



An Interview With Robert Curtis

Neil Hughes, University of Georgia

SEMLA is about to lose (at least in the active, day-to-day sense) a stalwart supporter and a dear friend and colleague. Robert Curtis (Head, Maxwell Music Library, Tulane University) is leaving Tulane later this year in order to devote his time and energies to his family. Robert has taught and served Tulane's community of music users for eighteen years. Prior to that he worked at Sam Houston State University, serving in the library in both professional and paraprofessional capacities and also teaching in the music department. Robert's Ph.D. in musicology is from the University of Texas at Austin, as is his library degree. The following interview occurred in March of this year.

A preliminary *nota bene* from Robert: When Neil called me and started talking about a written interview for *Breve Notes*, I quickly broke him off and asked why on earth anyone would want to read what I think about things. When I learned what the questions were like, I said that these questions weren't for me, they were for *every* music librarian as we all grapple with what we are and what we do. I worried that although Neil's questions are excellent topics of discussion, my answers standing alone might 1) be construed as "the one, right answer," or 2) they might sound like a preacher or (worse) a parent. I told Neil that what was truly needed was that *all* readers formulate their own answers and have the willingness to share those thoughts and feelings in their lives. I then finally agreed that if readers understood and reacted to the interviewer's questions in this context, I was willing to start the ball rolling with my own responses.

Neil Hughes: Robert, can you always draw a clear distinction in your mind between what you feel are your most *important* contributions to music librarianship and what your most *enjoyable* experiences have been in the profession? Because it seems to many of us in SEMLA that you are someone who has truly enjoyed his years in this profession, whatever frustrations and annoyances you may have encountered along the way.

Robert Curtis: Is that a thought-provoking question or what? If it's true that one of our greatest sources of pleasure is in giving, then can we separate "important" from "enjoyable"? To me—and this is true over eighteen years—SEMLA members are incredibly giving people, sometimes in big ways, but equally important, sometimes with just a word, a smile. Is this the impression of other members who have been around a few years? Of new members? Surely it is not by chance that SEMLA combines wonderful and productive professional actions—in our libraries, with SEMLA, and with MLA—with being a shamelessly fun-loving, let's-have-a-good-time chapter.

As for contributions, people already know what I've done, and it's far more important that each of us takes a moment to think about—to remember—his/her own contributions and, especially, the contributions of others. Contributions are gifts. Gifts to the goals and causes of our profession, but also gifts to each other.

NH: Who are some of the people who have had the greatest influence on your views on what a "good music library" should offer our patrons? I suppose I'm really also asking you here who may have most influenced you to develop your own personal style as a music librarian, and also how you might describe that

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Membership Information

Membership in SEMLA is available at three levels: Personal (\$5.00 U.S.), Institutional (\$5.00 U.S.), and Student (\$2.00 U.S.). An application for membership appears on the back page of this newsletter. Make checks payable to the Southeast Chapter of the Music Library Association. Send membership applications, renewals, dues, and corrections and updates to:

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FROM THE CHAIR

Diane Steinhaus

University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

*A little Madness in the Spring
Is wholesome even for the King.*

Who knew that Emily Dickinson was a college basketball fan?! But we won't go there. I write to you between doses of antihistamine as Spring begins to take a firm hold on our area of the globe. This annual ritual of unfolding freshness and color never ceases to amaze me and, like any other self-respecting transplant, reminds me why I call the Southeast home. Okay, so we'll be sweating in the heat and humidity soon enough (although you deep South folks no doubt have a head start on that!).

