. One of the best ways to meet other members with similar interests is to check the sessions for topics you're interested in and see who is presenting. You'll then have specific people in mind whom you can talk to about a particular issue. Another way to explore networking by interests is to attend the meetings of interest groups. These interest groups hold their own meetings throughout the conference. The purpose of interest groups is to "exchange ideas on topics not specifically

addressed by [MLA] committees,” so the range of interest varies widely.<sup>14</sup> Currently, there are twenty-eight interest groups listed on the MLA website that range from American Music (111 registered members), to Musical Theatre (forty-six registered members), to Video Game Music (a new interest group, with six members). Interest groups are always open to any new members who want to join, including students.

Networking is important and doesn't need to be a daunting task. Consider the following tips when creating your networking strategy:

- You might need to exude a little more extroverted energy than you typically do, but you don't have to pretend to be someone other than who you are. MLA is a friendly and inclusive environment—with a lot of introverts!—so you can be yourself. That doesn't mean that connections will come to you without effort, though, so you might have to summon some bravery to speak out and socialize more than you might otherwise be inclined to do.
- Don't worry about trying to seem like you already know everything—no one does! Proudly wear the student ribbon on your name badge and let others know that you're attending an MLA meeting to actively learn about the field you are planning to enter.
- Don't limit your conversations to “shop talk” or push your interests about looking for opportunities for jobs and internships. You'll likely have much better success in making connections if you are just friendly and likable. Remember that relationships can build over time; give yourself a chance to get to know people before seeming too opportunistic.
- Identify times and locations to network. For instance, you can try to network during MLA programming, but you may find you have better opportunities to network during the opening and closing receptions, coffee breaks, tours, and poster sessions. Network outside of conference programming, during meals, or after-hours gatherings at the hotel bar.

## SO, HOW CAN NETWORKING BENEFIT YOUR JOB PURSUITS?

Taylor's perspective:

As a student, I began networking with music library professionals not at the MLA national meeting, but the regional Midwest chapter meeting. While attending my first meeting, I showed up early to an event that was about to take place after the regular sessions had concluded. While waiting there, I introduced myself to another attendee who had walked in shortly after. This meeting turned out to be a fortunate circumstance since that person was Misti Shaw, a friendly, well-respected, and outstanding music librarian who is also a great advocate for helping to boost the experiences of new members. Several months later, I attended my first MLA National Meeting, and Misti invited me to dinner with several other music librarians who were similarly friendly and kind to a lurking student. The following year, I attended the national meeting again, and I recognized Scott Stone, one of the librarians I had had dinner with the previous year. It just so happened that Scott was about to change to a new job, which meant that his current job was soon to be open. I felt very fortunate to have heard about this information

14. Music Library Association, “Community Groups: Interest Groups,” accessed 30 July 2019, [https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group\\_select.asp?type=12693](https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/members/group_select.asp?type=12693).

before it even hit the job postings on the MLA website, especially since it was in my home state of California. Scott and I continued talking well after the conference, and his guidance was extremely helpful in getting through the application and interview process of what would soon be my first music librarian position. What if I had not taken that initiative to talk to Misti at the Midwest Chapter meeting? Or if I had not followed up with networking with Misti at the next two national meetings? Would I have been as successful at securing this position? Who knows! It certainly didn't hurt having a heads-up about Scott Stone's upcoming position, and getting the inside information on the job certainly made my interview prep much stronger. Even if I didn't get that particular job, the conversations that I had with Scott and the friend/mentorship that we established gave me more confidence that I was ready to enter the music librarian profession.

