

Time Capsule Transcript: Jan Smaczny and John O'Flynn

John [00:00:00] Good morning, Jan: great to see you, and to hear you. So, I can't think of a person more qualified to speak about the relationship between [the] RMA and [the] SMI – the Society for Musicology in Ireland – since you've held high office in both societies, and you were President of the SMI for two terms, from 2006 to 2012, and, of course, you were based in Queen's University [Belfast] for much of your career. So, could I ask you, first, about the Ireland involvement, historically, with [the] RMA, including the period when the late Hilary Bracefield set up the RMA Ireland [Irish] Chapter?

Jan [00:00:39] It sounds a little bit like colonialism, but I don't think it was perceived as that. The Irish Chapter was something that was operated by the RMA, which facilitated conferences across the island, north and south. I think it was very creative. It was very good about drawing people together, and Hilary did a fantastic job. I mean, I think one of the most interesting things about that transition from the RMA Irish Chapter towards SMI was the fact that almost everyone perceived the need for something clearly Ireland-based, and the general development of musicological excellence: Irish Musicological Studies, the intensity of the conferences, the breadth of the conferences, the Maynooth conference, I think [in 19]97. All of that, I think, was clearly saying that, you know, something had to change. And Hilary, to her great credit, was very much behind that. I think she was not at all discountenanced by the fact that the Irish Chapter necessarily had to disappear in the course of time – fine: to be replaced by something, I think, much bigger, more vigorous, with much more kind of infrastructure. And I think that's a very crucial part of it, was the nature of infrastructure, moving from a kind of one-person show to something that was spread much more broadly and actually gave people, I think, a real sense of ownership – each institution, north and south, taking their role as part of the new organization. [It] was really a very healthy and perfectly reasonable kind of evolution.

John [00:02:20] My first musicology paper was actually at RMA Ireland in Belfast, in 2000. So, it was a very – it just had a feeling of being a very welcoming community. At that stage, I mean: what numbers were you talking about at that conference? Maybe 40 or 50 people, maybe?

Jan [00:02:38] I think it was about 50. We were quite pleased, and we also had, again, a slightly international reach: I think Mike Beckerman was there doing the keynote and the feeling was very good, actually. And I think, again, preludial to the foundation of SMI and a real feeling that we wanted to move on to something that was clearly identifiable as island-of-Ireland based. No, I think, you know, you're right to identify the kind of health of what was developing, and, you know, a lot of very goodwill and genuine collegiality: that's what's always struck me as one of the defining features of SMI from the start.

John [00:03:19] Was there anything beyond that, do you think, that was a motivation for setting up a distinct national association?

Jan [00:03:26] Yes, I think, really – and it was quite clear from the way in which SMI acted from the beginning – [it] was the notion of support for musicology, and support, not just for institutions taking part in conferences, but giving student support – undergraduate, mainly postgraduate students, eventually with a view to something postdoctoral. The kind of broad image of SMI of itself at an early stage was essentially related to institutions. I mean, RMA going back into the mists of time, pre-history, was a kind of highly informed – I don't know – gentlemen's club, in some kind of way, where there was no really strong academic institutional affiliation at an early

stage, because they weren't, simply weren't there. But, I mean, you know, the fact that Ireland had several very well set up musicological departments was, you know, an inevitable part of trying to draw the whole thing together.

John [00:04:27] Yes, and I'm just wondering what, as one of the founding Council members, what did people see as the primary mission at that point?

Jan [00:04:37] Essentially to support musicology in Ireland and enhance it. I don't think there was any desire to mould it in any particular way, other than to actually stand by the excellence of scholarship as it was identified at the time. I mean, Harry White was an astonishing shaker and mover in this whole process, but he was quite clear that the kind of basis of it was going to be as broadly based as it could be. I mean, you know, the first meeting I had with him about it was in a pub just outside UCD, and it was me, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin and Harry. And I think that, in a way, epitomised the kind of geographical approach: me from the North, Harry Dublin, and Mícheál from an ethnomusicological background. I mean, it was very important that it should be representative in that kind of way. And then I think it grew, and choosing initial Council – initially inviting people, with a view to later election – I think we did try and be as broad as possible in our approach.

John [00:05:45] Again, going back to the all-Ireland origins: in what way was that balance reflected in conference organisation, or – well – those functions, and so on? Did that continue?

Jan [00:05:58] We tried to do that: it wasn't always possible. I think one of the things we tried to do – recognising the centrality of Dublin, inevitably (again, there are parallels with the RMA: RMA has a tendency – I'm not sure if it's a policy, but it's certainly a tendency – to have one conference London-based and then one conference more regionally based.) And what we tried to do was a balance between Dublin every two years and another institution hosting and, of course, you know, Northern Ireland, with Queen's hosting, but also University of Ulster, at various stages. You know, these were points of pride, I think.

John [00:06:37] And then, all the while, there was a continued representation, being an SMI rep within RMA.

