

## Time Capsule Transcript: Sarah Collins and Leanne Langley

**Sarah** [00:00:00] So, Leanne, you've just, in this last week, finished, or almost finished, writing your history of the RMA for the 150th anniversary. Before we talk about what you've discovered in researching this history, I wonder: this must feel like more of a personal project than a professional, solid scholarly assignment for you: there's a personal aspect to it. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your own history with the RMA. What has the Association meant to you?

**Leanne** [00:00:29] Well, it's been a real lifeline in many ways because, when I first came to Britain, I was a postgraduate student still writing my PhD. That's why I came: it was to do research at the British Library. And I saw it as a place to make a connection, right away. And my supervisor at the time happened to be in Britain as well, and he recommended me for full membership, so I went along. My first meeting was a Saturday morning. I was the only female in the room, apart from Elsie Arnold, I think, and I was the only person under about 55, I think.

**Sarah** [00:01:14] Do you remember what date that was?

**Leanne** [00:01:17] That was in the autumn of 1980, and I knew there were younger people. What I didn't know was that they'd go to their own Research Students' Conference. They didn't necessarily go to every monthly meeting at that time. At the coffee break, I just thought, where are the younger people? Have I made a big mistake? And eventually, of course, I didn't make a big mistake. I just kept going, because in the States, you do go: it's part of your training as a professional to join in, find out what other people think, listen, learn, all those things. And, eventually, I felt much more at home. And through the years, I made lots and lots of good friends, and, of course, research ideas flow, so it's worthwhile going. Eventually, I think I gave my first paper in 1987 on a day meeting, and then I gave another paper at a conference, an Annual Conference in 1989. Then I joined the Council through a vote and found out a lot more than I knew as a member. And then I stepped back to do my child-rearing duties and private research.

**Sarah** [00:02:42] It's a very similar background story for me, in the sense that it's been a long, long-term international engagement, in that I'm speaking to you from Perth, but because of my research relying so much on British libraries and archives, every year I went over there, you know, joined the RMA, and I think I met you at a Music in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Britain conference, perhaps in Belfast, or maybe it was before then at an RMA conference, actually. And yeah, similar idea that you went for connection, to the, sort of, the British musicological context, but then also found that it was a very outward-looking organisation that was, that had a sort of international mandate almost. It's much more than a professional organisation: it's, you know, it's a community, it's a real scholarly and personal community. How did it feel writing the history? And, I mean, obviously you started at the foundation of the organisation, but coming into your own period of time and you see the names of people who, you know, you would have met during those early years of your own engagement, and all of a sudden it becomes your own story interweaving into the organisation's story.

**Leanne** [00:04:02] That is very well observed. I felt very much like a historian when I was first starting, and then when it comes up to the period of time where you know all these people, it's revealing to you personally, but it also means you're a part of the story, and I think I have to take effort to be careful with what I say about people. But also, I was never disappointed in anything I learned, or, in fact, I just had my eyes opened about how complicated some of the processes are

and how well things worked out because of the independence of the organisation. It's not based in any one university; it's not run by an academic mandate; there's no money that comes from anywhere else except members' annual subscriptions, really, and the sale of what we produce. So, we do get income from what we create, which is our work. But also, you understand there's a long time-lag between when people in the RMA realise 'This is a bit old fashioned: should we change?', and when they actually start changing. They think about it, talk about it, but they don't want to do anything too quickly, because it might compromise procedures that have been set in place for decades. So, things do look old fashioned for a while. Also, you notice as you go through records how many times somebody has a bright idea, says, 'Let's do this: I think it would improve things'. John Stainer said, you know, 'Why don't we have a small committee who looks at proposals and let them choose which papers we programme?' And they said, 'Oh, no, no, no, no'. They did, they talked about having what we now call a Proceedings Committee or something like that, you know, a Sessions Committee, for decades before they instituted one, because the fear was, oh, if we delegate that to a small group of people, then the rest of us won't have a say. And it was very democratic. Everything was so democratic, all the way across, which is again, admirable: because it was a small organisation, they could do it that way.