True to form, our interim chapter meeting at the MLA meeting in Crystal City, Virginia this past February was another splendid combination of constructive discussion and good humor (even though Sarah forgot to bring the beer). We welcomed two new members—**Shannon Watson** (Jacksonville Public Library) and **John Leslie** (University of Mississippi)—and seven first-time attendees—**Tsukasa Cherkaoui** (Lynn University), **Michelle Cronquist** (University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill), **David Guion** (University of North Carolina–Greensboro), **Eric Harbeson** (Florida State University), **Greg Johnson** (University of Mississippi Blues Archive), **Catherine Pellegrino** (University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill), and **Jaroslav Szurek** (Sanford University). We also had the honor of bidding farewell to our dear colleague **Robert Curtis**, soon to retire from Tulane University. Elsewhere in this issue you will find a delightful interview between Robert and our intrepid “reporter,” **Neil Hughes** (University of Georgia). If you would like to join your colleagues in honoring Robert's decades of contributions to our chapter and national organization, please send your donation—for any MLA fund—designated “in honor of Robert Curtis,” to MLA's administrative office:

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8551 Research Way
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Much of our interim meeting was spent on discussions of SEMLA's role as Local Arrangement hosts for the 2006 national meeting in Memphis and MLA's 75th anniversary. Our own **Roberta Ford** (Columbus State University) chairs the Ad Hoc Committee on MLA's 75th Anniversary, which includes fellow SEMLANians **Neil Hughes** and **Laurel Whisler** (Furman University), and as ex-officio members, Local Arrangements Chair, **Anna Neal** (University of Memphis), and Program Chair, **Lois Kuyper-Rushing** (Louisiana State University). They have been working since the Fall on ideas to make our 75th unforgettable. As you know, the MLA board has approved the Committee's recommendation to commission an orchestral piece to be premiered by the Memphis Symphony Orchestra at the 2006 meeting. Out of concern over the fundraising burden the cost of the commission could put on the LAC, the MLA board initially set a fundraising cap of \$7500. The chapter's enthusiasm for sponsoring this effort and our confidence in being able to raise \$10,000, half of the projected \$20,000 cost for an eight-minute orchestral work by a prominent composer, were conveyed by Laurel to the board after our meeting. The board subsequently voted to remove the original cap. **Phil Vandermeer** (University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill) has been appointed from both SEMLA and MLA to join Don Roberts and two representatives from the Memphis Symphony Orchestra on the commissioning committee. They are coordinating their efforts with the 75th anniversary committee. Fundraising plans for the commission and any other activities we might want to sponsor as the LAC in 2006 are already underway. **Laurel Whisler**, with the assistance of **Lynn Jacobson** (Jacksonville Public Library) and **Phil Vandermeer**, is spearheading the chapter's efforts—you will be hearing from her soon!

But before Memphis we have next Fall at Emory University in Atlanta to look forward to! Below you'll find some preliminary information about our next chapter meeting, to be hosted by **Joyce Clinkscapes** (Emory University) and Company. Please mark your calendars for October 7-9, 2004, and contact Program Chair **Lenny Bertrand** (Tulane University; lennyb@tulane.edu) if you would like to present a paper at the meeting.

I wish y'all a wonderful Spring!

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Interview

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personal professional style. (These people needn't be music librarians themselves—they could be favorite patrons who have offered helpful advice or personal insights over the years, a favorite professor from your undergrad. days, etc.)

RC: I don't want to name names in response to this or any question. There are so many people who have profoundly influenced me, and if we were just talking I'd probably throw out some names, but it doesn't seem right to name a few in print and leave others out. I hope that isn't misinterpreted, for I do believe it essential that everyone keeps alive the memories of mentors and exemplars. I mean, why do we remember someone so profoundly and with such feelings of gratitude at their death, but not think enough about what they give us while they are alive?

As for describing a personal professional style, I'm not sure I even like the idea of having a style! And I'm certain that my staff would roll their eyes at the notion of my being stylistic. A *modus operandi*, perhaps, or still better, how we all stumble through library quagmires hoping to keep our sanity! Aside from attention to the quality of work on whatever I'm doing, I think the essential factor is the quality of our dealings with others, be they colleagues or library users. I've been blessed with having three wonderful staff who have been with me for all (in one case almost all) of my eighteen years at Tulane. So I've had the luxury of having an efficient and rewarding teamwork environment that applies to all aspects of our work, including dealing with library users. Everyone's ongoing challenge is to drop fixed notions of how something or someone is supposed to be and instead find ways for positive dealings and interactions. For just being in the moment and not in what we think that moment is supposed to be like. Easy to say!