Jan [00:06:44] It was curious: there is a kind of osmotic link, you know – we kind of know what each other is doing. But in a way, it was, you know, helpful from time to time to have it formalised. I mean, I still provide reports on SMI activities with reports to RMA Council and, I think, having a kind of formal link in that way does actually help: it reminds each other of our existence apart from anything else. But I think the most important thing is the people we know, the contacts we make and all of these things which go beyond the kind of national periphery, to something that I think is much more genuinely international. But it's always been a healthy relationship, I think.

John [00:07:25] And, of course, that culminated in 2009, with the joint conference held at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin.

Jan [00:07:33] Yeah, this was one of those occasions where I felt, you know, perhaps some of the differences were beginning to emerge. Now, I was invited, as President, to make a report to the RMA Proceedings Committee. Now, this is already one of the main differences: we were a young Society, we did most things in open Council, whereas RMA, for a long time, had had a Proceedings Committee, and a Finance Committee, and Awards Committee[s] of various kinds. You know, I felt, you know, turning up to the Proceedings Committee was a little bit like going to see the

headmaster. And everybody was warm, very welcoming: they were obviously very keen to have the conference in Dublin. Philip Olleson was the then coming-in President; John Deathridge was, I think, the then President. But yes, they were warm, very welcoming. There was a hint of finger-wagging about our finances – to make sure we didn't expect people to pay too much, that we'd got our finances right, didn't get into financial trouble – before they gave us their grant of £1,000, I think it was. But I'm pleased to say that our finances, thanks to the savvy intervention and marvellous commandeering of the whole aspect of that from Michael Murphy, we were actually able to return the £1,000 to the RMA. But, no, it was a very good experience. I think there was a feeling that SMI was an up-and-running and very competent and broadly based organisation.

John [00:09:08] To jump ahead a little bit in time, in 2018, representatives of RMA and SMI and musicology societies around Europe were invited to Utrecht, to the 150th anniversary of KVMN, the Netherlands Music History Society. So, at the time, the President of SMI was Lorraine Byrne Bodley; Simon McVeigh was President of RMA and also in attendance from RMA was Barbara Kelly, the current [next] President, and I was there also. So, I know that what we found when you're put into a club of maybe 12 different organisations around Europe, and the similarities between RMA and SMI and the differences, certainly, with many of the societies in other countries, became apparent. So, I would suggest that, since then, that this Network of European Musicological Societies [NEMS], has become, it's become a very important framework for how we continue to communicate between our two societies. But that doesn't mean that we can't continue – like the Common Travel Area that exists between the UK and Ireland – there's no reason why we can't have that kind of collaboration. But it's also very useful to have that broader European perspective.

Jan [00:10:21] I couldn't agree more, and I think it's also quite a good idea to have it formalised – you know, the occasion you mentioned. I wonder whether – I mean, just take the role of questioner here – I was always aware of the strong sense of collegiality in the committees; I was aware that everybody was a friend, on the whole, on the Council. I just wonder if that kind of collegiality has changed? I'm not suggesting you have enemies on Council, or anything like that! But, I mean, what is your feeling, as current President?

John [00:10:54] I think it's very similar to what you recall: that there is a sense of unity of purpose. We very much look forward to conferences. I mean, for example, at the last postgraduate conference, which was jointly held with ICTMD – the International Council for Traditional Music and Dance, Ireland branch (and that sort of parallels the RMA's joint postgraduate conference with [the] BFE [British Forum for Ethnomusicology]) – but, at our last joint postgraduate conference, I noticed how many senior (let's say) colleagues came to support the postgraduate conference – not just the Council members – and how everybody met together in a pub in Maynooth afterwards, and it was buzzing: it was fantastic. You could see that people love the social aspect and people really like how these events bring people together. And I think that does come down to the collegiality at the level of Council.

Jan [00:11:47] I agree entirely about postgraduate conferences: you know, this is where our future lies. There is a genuine excitement: I mean, this is something I always felt, going back a very long time. I think my first RMA postgrad conference I gave paper at was back in 1980, and I think there was a similar sort of delight generally. And we saw lots of senior members trying to see what was happening: where things were moving, the kind of directions in which things were developing.

John [00:12:21] Jan, shall we go to prizes, beginning with the Harrison Medal?

Jan [00:12:25] Yeah, I think there was a feeling that, if we're a Society that actually values musicology, it ought to be a Society that can actually make awards of a very high nature. Again, Harry White was absolutely instrumental in developing the kind of profile of what we were doing. You know, there are similarities, obviously, with RMA: the Dent Medal – these are things that recognise figures, musicologically, who are of great significance. We were quite clear we wanted to identify, in a sense, have a kind of fellow feeling with some of the most significant musicologists working. And so, the Harrison Medal seemed an absolutely ideal way of recognising this, with Christoph Wolff, Meg Bent, among the early ones, Kofi Agawu, Christopher Hogwood, Susan Youens: I mean, this is a great kind of collection. And they were all so pleased: they felt it was a mark of genuine distinction. I think, beyond, you know, the awards of various kinds they developed in interesting ways – you'll have dealt with the Alison Dunlop Award, Danijela Kulezic-Wilson Award – you know, these are the things that are important, I think, on an Ireland-wide level: to actually recognise and foster the way in which people want to develop their particular careers. I think probably the most important thing is the money and the awards we can make to students, supporting student research. I did actually chair the Awards Committee of RMA for a while. It was quite clear to me that, if you're supporting postgraduate research, the amounts of money need to be reasonably significant. Is that still possible with SMI these days? I mean, do you have enough in the bank to actually give meaningful support?