Sylvia's Perspective:

As I detailed in my 2018 article for MLA's *Newsletter*, I attended several national and regional MLA conferences as a graduate student. In addition to getting a feel for the field and making great connections, I took advantage of the resources available during the annual conference. I had an assigned mentor, attended the first-time attendee's reception, and had an invaluable cover letter and CV consultation. I made connections on a regional and national scale and learned so much about the profession I hoped to join.<sup>15</sup> I had a very similar experience to Taylor in that my smooth transition from student to emerging professional was due to connections I was able to develop at MLA meetings. The connections I made at MLA allowed for me to cultivate relationships with giving and dedicated individuals who review my professional materials, practice mock interviews, discuss strategies in the music information field (professional development opportunities, strategic plans, salary negotiation), and continue to advocate for me. Librarianship is a collaborative field; one that necessitates networking and relationship building and I am incredibly thankful that I have been able to cultivate such strong relationships over the years.

### **GET INVOLVED: ENGAGEMENT IN COMMITTEES, INTEREST GROUPS, AND PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES**

When it comes to making yourself marketable for a music library professional position, it will help if you can show your engagement with the music library profession. There are a number of ways that you may accomplish this: through publication, service to the profession on committees, or service to other libraries or library events. Essentially, it will help to show that your engagement to the profession doesn't end with your coursework and library job, but rather than you give your time and effort to enrich the music library profession. Getting involved with MLA committees, interest groups, and publishing opportunities is a great way to gain this kind of experience.

There are several ways to get involved in MLA that you can seek out while at the Annual Meeting. One way is to attend the annual "Get Involved" session, where representatives from committees and, occasionally, other MLA-related groups set up tables to talk with attendees, much like a job fair.

Taylor attended the Get Involved session at his first MLA Annual Meeting, while in his first year of library school. At this session, he met the (then) editor of the book review section of *Notes: The Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association*. Taylor knew that a book review

15. Sylvia Yang, "Musings of an Emerging Professional," *MLA Newsletter*, no. 195 (January–February 2018): 7–8, <https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/page/newsletter>.

could be a great opportunity to get a publication in *Notes*, which would help in showing engagement in scholarship to future employers. In talking with the editor, Taylor described his interests and areas of research in musicology. As it turned out, one of the areas in which Taylor had focused his musicological studies was related to a recently published book that needed a reviewer. This fortunate coincidence led to Taylor's first publication and allowed him to put something substantial in his curriculum vitae. While this exact scenario can't be guaranteed, it goes to show that it's worth getting out there, talking to people at MLA, and sharing your interests.

In addition to the Get Involved session, you may also find opportunities at the committee or interest group meetings. All interest group meetings and many committee or subcommittee meetings are open to non-members, and some of them accept self-nominations at the time of the meeting. Even for those committees that do not accept new members at the MLA meeting, it can be well worth attending the committee meeting if you have an interest in joining at a later time. You'll get to know some of the people on the committee (and, more importantly, they will get to know you and observe your interest in their work), you'll hear the issues they discuss, and you'll get an idea of the kind of work that MLA committees do.

Taylor sat in on committee meetings at his first few MLA Annual Meetings and then joined a committee during his last year of library school. Many MLA committees have guidelines that stipulate who can join, and students are not always eligible. If you are interested in joining a committee, you can ask the chair of the committee about member eligibility when you attend their committee meeting or via email.

Attending the Get Involved session at the national MLA meeting in Denver, CO was a professional turning point for Sylvia. She was able to meet the editor of the *Midwest Note-book* (the newsletter for the Midwest Chapter of MLA), the editor for the *MLA Newsletter*, and spoke with a number of committee chairs. Her attendance resulted in publications in both the *Midwest Note-book* and *MLA Newsletter*. She continues to write for both actively today. The article she wrote for the 195th issue of the *MLA Newsletter* directly resulted in her being asked to co-author this very chapter.<sup>16</sup> Sylvia's service on three particular MLA committees (Development, Diversity, Instruction Subcommittee) followed meetings with all three committee chairs at the Get Involved session during her first MLA meeting.