**Sarah** [00:06:24] They could do it that way. Yeah. Keeping with the sort of democratic theme, and also going back to what you were saying about the independence of the organisation from any one institution or one funding source, can you tell us a little bit about the establishment or the years just before the establishment of the RMA? I mean, you write in the history that the RMA was 'neither inevitable nor bound to last'. And I'm wondering what you mean by that. Can you sketch us a picture of the situation just before the RMA was established?

**Leanne** [00:07:01] Yes. Well, obviously these are the Victorian years when we tend to think everybody wanted to know everything and set up an organisation, thrusting knowledge and, you know, new scientific information, and there are a lot of stereotypes about that. But the problem here, with music, was that it is so multilateral that you get people wanting to divide and claim what music is, against what someone else wants to claim music is. It's a perennial problem: we still have that. There were at least three attempts at setting up a scholarly society for music before 1874. The problem was that they were always attached, for financial reasons, to a concert-giving body of one kind or another, assuming that giving concerts and getting people to come to concerts was the money that would set up the scholarly aspect. And it was found every single time [that], given the choice, ordinary folks would not go to a scholarly paper. So, the final coup that brought the whole thing together and made it last, was the bringing in of a couple of scientists who thought – well, think about how the Royal Society, the real Royal Society, was set up in 1660. It was not based on everybody practising the same kind of science or everybody necessarily being eminent in everything: it was for people who wanted to investigate. So, when the emphasis comes on to investigation of any kind of sound, not just printed music or sung music or performed music, then you suddenly have a panoply of people who become actually expert at how to run a learned society. That was the missing element. How did these things work, you know, organisationally? And the first thing you have to do is make it stick by protocols and paper-giving that can be yielding published papers. And at that very first organisational meeting, there were 22 people invited; six of them were members of the Royal Society. They were the leaders of this whole initiative. And, without wishing to demote performed music, they made it clear 'We are not putting on concerts. We want people who are interested in investigating and discussing'. The alternative side of investigating is that you tell people what you've found, and you tell it formally, and you publish it, but you could also send in a three-line letter. It becomes a kind of 'What have you found out?', and, therefore, you have to come to hear other people's findings. It is true that in

the first few years there was a heavy dose of science – mostly physics, mostly instruments and their vibrations, that kind of thing. But a perfectly valid study, that had many applications within ethnomusicology, right from the very earliest days of the formation of that doctrine. All this was completely separate, I should say, from *Musikwissenschaft* and its origins in Austria/Germany. But that's also something I take up in the book.

**Sarah** [00:10:53] As you say, the idea that these scientists had the sort of institutional, organisational, the institutional knowledge to know what a learned society could look like, but there must have also been a range of voices tempering the idea that it would turn into a fully professionalised organisation quickly, I suppose, thinking about the sort of three words in the title of the organisation: the fact that it's 'musical' and not 'musicological'; the fact that it's an association and not a society or an academy; and even the term 'royal' doesn't indicate a royal charter, does it?

**Leanne** [00:11:34] Not at all, no. In the beginning it was just 'Musical Association'. That was chosen, after a long meeting in which the name was thrashed out. 'Musical Science Society' was once considered; 'Musical Scientific Society' was once considered; and 'The Musical Society' was another one considered. 'Association' was chosen, I believe, to indicate not just that this is not about elite or select people that can be in it, but that we are crossing disciplines, we are crossing social class, we are crossing musical knowledge with other kinds of knowledge. There really was no professional place for any of this kind of work, except by people who were doing something else, and they were paid. Some were attached to universities: John Stainer is the key example, as a professional organist and a theorist and a composer, but he had not got a lot of experience in research. Nobody was trained in how to do musical research. There was no such thing as musicology, and they certainly avoided that word, even when it was used as a translation of the French '*musicologie*'. They never used 'musicology'. In fact, they were still embarrassed to talk about musicology in the 1960s. There are letters from Frank Howes saying, 'We need to be careful with that word', because it was off-putting to people who loved music and thought musicology was out to destroy music.