John [00:14:25] I suppose we don't, is the honest answer, really. Our membership vacillates somewhere between 130 and 140, unless we have some bumper year, for a particular reason. We don't have any bequests at present, although one of the prizes you mentioned, the Alison Dunlop Prize, is very generously supported by the family of Alison Dunlop. We've only recently introduced a book prize – the Danijela Kulezic-Wilson Prize. There is the Harry White doctoral prize we also recently introduced, and this is really important, and I think it resonates with some initiatives in RMA. We initiated the Aloys Fleischmann Prize, which celebrates practice-based research in music. So, although we have the term 'musicology' in our society – as opposed to [the] Royal Musical Association – we celebrate Music Studies in all its facets, and that's really important. We offer, obviously, small grants for people applying to attend conferences, typically students, but also independent scholars. And then very recently we introduced an SMI fellowship. The fellowship has a very small value – it's just €1,000 – but we feel that, in terms of creating a CV and a profile, to actually have the award of a fellowship from a scholarly organisation, maybe is some help towards applying for the really more substantial fellowships that people are pursuing. So, I totally agree: apart from the gongs, these can be very important for people's careers. It can have a monetary value, it can have a significant career advantage, and then there is the feel-good factor for all of us, in just celebrating the progress of others.

Jan [00:16:04] The feel-good factor is extremely important: to feel part of a community, to feel recognised by a community, and, you know, with the glorious addition that you actually have something to add to a CV. Right at the start, in Harry's time as President, and my time as President, we did actually feel very close to our constituency. I wonder if that has changed in any way, or is this still a vital part of the way you perceive SMI Council operating and the way you perceive yourself as being in charge of it?

John [00:16:39] I agree it's really important to stay true to the original mission and vision of the organization, and to pursue its objectives. But in a material way, the mere presence of people at the conferences is really important, to support the research of others – but also, just thinking a little bit more broadly, maybe to change the interaction sometimes. So, last year during my term,

when we were celebrating the 20th anniversary of SMI, we had a symposium at the new National Opera House in Wexford. And actually, since that time in Wexford, the opera organisers have actually initiated a programme of free tickets for students to attend during the opera season, and so on. So, these kind of collaborations are really important. And then, very recently, I'm very conscious about the funding challenges for researchers, so we organised a symposium on research funding. And we were very pleased to have all of the key stakeholders in research funding for Ireland, based on European funding, to come along and support that, and it was very well attended by people at different career stages. So, not just to think of a constituency, but to think of their needs and, increasingly, how broad people's connections are, and interests are – definitely within the academy, but we also need to think beyond the academy.

Jan [00:17:54] I agree, and I think an important thing that has informed SMI is the way in which the needs of the constituency actually creep up on you. Certainly RMA, I think, has always felt this – that it is something that will occur in a kind of bottom-up kind of way. But it is vitally important to be able to respond and to actually understand what the needs are, very important.

John [00:18:21] And I suppose that leads us on to issues of, I suppose, a different demographic within our respective countries. And to be quite frank, the diversity that's currently in Ireland is not reflected in Irish musicology. Yes, at the postgraduate level, but certainly not yet within SMI Council or within Irish institutions. So, I think there's a leadership role that societies can play, not just in developing policies – that of course we want to do – but also in maybe being proactive.

Jan [00:18:51] There is, to an extent, an inevitability about all of this. But I think it is important to be, as you say, proactive. I think we do need to expand the constituency as much as possible. And I think certainly the RMA has been aware of that, and I think acts really, on the whole, in the best interests of this growing constituency.

John [00:19:14] Yeah, and – I don't know if you feel the same way, Jan – but I myself am a member of other Music Studies associations, and I know of people in RMA who are also in IASPM [International Association for the Study of Popular Music] or BFE, and so on. And I don't think that it necessarily means that those organisations or associations need to merge, because there's always a strategic advantage in having specialist societies that can also have a breadth, but I just wonder about where that is going.

Jan [00:19:40] I think it's important that organisations keep their identity, but I think drawing people together is terrifically good – just to go back to the 2009 conference: it felt really good. Even apart from the quality of what was going on, it just felt good to be together. I think the real problem is everything's too big. I mean, we did talk about another joint conference at some stage, but, you know, it just becomes so hopelessly unwieldy. So, perhaps in areas of specialism, you know, conferences can be geared towards those sorts of needs. I mean, I remember AMS and IMS together in, I think 2000, in America, and it was absolutely pulverising. So, I think we need to be quite careful, but aware of the possibilities.

John [00:20:29] Yes, but, still, maybe there is scope for a return joint conference, perhaps with SMI travelling across the pond the next time.