Depending on the size and needs of the chapter, there may even be opportunities for you to gain service experience while still in library school, e.g., as a Secretary/Treasurer or editor of the newsletter. Gaining service experience through positions within the chapter can be much less intimidating than going for a position within the "Big MLA." Building this kind of service experience locally will help serve your local community of music information professionals, it will help you to get to know your fellow officers better, and it also adds some valuable new experience to your CV.

Another opportunity to build your scholarship is to respond to calls to write for the *MLA Newsletter*, or to write about the MLA Annual Meeting for your local chapter's newsletter. Almost all recent library school graduates have pretty thin "publications" sections on their CVs, but these short write-ups in newsletters are an excellent way to help populate that troublesome section.

16. Ibid.

Taylor's first two entries into the "Publications" section of his CV were summaries of sessions for newsletters: a session summary for the *Midwest Note-book* and a plenary summary for MLA's *Newsletter*.

Engagement in scholarship and committees can be beneficial to you in a number of ways: it diversifies your range of experience in the music library profession (in other words, it looks good on your CV), it allows you to make connections with people in your field, and it provides you with interesting experiences to bring with you into jobs and (maybe more importantly) job interviews. When you are in a job interview, your goal is to show what you are capable of through what you have already accomplished. Some music library professional jobs will require you to do research and scholarship, some will require participating in events or groups outside of your normal duties, and many will require you to work as part of a team on committees. If you have done some engagement with the library profession before you get to that point, it will help show that you are already experienced in those areas.

### THE VIRTUAL MEETING EXPERIENCE

The majority of this chapter has focused on the in-person meeting experience, but we would be remiss to neglect the experiences of first-time student attendees at our most recent meeting (March 2021), which was held virtually in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Attending the virtual meeting provided many of the same opportunities for students as attending the in-person meeting. We interviewed five first-time attendees to gain insight regarding their virtual meeting experience and specifically asked about acquiring new knowledge regarding topics in music librarianship, networking, engagement with MLA, and challenges navigating the virtual meeting.<sup>17</sup>

When asked about acquiring music library-specific knowledge, networking, and learning about MLA as an organization, even in a virtual environment, the first-time attendees found the virtual meeting and the members inviting, inclusive, uplifting, and informative.

- **Acquired Knowledge:** The interviewees all reported that attending MLA provided them insight into the music and performing arts library professions that is not discussed in library school or learned from a theoretical perspective. The students learned about different potential avenues their careers might take and about several concepts that were either new or less familiar to them or new concepts (such as information literacy, critical librarianship, and DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] initiatives in music librarianship).
- **Networking:** First-time attendees reported different experiences networking at the virtual meeting. Some participants connected with other first-time attendees, became involved in MLStEP, and joined Slack channels to continue the conversation throughout the meeting. Others shared that they had a positive experience connecting with their mentors and discussing career paths, which gave them real-world examples of how careers can take shape in the music library.

17. The authors would like to sincerely thank Mariela Cifuentes, Jackson Harmeyer, Jeremiah Kamtman, Joaquin Peres, and Jenn Strayer for their insight regarding the first-time attendee experience at the MLA virtual conference in March 2021.

- **General MLA Information:** All interviewees felt that they learned a great deal about MLA from the virtual meeting and thought that they understood the organization well after attending. While not all of the interviewees were certain that they would participate in conference programming in the future, all felt that they understood how to get involved. Several of the interviewees had already either contacted an interest group to join or had an interest group in mind.

When asked about the challenges involved in attending the virtual meeting, three challenges rose to the top: technological challenges, tackling meeting-work-life balance, and an absence of casual meeting and conversation opportunities.