**Sarah** [00:13:30] When people talk about amateurism, it's often used obviously in the pejorative now, or as a kind of rebellion against institutional elitism, or a reactionary force against a progressive force, or the opposite: you know, this is a very politicised term. But at the time, you know, the situation that you're describing, with polymath thinkers coming in from a scientific lens and saying, 'Look, I'm really curious about this art form', with a whole different system of meaning creation and emotional response. And, you know, whatever the parameters that they were looking at, that the term 'amateur' had connotations of somebody who was approaching something without, you know, for its own sake, not for any sort of professional, money-making purpose. Not they weren't professional musicians, as you say, but the idea of approaching music as an object and sound as an object, as an object of curiosity – that sort of, I'm not going to say objectivity, because that's also a term with a lot of baggage. But there was, do you think, a valorisation of a certain type of amateurism that was designed to provoke intellectual discussion at a very, not anti-authoritarian, but anti-institutional – just a sort of collegial, scholarly but rigorous level? Does that play into it?

**Leanne** [00:15:12] It does, if you think of the traditional meaning of amateur as being a social class distinction, where someone is born into privilege and wealth, they have the money...

**Sarah** [00:15:20] They don't need to be a professional, yeah.

**Leanne** [00:15:25] ...They have the money to purchase the sources. And the chief, wonderful amateur at the beginning, was Stainer's own teacher, and he had, you know, this amazing library collection: Sir Frederick Ouseley. Ouseley was an aristocrat: he was proudly an amateur, but he also was working at Oxford. So, he would never have wanted to be considered a 'professional'. But he was the font of all the knowledge and gave more than one paper. He was the first elected president by acclamation, because he seemed to have the status in every possible form of meaning of that word. And the strange thing is, he didn't come to many meetings. He didn't show up very much at Council meetings: he was a figurehead. Stainer, by contrast, was a professional musician, and I would not call him an amateur scholar, but he wasn't a musicologist either: he was still learning. And he, by fortunate discovery and training of colleagues he knew at Oxford, in the library particularly, he discovered one of the most amazing manuscripts that we have still studied: the Canonici one in Oxford [Canonici Misc. 213], that has all these amazing 15th-century songs that totally changed the face of our knowledge of early Renaissance music. And he really did a good job, considering that particular time of understanding, transcribing, trying to play some of those pieces, with modern string instruments in his first paper. And he was still very young. He was a nominal founder: I don't think he was the chief reason the whole thing was set up. But I have changed a little bit my view on 'the founders' as a group of people since doing this research: he was obviously central and very, very important, but he was not the single founder.

**Sarah** [00:17:42] You were mentioning about, you know, the types of activities that he and others were doing that sort of fed into their formal papers that people gave at the events of the early organisation in its sort of nascent period. And the types of activities that sort of feed into the organisation seem to be around editing, especially editing of early music, discovery of, you know, manuscripts, transcription and early ethnographic work and also cataloguing, which I guess is, you know, from this kind of scientific character or tendency in the early organisation. From that, we get the importance of the RMA's relationship with the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and also its relationship with the early collecting practices of the British Museum, and the music collection that ended up at the British Library.

