



The Performance Librarian:

A Career Introduction

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The performance librarian, often called an orchestra librarian, is a music preparation specialist who works in an ensemble library. The musical ensemble he or she serves 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 2015, no college, conservatory, or university has offered an official program of study or degree in performance librarianship, however there are many internships and apprentice programs where aspiring librarians can gain skills and experience (see www.mola-inc.org/job openings for a list of internships).

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 country where they work and tour. For more information, please refer to the MOLA publication "The Music We Perform."

Frequent interactions with publishers and music dealers are required in addition to extensive performance history and library record keeping. Other supportive tasks 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 PDF scans via internet sites 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.

Computer engraving programs are 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 now 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 the music must be mailed or transmitted via emailed PDF files. Emailing of PDF files is only legal if the music is in the public domain.

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 pick up all 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. The librarians either store the music or send it back to the rental publisher. Other duties can include keeping records of performance history, timings, and bowing masters.

Employment Terms

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

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 deleted, 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, including orchestras, bands, 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 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 or significant time constraints, coupled with 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. Challenging aspects of this job are frequent last minute changes, difficulty in contacting artists, music storage, and 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 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 programs.

The best opportunities for training are found in major ensemble libraries that work in conjunction with accredited music and library

degree programs. An internship with one of these organizations provides the serious 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 librarians train under the guidance of an experienced librarian. This venerated 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*

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www.mola-inc.org