- **Technological Challenges:** Although all of the first-time attendees interviewed shared that the majority of their conference experience was smooth, several experienced technological challenges (registration, Sched, Zoom, Remo, Slack) that required troubleshooting. All five considered this a minor inconvenience, but others may have had a more challenging time troubleshooting technological issues.
- **Tackling Meeting-Work-Life Balance:** We often hear of trying to juggle work-life balance, but many of our interviewees reported difficulty navigating meeting-work-life balance. One attendee shared: “It was hard to unplug from my regular duties, which made it hard for me to watch sessions.”
- **Lack of Casual Meetings and Conversations:** Although there were planned social events and virtual spaces to meet, all five of the first-time attendees interviewed agreed that casual social opportunities (grabbing a coffee or going out to lunch) would have enhanced their meeting experience. Librarians all know the joys of serendipitous browsing—why would serendipitous conversations and meetings be any less of a joy? It’s not uncommon to meet another MLA attendee outside of the conference; Sylvia and Taylor met when one person was on the way to the St. Louis Arch, and the other was headed to the City Museum.

### TAKEAWAYS FROM A FULLY VIRTUAL MEETING

We can only assume that there will be opportunities to attend both fully virtual and hybrid meetings in MLA’s future. When deciding which to attend for your first MLA meeting, it is worth considering the various tradeoffs.

The main advantages to attending a virtual meeting are that the online format is less disruptive to your regular life and removing travel costs makes attendance incredibly cost-effective. Attending a conference becomes more accessible when you don’t have to consider travel arrangements (transportation, lodgings, and other expenses). The tradeoff is that it can be difficult to reserve the time to attend the virtual meeting. Try to be as present as possible during the virtual meeting. You might find it beneficial to take time off or shift your work schedule, make arrangements with your professors ahead of time, and consider your childcare needs in advance.

A disadvantage to attending a virtual meeting relates to networking; attending an in-person meeting and being physically present with colleagues builds community and rapport that may not directly translate to the virtual space. First-time attendees will learn just as much from the presentations, posters, committee meetings, etc., but there is no way to entirely replicate the social



situations of an in-person meeting, where creating relationships and finding lifetime colleagues is easier. A tradeoff for some might be that it is less intimidating to network and meet people in an online environment. When attending a virtual meeting, try to build on these connections. For example, consider reaching out to a speaker after their presentation to introduce yourself and learn more about their work.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, there is no “right way” to attend an MLA meeting. MLA contains a multitude of music information professionals, who all have a unique approach to conference attendance. Some members socialize throughout the entire event and attend every social event they can find when others might opt out of social events. Some attendees set really specific agendas and create a jam-packed schedule, while others take a morning off here or an afternoon off there to explore the conference city. Some members actively participate in the dialogue during session Q&As while others may wish to focus on listening.

Participating in professional organizations, i.e., attending regional and national conferences and meetings, can only benefit and further your career. As Ruthann McTyre states in her chapter on professional organizations:

Professional organizations offer opportunities for involvement at the state, regional, national, and international level and exist to enhance the advancement of the profession and related research as well as to provide a resource for their members, ensuring the future of said profession.<sup>18</sup>

Consider the following tips when preparing to attend your first professional meeting:

- Try to stay in the conference hotel if you are able. Staying at the conference hotel provides you with the ability to easily meet other members of MLA in both formal and informal settings, minimizes any barriers related to travel, and gives you a place to escape to if you need a moment to yourself.
- Cement relationships and networks that you have established at MLA by sharing contact information and sending follow up emails.
- Remember that you’re new to the field. Speak with your faculty beforehand to excuse any absences due to conference attendance, try to complete as much work as you can prior to arriving, and set aside the time to complete work you need to accomplish during the conference.
- Participate thoroughly, but take care of yourself. Get involved, attend sessions, make a friend, gain a mentor, but don’t forget to practice self-care. If you go to a meeting in Portland, no one is going to think poorly of you if you need some downtime or work on an assignment in the MLA sponsored quiet room or if you disappear and stuff yourself with Voodoo Doughnuts.<sup>19</sup>
- Have fun! You’re going to be making connections with life-long colleagues and friends.

18. See this volume’s chapter 4 by Ruthann McTyre.

19. Yang, “Musings of an Emerging Professional,” 7.