NH: Continuing the thread of the previous question, what then should a "good music *librarian*" offer to patrons?

RC: A standard answer might be, "to give library users what they need when they need it." But we all know that it goes far beyond that. Do we also offer an environment and personal contact that results in patrons wanting to come back? Are we not in essence selling our product? Do we understand and believe in the importance of that product deeply enough to allow positive and constructive patron interactions to happen?

NH: What key advice might you offer to a new member of our profession as s/he strikes out in that first job, hovering somewhat nervously (but not too far from the punch bowl) at that first-ever SEMLA or MLA opening reception? And I'm not just asking what you might say to people with the M.L.S. degree or archival certification, because I know you have long been one of our strongest advocates for greater recognition of and institutional support for paraprofessional music library staff.



Left to right: MLA President Laura Dankner, Robert Curtis, and SEMLA Chair Diane Steinhaus at the interim meeting in Washington DC.

RC: Be conscious of the vital, giving service that music librarianship is. Know yourself and go after what you truly want—for music librarianship, but also for yourself.

NH: You served on the MLA Board as Member-at-Large during the worst of the Association's financial and management crises of the late 1990s, and you and I have talked a good deal about those dark days. We all remain grateful to you for the important part you played in guiding us through those awful times, but the impression I have is that not only you but all the other members of those MLA Boards in question came away from it very much humbled by what you each saw exposed in one another. Without going into inappropriate detail, can you affirm or perhaps modify this impression that I have, and perhaps share a little with us about how that experience affected you?

RC: I'll answer this in more detail because I feel that it's important that people understand some things. Those two years were very difficult for everyone on the Board. No fun. The lightning struck at my first Board meeting, and the issue dominated through my last meeting and extended beyond. The experience was humbling because of our shocking realization of how vulnerable MLA was. Like the effect of 9/11, this came out of the blue. It wasn't just the loss of money, but also the sudden situation where MLA, an association with over eight hundred members, suddenly had no business office and no obvious guidelines on what should be done. It was also personally humbling for me because of the wonderful courage, strength, and determination shown by every single Board member.

Regarding how the experience affected me, and aside from grappling with the situation itself, there was disappointment in all of us that "onward and upward" had been replaced with "how can we even tread water?" Just starting at the point of my first meeting,

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Buffalo, NY 14260

University of Mobile

J.L. Bedsole Library
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New Members

Mary Rose Adkins is Assistant Professor and Cataloging/Database Management Librarian at Dacus Library, Winthrop University. She is responsible for authority control for all collections, and she catalogs special collections, focusing primarily on the music collection in the Music Library. She is also involved with cataloging the digital collections of the archives department and the Small Business Development Center. She has taught piano for over 30 years, and is nationally certified with MTNA. She is a former church music director and liturgist and directed adult and children's choirs and handbell choirs. She has been at Winthrop for nearly 4 years.

Kirstin Dougan received her B.M. in Viola Performance, *cum laude*, from Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin. She went on to earn an M.M. in Viola Performance from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, where she was inducted into Pi Kappa Lambda. In 2001 she earned her M.L.S. from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and was inducted into Beta Phi Mu. After graduating from UW–Madison she was a metadata librarian in their digital library group. Since June of 2003 she has been the Public Services Librarian at Duke University's Music Library, where she is responsible for reference, instruction and outreach, selection of visual media, and overseeing the daily operation of the Music Library and Media Center. She was recently invited to serve on the Statistics Subcommittee of MLA and is also a member of ALA, ACRL, and Sigma Alpha Iota.

Ana Dubnjakovic is a native of Croatia and holds two degrees in composition. She is currently enrolled in the library school at Louisiana State University and expects to graduate in August 2004.

Greg Johnson is Curator of the Blues Archive in the Department of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Mississippi. Greg holds a M.L.I.S. as well as a B.M. in History and Literature from the University of Southern Mississippi. When he's not studying the blues, he and his wife Dasha perform traditional Irish dance music.

