

*Stories and Lessons from the World's Leading Opera, Orchestra Librarians, and Music Archivists*, Volumes 1 & 2 by Patrick Lo (University of Tsukuba, Japan), Robert Sutherland (Metropolitan Opera (retired), USA), Wei-En Hsu (The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, Hong Kong) and Russ Girsberger (Naval School of Music, USA).

Book Review by Travis Newton

In the grand scheme of the opera and orchestra industries, there are many who toil behind the scenes in order to facilitate high quality performances – stagehands, staff members, volunteers, board members, and the list goes on. Among these individuals, music librarians (also known as performance librarians) may be the least understood, and in many cases, the least recognized in terms of the importance of their contribution to the planning, rehearsal, and performance process. As stated within these volumes, the performance librarian's work “involves preparation for the future, attention to the present, and preservation of the past.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, no season of performances can be planned without deep consultation with performance librarians, who are tasked with sourcing appropriate material (either through purchasing, renting, or locating music in their existing collection), as well as supplying detailed information about the required number of players for a given work. These individuals also go to great lengths to prepare parts for performance (including bowings, correcting errors in parts, and transferring other important markings), as well as to preserve the music for future performances.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick Lo, Robert Sutherland, Wei-En Hsu and Russ Girsberger, *Stories and Lessons from the World's Leading Opera, Orchestra Librarians, and Music Archivists*, Volume 1 (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2022), 267.

In short, because of the nature of how orchestral musicians perform, the notes, markings, and condition of printed music is of utmost importance, and the weighty responsibility of sourcing, preparing and preserving these materials falls on the performance librarian.

For these reasons, this two-volume set is of high value for anyone who is interested in understanding how orchestras work. There is precious little published literature that delves into the inner workings of orchestras, much less into specific aspects of their operations. Therefore, those who would like a glimpse of how orchestras and opera companies operate and the people who drive their success will glean a tremendous amount of information from this text. Composed of interviews with dozens of music librarians and archivists, the first volume focuses on those working in North and South America, while the second features interviews with individuals in Europe and Asia. The result is a remarkably global and holistic view of a very specific field.

The efforts toward broad representation that the book undertakes should not go unmentioned. In addition to its global scope, the librarians featured are diverse in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity. That said, it does seem that the world of music librarianship, not unlike the world of classical music, lacks overall racial diversity – certainly a shortcoming for the entire field of orchestral music.<sup>2</sup> The book does, however, highlight librarians who are at various stages of their careers, including veterans and relative newcomers. The fresh perspectives offered by those who have joined the field more recently seem to be welcomed by those already doing the work – not surprising given the general interest of music librarians of always learning more.

One point that the book makes very effectively is that, in general, performance librarianship is a profession in which the majority of training is on the job, not through a formal

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<sup>2</sup> Aaron Flagg, “Anti-Black Discrimination in American Orchestras,” *Symphony*, Summer 2020, <https://americanorchestras.org/anti-black-discrimination-in-american-orchestras/>.

degree or certification process. First and foremost, performance librarians are trained musicians – in fact, in some orchestras, the librarians are members of the ensemble, some who perform and some who do not. In either case, these individuals must have a deep knowledge of the particular needs of professional musicians, and this foundational understanding would be difficult, if not impossible, for someone who isn't a trained musician themselves. Beyond this musical training, performance librarians' best chance at the specialized training that is necessary is to simply start doing the work, learning alongside those who have extensive experience and expertise.

Fortunately, the existence of this two-volume set will provide a valuable primer for those who are considering exploring this career path. Furthermore, music librarians are known to be extremely generous with their time and expertise, whether they are being called upon to replace a conductor's lost score, transpose a part for a musician, or assist with season planning. Aspiring performance librarians should consider reaching out to these individuals, many of whom can surely be reached by calling their ensemble's administrative offices. After all, music librarians will understand better than anyone the value of learning the tools of the trade from someone who is already doing the work.