**Leanne** [00:18:43] You've asked about *Grove* as it developed. The first *Dictionary* grew and grew. People got interested in research, not having known that they would. He [George Grove] was asking people to write and paying them for writing on subjects they weren't necessarily expert at, and that's what made them expert: [it] was that he said, 'Do the research and write me something'. So, it was very much, everybody is at the beginning. Nobody knows what they're doing: they're all experimenting. And this notion of experimenting was very useful because it means you're not fitting a pattern, you're not ticking boxes: you're trying things to see what works. It's very much, empirical. Sound research was empirical, too, and some of it was related to, foghorns in mist, and foghorns in rain, and fog horns in sunshine. That was John Tyndall, the Irish experimental physicist, who now is hugely important because of his discoveries about climate science and why the sky is blue. He was a founding member and a first Vice President. He was one of the few who wrote in and said, thank you so much for honouring me with a Vice Presidency, to be a member of your group. There were others, of his ilk. They were not necessarily siding with the literary folks. There were little camps of people in, you know, who had their interests. The literary side has remained strong because of needing to communicate what music is and what it can be, and what we all think about what we've learned by doing research. Communicating that knowledge is part of the mission of the society: you give your paper and then you discuss it. Discussing the findings, and then somebody coming along and changing them – that's the scientific method. And then you discuss it again ten years later, or 100 years later, you

discuss it again. That's part of getting better at what we do. Publishing it in the *Dictionary* is a different project. And those subsequent editions of *Grove* changed. Not all of them were as good as the first one. The specialist dictionaries come along in the '80s, after the *New Grove*. And the *New Grove* is a huge shift, actually, in the reputation of British musicology. It sort of trumpeted to the whole world, 'these people know what they're talking about'. And it took that long, you know, until the 1980s, before British musicology was really quite as well respected as it should have been. And they all agreed by that point to use the word musicology.

**Sarah** [00:21:42] So we have those themes of the RMA and the group of people around at the beginning and in the early decades – this image of, you know, a really diverse membership, a diverse membership that was, you know, interested in public-facing work, which seems to be, you know, where the organisation is trying to rediscover those type of imperatives now in its current membership and its equity, diversity and inclusion initiatives, and all sorts of other types of interdisciplinary reaching out and international reaching out. I wonder if you could finish, perhaps by saying whether writing this history has changed your view of the organisation.

**Leanne** [00:22:32] I would say I was surprised by how interesting it all was. I thought it would be boring; I thought it'd be tedious; I thought I would have a hard time finding anything very remarkable to say about these people. They all seemed like old men, dusty, you know, the record is... okay, you can peel away a layer of dust and find something trivial. But I continued to find real turns of thought and belief that I had not understood before from the way things have been written about in a secondary way. We pass on so many stereotypes without realising what we're saying. When you go back and peel it away, it's a bit like a historical performance, when you realise, hey, we might have been, got the wrong end of the stick here. I continually found that feeling, and I thought, there's so much more here that I did not understand. And why have we waited so long to recognise the brilliance of some of these people? And you say, what have I really learned? I think I found myself; and my, the reason for my curiosity about what I've been studying for 45 years was vindicated. Yeah, this was worth being interested in. But also, you are standing on the shoulders of some great people, and I'm so lucky I knew some of them, you know, really, really well. I remember hearing fleeting comments about the RMA or the Council, but what these people did out from spokes of their own work, not necessarily representing the RMA, but I knew they were. And their work was not necessarily academic, though many of them were right in the centre of the top of music academia. They all got along, and they all benefited from the knowledge that the other one brought in. And there's always this, kind of, arena of discussion. What we must keep open is that people join in, that people come, that people listen, that they participate. They comment when they don't like something, or if they have a great idea. All those things feed into the vitality of this group, and I would hate to see that go, just because we all are too busy publishing our books and our papers for our universities. You know, we have to think of this as a live thing that's bigger than any one person, bigger than the job you have. I know people don't have time to devote to an organisation that seems trivial sometimes, but it's very important. And it's what makes the RMA different from every other scholarly music organisation in the world. The important thing is that we support it and keep it going to be independent and eclectic, and welcoming to everybody.

**Sarah** [00:25:44] Yeah: jump in, participate, contribute, listen, debate, attend.

**Leanne** [00:25:49] Absolutely.

**Sarah** [00:25:50] Fantastic messages. Leanne, thank you so much for writing this history and also for chatting with me.

**Leanne** [00:25:57] Thank you. It's been a pleasure.