John Leslie is beginning his second year of professional service as Assistant Professor and Catalog Librarian at the University of Mississippi. His musical training began with piano and guitar lessons at an early age, continuing through the B.M. degree in music theory at Furman University. John took his library degree at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. In his free time, he enjoys gardening and cooking, baseball and college football, and eighteenth-century literature.

Susan Potter is currently living in Florida, the Sunshine State, where she just received a library science degree from the University of South Florida. Currently she is working in the St. Petersburg College Libraries, and hopes to find herself more connected to the Music Library profession shortly. Her music degrees are from the University of Connecticut, the University of Vermont, and Temple University, and she has taught music in Massachusetts, Illinois, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, California and Ohio at a variety of post-secondary institutions.

Jason M. Rogers is presently working on his M.L.I.S. at the University of North Carolina–Greensboro. He received his high school diploma and B.M. degree in horn performance from the North Carolina School of the Arts, and he has completed some graduate work in Music Performance and Music History at Ohio University. A resident of Winston-Salem, he currently works as a bookkeeper in a local retail store in Greensboro while completing his library studies.

Interview

Continued from page 4

I think we all had ideas and aspirations on what we could accomplish. And suddenly all that was on the back burner and we were thrust into an unexpected and ongoing chain of events. During the early 1990s I had been a part of moving the MLA Fund into much more aggressive investments, and the Fund grew beautifully during the amazing bull market of that decade. And so I remember coming to the Board wanting to see effective ways that MLA could begin to use its MLA Fund. Instead, it was used—again and again—to bail MLA out, and while that is also a reason the Fund is so important, it did mean that any other use of it was postponed. Which has remained the case, a theme I spoke up on at the “town meeting” on strategic financial planning in Washington this year. I think it is time to consider using the MLA Fund like an endowment and in ways that will broaden what MLA does. To put the Fund back in the spotlight, but for different reasons.

NH: You have served SEMLA in many important capacities, including Chair and until very recently, as Archivist. You’re also a native-born Southerner. Your present interviewer, despite having lived here nearly eighteen years, is no sort of Southerner at all, having grown up more than 400 miles north of the Montana border in Alberta, Canada. (The Deep South for me was, for the longest time, Calgary.) Yet I would have to say that SEMLA, for all the present diversity of its membership, has many distinctly—and for me, almost without exception desirable—Southern qualities that extend well beyond our noted attention to regional musics at our conferences: we’re passionate; we’re sometimes quirky, occasionally even eccentric; we regularly treat one another as kin before we approach the more mundane relationships we have as professional colleagues; and there’s a certain graciousness and an indirect quality to our group approach to the rest of MLA and its business affairs that seems ever so slightly old-world in nature compared to that perhaps exercised by other chapters. Do you agree with my foreigner’s impressions to any extent? How “Southern” (with a capital S) is SEMLA? And if it isn’t anything particularly Southern that characterizes us, what is it, and what has made SEMLA special for you?

RC: SEMLA has been special for me because of the quality of its membership, a quality that goes without saying for anyone who has attended meetings or looked at the record of what its members have achieved. But I don’t think the levels of achievement can be directly attributed to our “Southernness,” as if there’s something in our blood that makes us superior! Still, I think you are absolutely right, the South’s tradition of hospitality, personal warmth, openness, and avoidance of excessive formality is alive

and well in SEMLA, and that environment permeates our gatherings and the wonderful interactions among our membership. It encourages people to open up—to grow—and that’s what has happened both with individuals and collectively.

NH: Do you see any long-term threats to MLA and its constituent chapters that we should be planning for now? And the obverse: what opportunities and promise does the future hold for us?

RC: I think the long-term threats to MLA are the threats to our culture. Music librarianship exists to serve our culture and to make it accessible and alive for anyone and everyone. Damage to the integrity and higher values of our culture can undermine what MLA is and does.

It is our challenge to find rewarding music wherever it may be and then to protect it, preserve it, and allow and encourage it to enter people’s lives. That challenge is a tremendous opportunity for all of us.

