



The Performance Librarian:

A Career Introduction

Prepared by the Publications Committee

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The performance librarian, often called an orchestra or ensemble librarian, is a music preparation specialist who works in an ensemble library. The musical ensemble they serve is often an orchestra, but could be an opera or ballet company, festival, military service ensemble, or educational institution.

The field of performance librarianship is relatively small and selective. It is a career that appeals to the musically curious and highly organized person who likes direct contact with artists, musicians, and administrators in the production of concerts.

Performance librarians are comprehensive musicians/administrators who must bring a keen attention to detail to all of their work. Many have studied music performance and performed in ensembles, which serves as an excellent frame of reference. As of 2025, no college, conservatory, or university has offered an official program of study or degree in performance librarianship; however, there are internships and apprenticeships where aspiring librarians can gain skills and experience. Many colleges, universities and conservatories offer graduate assistantships or other work-study opportunities in their ensemble libraries.

(See mola-inc.org/p/careers for a list of training opportunities.)

Why is a Performance Librarian considered a musician?

In addition to the many administrative tasks involved in running a library, adept score reading is essential. A librarian must notate musical instructions from conductors, composers, soloists, or principal players on a daily basis. Knowledge of harmony and music theory are important to effectively proofread, edit, or mark cuts. Librarians often transpose or re-orchestrate passages to suit a particular situation. Familiarity with orchestration, string bowings, instrument ranges, and transpositions of instruments is essential. In addition, librarians are expected to be knowledgeable about standard repertoire and performance practices of their genre.

Why is a Performance Librarian also considered an administrator?

The library is the information hub for the ensemble's administration, conductors, and performers. Upon receiving programming information, librarians research editions, versions, timings, publishers, costs, and instrumentation. Managing a budget and library staff is often part of the job. Librarians also must have an intimate knowledge of copyright laws in the countries where they work and tour.

Frequent interactions with publishers and music dealers are required in addition to extensive performance history and library record keeping. Other supportive tasks may include managing recorded music collections, preparing audition excerpts, archiving programs, and answering public inquiries.

In simple terms, the result of the librarian's work is that the right music is in front of the right player at the right time.

Music Acquisition

Once all of the questions of edition or version are answered, the librarian acquires the music the performers will use, including conductors' scores, from publishers or music dealers. In many cases this music is already on hand but in some cases it must be rented or bought anew.

Working closely with publishers of copyrighted music is an important aspect of the librarian's job. Trusting relationships between publishers and librarians can make problems much easier to navigate.

Some music in the public domain can be downloaded as PDFs from websites such as IMSLP.org. These scans are voluntarily contributed and the quality varies; however, they can be useful to a librarian.

Librarians will often share information or resources with other ensembles when the same conductor or soloist is performing a given work in multiple locations.

Music Preparation

The performance librarian collaborates with conductors and soloists about specific requirements for the accurate preparation of the music. String bowings, rehearsal letters or numbers, and measure numbers must be coordinated between the conductor's score and players' parts. The music may also need additional proofreading, layout adjustments, or corrections. To accommodate specific performance needs, editing of tempos, dynamics, articulations, inserts, cuts, or transpositions may be required.

Music notation software is helpful in facilitating changes such as transpositions, inserts, and edits; once the music is in a digital

format, the librarian can quickly make necessary changes and save or share the files. Digital editing programs such as Adobe Acrobat Pro and Photoshop are widely used as tools to improve music. Fixing mistakes, improving readability, and adjusting layout are common uses of these tools.

For orchestras, much time is spent marking string bowings consistently. The conductor or principal string players will generate or approve the bowings, which are then transferred to each part in pencil by the library staff. In some cases the librarians will mark bowing changes throughout the rehearsal process as directed by string principals or conductor.

Music Distribution

Once the music preparation is finished the librarian prepares folders for each individual instrument and then distributes the music to the performers, ideally far enough in advance for practicing. When the ensemble meets frequently they can pick up music in advance of upcoming events, but in some cases other distribution methods are used including providing PDFs (following copyright guidelines) and more uncommonly, mailing or shipping music to a performer for practice purposes.

