The Sheraton towered over Kansas City as we arrived, red lights glowing. We’d spent ten hours with five music therapy students crammed in the car, sunrise to beyond sunset. About 12 albums, a box of cheese crackers, and 600 miles later, finally we’d made it!

That evening we attended the opening session, greeting music therapists and music therapy students from around the world. The opening session featured a musical called “Under the Same Sky”, starring several children with different disabilities, singing together and taking solos describing their experiences in the world. All were touching and inspiring, some were heartbreaking. Following the opening session, the exhibits were opened, and hundreds of us explored the hall, which contained booths for different universities, sales of instruments for use in therapy and education, and information on advanced training. That evening, because I received a scholarship from AMTA this year, I attended a reception for the 2015 award winners, where I met other students and music therapists.

The next morning, after scarfing down a few protein bars and puzzling over the dozens of potential breakout sessions, we got right to learning at 7:30am. The sessions I attended that Friday morning included a skills session, music therapy with women survivors of violence, a session about expressive arts in the hospital setting, real world music therapy experiences, and a guitar techniques class in the evening. I learned so much on the first day! It was wonderful to be surrounded by so many people passionate about using music to help the world in some way. I think my favorite sessions were the real world session and the women survivors of violence
session. In the real world session, professionals shared stories about facing unexpected situations during their internships or practice. It was a nice reality check; although in class we discuss theory and methodology, in practice things are going to happen that we have never been instructed upon. We must always “expect the unexpected”, and if a situation arises, to deal with it in a calm manner the best we can. In the session for women survivors of violence, the speaker talked about the use of recordings in therapy, and the benefit to the participants to have something to take home with them. I also learned more about the nature of domestic violence and the various ways a victim may try to cope. Music is often a helpful way for people dealing with trauma to express their feelings and connect with others, even nonverbally. At the business meeting that afternoon, I was able to accept my certificate for the E. Thayer Gaston award, which is AMTA’s undergraduate research award. During lunchtime I jammed with several music therapists to “Proud Mary” and we all took a few blues solos. The weekend was full of music outside of sessions too; in the lobby of the hotel that evening, there were about 40 people participating in the conference choir, singing through the lobby and up and down the escalator!

The internship fair Saturday morning was fun and beneficial. I was able to meet a few supervisors from sites I had been considering, and also met supervisors from sites which I hadn’t seen previously. In the music therapy program we are required to take a 6 to 9 month internship upon completing our coursework, and there are sites all over the country. There are opportunities to work with children, psychiatric populations, geriatrics, veterans, and private practice. Of course with so many options it is a little overwhelming to apply for a site! After visiting the fair, however, I felt very encouraged that there are great opportunities available.

On Saturday and Sunday there were many more sessions that I attended. One featured multiple speakers discussing various aspects of professionalism in music therapy, such as how to
advocate for music therapy, effective communication, tips for social media, and creating a business design based on one’s personal vision. Another was about how to prepare for your music therapy interview and job, what employers are looking for in private practice versus a large state hospital, and how to manage one’s online presence. A few of my favorite sessions I attended were a percussion techniques session and a session about the application of DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) in music therapy.

Overall the conference was the perfect mix of inspiration, knowledge accumulation and motivation. I met so many wonderful music therapists that care the world for their clients. I was able to get closer to fellow students and learn about topics and populations I hadn’t yet explored. I am very thankful for the opportunity the honors program gave me by helping to fund this trip, as it has been a great help for me in planning my future career.