As for future opportunities and promise, given this context I don’t think MLA and music libraries have ever been more important. I sometimes feel we are like Medieval monks and nuns in doing what we can to preserve the best qualities of our culture and pass them on to future generations. Of course I do not mean here that we must focus on classical (vs. popular) music—there are artistic glories throughout our culture. The bottom line of music’s importance is its power, more than with any other art, to lift us out of the ordinary. It is our challenge to find rewarding music wherever it may be and then to protect

it, preserve it, and allow and encourage it to enter people’s lives. That challenge is a tremendous opportunity for all of us.

NH: What are the most marked changes (for good or for bad) that you’ve seen in SEMLA during your time as a member? In MLA?

RC: My answer is the same for both SEMLA and MLA. While we may not be batting a thousand, the changes for the good vastly overwhelm anything counterproductive. I’ve been fortunate throughout my career to blend librarianship with teaching in music departments, so I’ve been on both sides of the fence. And I’m here to tell you that the quality, dedication, and spirit of music librarians is overwhelming. We’re a breed that rises to the occasion and comes up with means to accomplish what needs doing. I am so pleased to see this quality in younger members of SEMLA and MLA, and the task for them and for our associations will remain a willingness and commitment to change as our culture changes, to do what needs doing.

NH: You’ve described yourself to me, in your typically self-disparaging manner, as a cynic. Yet few of us know anyone within

Continued on next page

SEMLA or MLA who has appeared more outwardly passionate about music librarianship, its goals, and its future. Perhaps a better description of you might be a “slightly-despairing optimist”?

RC: If I told you I was a cynic, I was misusing the word. A cynic is someone who attributes all actions to selfish motives, and that’s not me. But that said, we all know instances where cynicism is appropriate, and we were probably talking about one of those. It almost certainly wasn’t talk about music librarianship, in which cynicism would have no place. It’s admittedly true that my staff has frequently commented on my walking around the music library and unconsciously but quite audibly sighing. Yet I think that while it is important to recognize, lament, and combat things that hold us back, it’s also absolutely essential that we maintain ongoing focus on the extraordinary wealth of positive aspects in our music and our profession.

NH: What do you want to say to us in parting, Robert, as opposed to all this quasi-journalistic hoo-ha to which I’ve been forcing you to respond?

RC: It’s a sad and beautiful world. We are so fortunate to be in a profession that deals with this fact, and we are incredibly fortunate to have each other as colleagues and allies. At our Washington SEMLA meeting I stammered out some thanks to the membership for all that these people have given me, and that’s equally true for the MLA membership. I feel blessed that you have come into my life, and I know that without exception, I have left every SEMLA and MLA meeting that I ever attended with the feeling that I was a better person, that somehow a part of each of you rubbed off on me. There is no way I can express adequate gratefulness for that.

2004 Election

Call for Nominations

The SEMLA Nominating Committee is soliciting nominations for two offices: Member-At-Large and Vice Chair/Chair Elect. Descriptions of both offices are available on the SEMLA Web site: <http://jpl.coj.net/semla/bylaws.html>.

Of particular interest for this election is the fact that Vice Chair/Chair Elect will be in office leading up to and during the MLA meeting in Memphis in 2006, so it would be advantageous if nominees for this position have knowledge of MLA procedures, budgeting practices, and other similar information.

Please send your nominations to any member of the nominating committee:

Laurel Whisler (Chair)
Furman University
laurel.whisler@furman.edu

Lois Kuyper-Rushing
Louisiana State University
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Alan Ringwood
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Biographies of the candidates, ballots, and voting procedures will appear in the August issue of *Breve Notes*. Election winners will be announced at the conclusion of the business meeting in October.

2004 SEMLA Meeting

Call for Papers

Preparations for SEMLA 2004 are under way. This year’s meeting will be hosted by Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, October 7-9. The Holiday Inn Select in downtown Decatur will be our conference hotel, offering an \$89 single/double room rate.

Joyce Clinkscales (Emory University), Dennis Clark (Vanderbilt University), the local arrangements committee, and Program Chair Lenny Bertrand (Tulane University) are currently organizing programming for the conference. Papers, presentation ideas, and program suggestions are welcome and encouraged. You are part of what makes SEMLA vibrant, vital, informative, and fun. We look forward to hearing from you.

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