Rehearsal and Concert Duty

Librarians almost always attend rehearsals and concerts to distribute folders and assist with any emerging issues such as misplaced parts or unexpected changes to the music. In a concert setting the librarian often sets out the conductor and soloist scores. After the rehearsal or concert the librarians collect the music and store it until it is next needed.

Post-concert work

After the last concert the folders are “broken down” meaning each piece is removed, sorted, and inventoried. In some cases, cuts and/ or retouches may need to be removed. The librarians either store the music, send it back to the rental publisher, or return to the conductor or soloist if using their materials. Other duties can include keeping records of performance history, timings, and bowings.

Employment Terms

Performance librarians work under a variety of employment terms. Many major symphony orchestras, opera, and ballet companies with collective bargaining agreements (CBA) will employ full-time library staff under the same agreement or very similar terms of pay and benefits as the performers. This type of work is often quite sought after. Other librarians are employed as non-union administrative staff members, and some work under hourly or per-project agreements.

Types of Performance Librarians

The Symphony Orchestra Librarian

The symphony orchestra librarian is the most common librarian within MOLA, usually referred to as an Orchestra Librarian. These librarians are expected to research, prepare, and distribute music for an orchestra’s concert season. Their duties are mostly what we have outlined earlier. Challenges facing orchestra librarians are the potentially large volume of bowings to mark, changes of bowings, pops concerts which may involve obscure or unfamiliar repertoire, children’s concerts, budgetary constraints, and compliance with copyright laws.

The Opera Librarian

Unique challenges facing the opera librarian require flexibility to react to continuous changes such as cuts being added or removed, insertion of excerpts from secondary sources, and transpositions of arias for specific singers. These challenges require the librarian to facilitate early collaboration with the conductor, management, library, singers (and their agents) months or years in advance of the performance. It is the responsibility of the opera librarian to convey the pertinent information (and the ensuing changes) to everyone involved in the production, including stage managers, stage directors, set and lighting designers, accompanists, coaches, prompters, backstage conductors, soloists, and ballet and chorus members. An additional challenge is the difficulty of replacing lost parts given how specific the performance instructions are. The opera librarian must also develop and work with an extensive collection of vocal scores, overseeing the purchase, care, and lending of these materials, as well as the production of vocal scores not otherwise available. Some scores might feature a new translation or transliteration, or might be a compilation of materials from varied sources. In certain situations the librarian may be responsible for the preservation of older materials, especially those with invaluable, venerable, or irreplaceable performance markings. For more information about opera librarianship, please see the MOLA publication, ***Opera: Friend or Foe?***

The Ballet Librarian

The ballet librarian has additional responsibilities intrinsic to this medium, since the music is subject to extensive revision and adaptation by the choreographer, often necessitating cuts and sequence changes in the music. Therefore the librarian must be able to make logical cuts, remaining aware of key centers, modulations, and transformations of the music. The librarian may have to transcribe music from a recording or piano version that the choreographer or ballet presenter arranged. A librarian with a ballet company must thoroughly know the standard ballet repertoire, and also the major choreographers of these works and the various adaptations and arrangements available. For example, there are several works entitled *Romeo and Juliet*, and for each the “standard” arrangements vary by choreographer. Both opera and ballet librarians are resources for other performance librarians, offering assistance in locating, assembling, and preparing music within their specialties. For more information, please see the MOLA publication, ***Ballet Music: A Survival Guide***.

The Academic Librarian

The performance librarian in an academic environment oversees the music preparation for multiple ensembles which may include orchestras, bands, choirs, opera/dance productions, and chamber music ensembles, and also provides music for readings and repertoire classes. With ever-changing personnel and conductors, music is constantly remarked. The academic librarian may be required to provide excerpted parts for auditions. When working with pre-professional musicians there is an opportunity to educate them about the professional world of music.

The Military Service Librarian

These are librarians who are members of the military with a specialty in music. Challenges of this fast-paced environment include short notice for the need of music for ceremonies and other high profile events. Also, as members of the military, these librarians must adhere to all codes and regulations of their branch of service.

