I Never Asked for This!
166th Acoustical Society of America (ASA) Meeting
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While waiting for a specimen to be scanned this summer, I took a short break and noticed an e-mail inviting me to an Acoustical Society of America meeting scheduled to take place in five months. As a rising senior, I had attended numerous undergraduate conferences—from small SPS zone meetings to the giant PhysCon 2012—but I had never been to a major professional scientific conference.

I approached my advisor, Brent Hoffmeister, with a proposal to present my research at the meeting. After three years of working I certainly had plenty of data. So I submitted an abstract just days before I left for summer adventures and began working on a poster I intended to finish upon my return. Another student, Catherine Miller, also submitted a poster abstract. All that was left was to wait . . .

Nearly two months later, Catt and I received a surprise; instead of presenting in the undergraduate poster session, we would each be giving 15-minute oral presentations during the general biomedical acoustics session. Upon receiving this news, there may have been several slight moments of panic on our parts.

After three months of practice and preparation, we flew across the country to sunny California, and entered the world of our first professional conference. When we picked up our registration packets the first morning we had no idea what to expect. Neither of us had looked at the itinerary more than to realize we would be the first two presenters for our session halfway through the week. So we dove right in.

Unlike the tightly prescribed undergraduate conferences I had attended, in which there were at most two parallel sessions, the ASA meeting consisted of seemingly countless simultaneous talks about sound that filled half the conference rooms in the Union Square Hilton. We attended a crowded room full of marine biologists trying to piggyback off other technologies to map whale migration, and later we found our way to a surprising number of talks about bubbles. One professor described his attempt to coteach a course about designing instruments with a music teacher and an art teacher. His conclusion, “It was a wonderful and fascinating experience, which we will probably never do again.”

As the days continued we each developed our own taste in talks. As a future Army officer, I was fascinated by discussions of defense applications of acoustics; a new undergraduate friend I made at the ASA conference described locating low aerial objects using acoustics, and another presenter used acoustic measurements to explain why timed detonation missiles are more effective than impact-detonation missiles. Catt found her way to presentations on acoustical architecture, and we reunited to learn about meta-materials.
On Tuesday evening we rehearsed our talks one last time, still nervous about the presentations we could hardly believe we were giving. Catt went first, describing our efforts to use ultrasonic imaging to measure bone density. I followed with a more quantitative comparison of our technique to multiple microtomography scans. The professors and grad students in attendance had half a dozen questions for each of us. I’ve since been told that was a hefty number of questions, but a good sign. Then the moderator quipped that the next presenter was a no-show, and I could answer questions for 15 more minutes. I blanched, but steeled myself to dissect the merits of various ultrasonic gates or transducer frequencies. Thankfully, a break was declared, and several questioners approached us with friendly explanations, suggestions, and simple congratulations.

With the pressure of our own presentations off our shoulders, we continued to explore the research sessions and social events for the rest of the conference. At times, two or three fascinating talks would occur simultaneously, and we had to make the tough decisions of which to miss. Other times I would be disappointed when a promised speaker cancelled last minute. At a student mixer, we met students from around the world—Finland, Russia, England, Chicago—while enjoying astounding views of the city and paltry snacks. We encountered physicists we knew, and made friends with physicists from France, Germany, and Ireland, and learned the prevalence of architectural acoustics. To our astonishment, we were informed this was not a particularly large ASA meeting.

Presenting to top professionals in our field was an opportunity we would not trade. Despite never wanting to do something as intimidating as give a bona fide verbal presentation, the push out of my comfort zone ended up being one of the best experiences of the entire conference.