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by Lisa Peet
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In this series, we profile librarians, archivists, and other library workers who use their LIS expertise in unusual and interesting roles, to showcase the breadth of library and information science careers.



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Mitchell, a 2013 *LJ* Mover & Shaker, always knew she wanted to be involved with opera and libraries—she sings, and originally envisioned herself working in a conservatory library. Because she spent so much time at her local library listening to opera, her father suggested she get a job there, and she's been working at FPL since she was 16.

When she got her MLS at Queens College in 2010, an internship doing archival work at the Metropolitan Opera Music Library turned into a part-time special projects position. Since then she has been helping catalog the Metropolitan's extensive collection of performance notes dating back to the 19th century, and using that access to develop a series of public talks, "Opera: Steps to the Stage," to engage the general population with opera and classical music, and serving as a guest speaker for the Metropolitan Opera Guild's Opera Outlook series.

_LJ_: What makes the Met's collection unique? And what are the challenges in working with the material?

Tanisha Mitchell: The music library is a performance library. Its purpose is to serve the performers in the organization as well as people behind the scenes. The notes for a production are preserved [there]. What makes it unique is that you capture a performance in time. For example, if people love Maria Callas, there are orchestra parts there from when she was performing. If somebody really wanted to know, "What did [the musicians] do? Did they accompany her when she sang this part? If they didn't accompany her, did she have an extra line?", that's there. It's like a puzzle piece that fits that historical performance. Everything isn't going to be the same every night, and then different conductors have different characteristics they want to bring out in the score. As an example, there's an aria that Leontyne Price does in *Manon Lescaut*. I've been learning that aria for years, and it's been hard for me to figure out—how do you do so-and-so—because I'm also a singer. I saw where she took the breaths in the aria, and I tried it, and it works!

What makes it challenging is the fact that the [Metropolitan Opera] administration, their number one mission is the performance, not the preservation of it. You have a rich collection, but you have to—I'm not going to say fight, but you have to continue to put it in the forefront, to say, "This is important, and this needs to be preserved in a certain kind of way."

How does your archival work connect to your public outreach programming?

During my time at the Metropolitan Opera I have kept my part-time librarian position at Freeport. In 2015, [FPL] had two librarians who retired. One of them handled the classical music series, the other one handled the art lecture series, so

their work was given to me, and I had to figure out a way to revive the classical music division.

I went to the chief [Metropolitan Opera] librarian and said, “I want to create a series that makes classical music and opera accessible. Is it possible that I can use the materials from this library, along with the visuals, and create a series?” He said, “Absolutely.” I use orchestra charts for the Met orchestra from Carnegie Hall and the music that was used by famous performers—I made digital copies and I created an opera talk series. I thought that it was only going to be for [FPL], but word got out, and it spread. On average, I have about 10 libraries per month that I present to.

For example, I did a program for the Port Washington Public Library not too long ago on Leontyne Price. I do an interactive timeline. But we have, in the [Metropolitan Opera] Library, scores with all of her notes, even where she was married to a certain gentleman and they got a divorce, and she crossed out his name—little things like that. People, when they see it, [say], “Wow, this is her handwriting, this is what she was thinking.”

We have a lot of first edition scores that came out at the time that the composer was living. The original Porgy and Bess score is laced with the N-word. If you told somebody that, they would not believe you. In my program, I show them the original score. When they say, “Oh, I went to see *Porgy and Bess*,” it did not sound like what the score looked like when Gershwin created it—but this is the progress between the two [versions].

How has the pandemic affected your programming?

The pandemic has grown my business. The Metropolitan Opera was closed, and I did lose a lot of programming there. However, being a public librarian, in March [2020] I was thinking of a way to translate what I was doing live to a virtual platform. I asked my colleagues, and they gave me some suggestions. I have over 35 programs, and I had to convert all of them into virtual programming. And then the arias that I would perform—my home became a studio, and I recorded myself as a part of the programming. Then I just marketed it out (see operatalks.com/all-opera-talks). I've presented for libraries and other organizations where I've never stepped foot in their facility.

Operas are often not in English, or you have to dress up, or tickets are expensive. How do you reach out to the average person who tunes in because they're interested, but just thinks, Oh, no, I can't possibly be an opera person?

The number one thing, and I'm going to be frank, is that I am a Black woman named Tanisha. In our society, those two things do not go with opera. If a person thinks about opera with the idea that it's rarefied, and then you have a woman of color—if you see my name, you know. So when people come in and they see me, they're like, “Oh, you don't look like someone who talks about opera.” That was the thing that I feared the most when starting this journey. I didn't know if people would come or not, but they ended up coming.

Number two is how I talk about it. If you have a story like *La bohème*, I don't just talk about the love story. I say, “This is a story about the lack of money.” People relate to that. So I think it's how I tell the story in relation to myself and the world that's around me, and who I am, that connects people to opera.



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