The Festival Librarian

The festival librarian works in either a short-term professional or academic concert series, or sometimes a combination of both. Given the nature of festivals, challenges can arise with frequent last minute changes, significant time constraints, limited access by the librarian to the library and facilities in advance, and students, faculty artists and staff who are not local. The job of a festival librarian requires extra planning and logistical solutions.

The Personal Librarian

The personal librarian is hired by a conductor, soloist, or artist manager to ensure that the preferred music for the artist is prepared and sent in advance of engagements. Personal librarians work under a variety of contracts or agreements which include, hourly, per-performance, or per-project compensation. Challenging aspects of this job are frequent last minute changes, difficulty in contacting artists, music storage, and international shipping.

Other Related Opportunities

Since many librarians have backgrounds as musicologists, composers, critics, or performers, they may find opportunities to teach, compose, or write about music. They may be asked to organize training programs for orchestra staff, researchers, or interns. They may teach music bibliography or other subjects within their areas of expertise, or represent the organization at events.

A performance librarian interested in taking a more active role in the world of music librarianship may publish bibliographic studies or other scholarly works, including errata research for existing editions, or preparation of entirely new editions.

Training Opportunities

Preparing for a career in performance librarianship should include a broad and intensive education in all aspects of music and the liberal arts. This field requires a combination of formal education and extensive practical experience in a performing organization. Most performance librarians have bachelor's degrees in some aspect of music, and many have graduate degrees in music or other related fields.

Most music schools and many library and information science schools have programs that offer a variety of related course work which could be applied to performance librarianship, including concurrent MM/MLS and MLIS programs.

Meaningful opportunities for training are found in ensemble libraries that work as part of, or in conjunction with, accredited music and library degree programs at colleges, universities, and conservatories.

This may include work study or graduate assistantships which, depending on the institution, may work under the guidance of a staff performance librarian responsible for overseeing music preparation. This opportunity can provide the student with a basic skill set, a sense of the pace and organizational structure of a library, and invaluable experience with the many facets of performance librarianship.

Many aspiring librarians train under the guidance of an experienced librarian. This can include fellowships and internships available through orchestras, other performance organizations, and summer music festivals. This method of apprenticeship is the most useful and common way to develop effective techniques and networks. There is no substitute for on-the-job training and experience.

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Prepared by the

***Major Orchestra Librarians' Association
Publications Committee***

1993 edition

Clinton F. Nieweg · Philadelphia Orchestra

David Bartolotta · San Francisco Ballet

Peter Conover · Houston Symphony

Gary Corrin · Toronto Symphony

Marcia Farabee · National Symphony

John Grande · Metropolitan Opera

Robert M. Grossman · Philadelphia Orchestra

Paul Gunther · Minnesota Orchestra

James Kortz · St. Paul Chamber Orchestra

Mary C. Plaine · Baltimore Symphony

Rosemary Summers · Metropolitan Opera

Lawrence Tarlow · New York Philharmonic

John Van Winkle · San Francisco Symphony

Revised in 2001

John Campbell · San Francisco Symphony

Russ Girsberger · New England Conservatory

Margo Hodgson · National Arts Centre Orchestra

Carol Lasley · Florida Philharmonic

Cathy Miller · The U.S. Army Field Band

Patrick Zwick · Utah Symphony

Revised in 2016

Sarah Anderson · Annapolis Symphony

Paul Beck · The Juilliard School

Robert Greer · Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra

Travis Hendra · Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra

Melissa Robason · The Metropolitan Opera

Revised in 2026

Laura Conrad · Santa Fe Opera

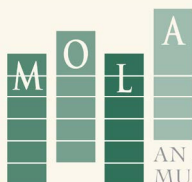
Katie Klich · University of Michigan

Emily (& Aaron) Marsh · Charlotte Symphony

Benjimen Neal · Jacksonville Symphony

For Further Information about MOLA visit our website at:

www.mola-inc.org



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