

2023 MLA/TLA Conference Report

By Dylan Rykse

The 92nd annual meeting of the Music Library Association took place in St. Louis, Missouri, from 1 to 4 March 2023. This event was the first hybrid MLA conference and its second joint meeting with the Theatre Library Association. I attended the conference virtually from Toronto, Ontario, and was excited to see various topics of personal interest on the program (e.g., early rock 'n' roll, photoplay music). I was also eager to hear from my colleagues in the theatre library world, an area of librarianship unfamiliar to me.

The conference began with a warm welcome from Todd Decker (Washington University in St. Louis). Decker addressed the role of St. Louis in American music history and its reputation as a "gateway city" for notable musicians on their way to larger northern stages, such as New York, Chicago, or Detroit. Repositioning St. Louis as an important destination, Decker highlighted significant events and sites in the city's history. This paralleled Decker's praise for "less celebrated" libraries (e.g. one's local public library branch), which often serve as gateways to prestigious research institutions.

The conference was off to a great start, and that spirit continued with the opening plenary session, "From School Days to Blueberry Hill: Chuck Berry in St. Louis." Moderated by Andy Leach (Rock & Roll Hall of Fame), this panel discussion with Berry's son (Charles Berry Jr.) and former industry colleagues focused on the musician's relationship with his hometown. While the speakers shared anecdotes about Berry's life and career, the most illuminating details involved the city of St. Louis itself, from its historic African American neighbourhood, The Ville – where Berry grew up – to its nightlife. The group discussed Berry's Club Bandstand, the integrated venue he opened in 1958, as well as the staggering series of 209 shows he performed at the famous club Blueberry Hill.

Many excellent presentations followed, and Friday morning's plenary was a conference high point. Introducing the session, Melissa Barton (Yale University) raised the concern that scripted land acknowledgements may be considered superficial and performative. The session, titled "Beyond the Land Acknowledgement: How Music and Theatre Libraries Can Amplify Contemporary Indigenous Voices in the United States," provided one method for performing arts librarians to look beyond and actively support indigenous communities: by spotlighting and celebrating the contributions of indigenous performers and creators in the present or near-present.

Erin Fehr (University of Arkansas at Little Rock) detailed the lives and achievements of three Native American musicians who were trained in the Western art music tradition at federal boarding

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schools: Tsianina Redfeather Blackstone, Zitkála-Šá (Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), and Louis Ballard. Through works such as *The Sun Dance Opera* (1913) and *Shanewis* (1918), these figures bridged the gap between Native American traditional music and Western art music, each leaving their unique and lasting mark on the world.

Heidi Senungetuk (Emory University) spotlighted notable indigenous composers from the United States and Canada, including Brent Michael Davids, Jacqueline Wilson, Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, Dawn Avery, Deantha Edmunds, and Raven Chacon. Senungetuk also performed a miniature from Chacon's series *For Zitkála-Šá* (2017-2020). The work, a graphic score dedicated to Senungetuk herself, visually reflects the presenter/performer's interest in tavlugun (ancestral Iñupiaq women's chin tattoos). This solo violin performance was incredibly moving and a tough act to follow.

Finally, Laurie Arnold (Gonzaga University) discussed the inaccessibility of historical dramas written by Native American playwrights. Citing the extensive research and craft involved in "writing history for the stage," Arnold was dismayed by the general unavailability of these texts – partly a result of publishing requirements – and the lack of an appropriate repository for works of this type. The speaker advocated for a new digital space to make these plays available as a means of amplifying Native American voices and fostering narrative sovereignty.

A personal favourite of the other Friday sessions was "Providing Open Access to Photoplay Music: The Mirskey Collection Digitization Project" by Jim Cassaro and Carlos Peña (University of Pittsburgh). In this presentation, Cassaro described the role and function of music in the silent film era, as well as the history of the Mirskey Collection itself, an archive of rare piano and orchestral "photoplay" music (i.e. music for silent film accompaniment). Peña outlined the process of organizing, inventorying, cataloguing, scanning, and ultimately making the materials available for open access. It was inspiring to hear that musicologist Gillian Anderson has utilized the collection to reconstruct the score for Ernst Lubitsch's film *Rosita* (1923) and is currently doing the same for D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920).

Saturday's plenary, "TLA Lightning Talks: Innovation in Theatre Librarianship," showcased recent and ongoing accomplishments in the theatre library world. For instance, Karin Suni (Free Library of Philadelphia) and her team have transferred a physical 30,000+ card catalogue into a digital play index of stage productions in Philadelphia. Richard Ring (Rhode Island Historical Society) detailed the digital restoration of an 1810 drop scene, which involved photographing the artifact, physically painting those photographs, and then digitally assembling the new pieces. Inspired by French archivist Christian Hottin, Catherine Barnwell (Archive of the Jesuits in Canada) has incorporated interviews into her acquisition process, treating acquisition as an interpersonal relationship with the donor (rather than a standardized administrative operation) to help understand the context in which the archival materials were created and used.

During these presentations, I discovered there is no subclass in Library of Congress Classification for play scripts, so those materials are not collocated like music scores. Fittingly, several presenters shared their efforts to improve play discoverability. Scott Stone (University of California, Irvine) is

using Tagpacker to help users browse plays electronically, while Diana Kin (UCLA Arts Library) is curating theatre LibGuides through a process of student input and collaboration. The TLA lightning talks served as a reminder that every subject area has its own unique challenges, requiring librarians to devise new and creative solutions constantly.

As the conference came to an end, I thought back to the last in-person MLA conference, which I attended in 2020. While there is no match for meeting colleagues in person or the excitement of visiting a new city, my virtual experience at MLA/TLA 2023 was very rewarding, as I learned about new artists, historical figures and events, and the amazing work taking place in libraries across North America. In addition to the excellent program, I did not encounter any technical issues, which made for three smooth days of streaming. Given the various practical, financial, and environmental factors involved in attendance – all of which were voiced at the MLA New Business Townhall – I appreciate the hybrid format. I am looking forward to next year's event!