

Time Capsule Transcript: Simon McVeigh and Mark Everist

Simon [00:00:00] Mark, I think that you took over as President in, was it September 2011? I know you'd been involved with the RMA for a long time, but what did you think when you took over as President that you really wanted to achieve? What did you think of the Association and its status, its future at that time?

Mark [00:00:19] Yeah, that's a good question. I mean, you're right: I'd been associated with the organisation for a long time. I'd edited the journal – I must have started that in the late '80s – and then took over from David Fallows as the editor of the monograph series. So, I'd recently had a place on the Council pretty well in perpetuity. And so I had a pretty good chance to look at the inside workings of the Association. And when I took over as President, I guess there were 2 or 3 things that I really wanted to push quite hard. One was to try and dispel the perception that this was a purely historically orientated organisation, and that there was genuinely a space for research-led performers, and particularly composers. We award the Dent medal; Dent was a composer, and [if] you look back at the founding document from 1874, it talks about the science and practice of music, which definitely was designed to include composition. So, I guess that was one of the things I was really anxious to move on, was to broaden the kind of disciplinary range of the Association. And it was actually quite a good time to do it because we were just running up to the Research Excellence Framework 2014, so there were lots and lots of preparatory meetings, but that was a great opportunity to pull in all the research-led performing people, and particularly all the composers. And I can remember some frankly epic meetings, which was enormously productive, extremely hard work, but I mean I think well worth doing. So, I'm guessing that's really, those were the things I was really after: to try and give a slightly broader dimension to the Association. And I did two terms, and one of the reasons why I did the second term was that I hadn't actually quite nailed everything at the end of three years, and I needed a notch longer. I didn't need another three years, actually, and boy was I pleased when you came along!

Simon [00:02:35] What happened at that point when you were thinking about and you were asked to do another three years? What was going through the Association's history?

Mark [00:02:48] Well, I think, I've got a feeling I was the first President on a three-year cycle rather than the five-year cycle. I think most of my predecessors had done five-year cycles. It was only relatively recently that there had been any kind of election for the President, actually. I might even have been the first to have been elected – I'm not sure that's right, but very, very early on. So, when they changed from five-year terms to three-year terms, no one thought about renewal. It was a new provision in the regulations. So, there was a slightly interesting moment where we actually had to put all that in place and make it happen. So, there is now a formal provision for more than one term. And I think we need it for three-year terms, actually, you know, in times of pressure or of great change it's actually quite nice to have someone there for a bit. I'm trying to remember whether anyone did two five-year terms? And I'm pretty sure they did, actually. I'm wondering about Dennis Arnold. But Simon, what about you? I remember that we had a splendid dinner in Canterbury. We had a long conversation about moving things along. How did you how did you feel about it?

Simon [00:04:00] Well, if you remember, I personally had rather moved away from the teaching world of music and a kind of departmental role because I was doing other things. I was still researching, but I really wanted to immerse myself back in the world of music research, if you like. And both in order to, as it were, give something back – that's a bit of a cliché, but I think it was

very much in my mind as I was approaching retirement – and I was keen to see different ways in which we could push forward many of the things that you have spoken about, and especially on the practice–research side: I’d become very involved with that across the broader sector, involving the other performing arts and visual arts, and so on.

Mark [00:04:49] No, that’s where you were ideally placed for that.

Simon [00:04:52] So, I thought there was something that we could really, really do. And that was the whole debate about the nature of practice as research in some form or another. I actually invented the term ‘practice research’, which I think is going to go down on my tombstone eventually, because I got tired of all these different ways of approaching it and said, well, let’s just do this: we’ll accept there are many different forms that this might take. Obviously, one of them is composition, as you’ve mentioned. And in my term, thanks to the energetic initiatives of many of our colleagues as well, I have to say, we were able to come up with a new way of validating, if that’s the right term, certainly publicising and bringing to public attention our interests in that direction with the new Tippett Medal.

Mark [00:05:51] Exactly, yes.

Simon [00:05:53] That was meant to precisely mirror the musicology of the Dent Medal, which has been in existence for some decades now. And in some ways, it paralleled that, but [it] was, I think, a very clear signal of the Association’s commitment to composition and beyond that, to practice as research in many different forms. And there’s now lately been introduced a Practice prize as well. So, this clearly reflects not only the history and aims and intentions of the Association, but also the very rapidly changing nature of our discipline as practised in higher education and beyond.

Mark [00:06:47] I think that’s absolutely right. I mean, one of the things that has struck me – when I was President and since – is just how fast new disciplines coalesce around, you know, a body of work, a series of conferences, and so on. And, if the Association is to be this comprehensive umbrella for the entire study of music in the United Kingdom, it has to be very fleet of foot to catch up with all these sorts of things. And I derive a lot of pleasure from things like the Music and Philosophy Study Group, which started out as an RMA Study Group. And now there are many of them. I remember there was a time I did a census of all the RMA-badged events in one year, that I was President, and I calculated that there was one every 11 days.

Simon [00:07:37] Right.

Mark [00:07:39] And I think that pace has been kept up. I mean, I’m sure no one is as sad as I am to actually bother to do the sums, but just to look at the number of advertisements for RMA-badged events, now, it must be something very much like that. And very, very wide ranging. I mean, I would like to think, as I’m sure you would, Simon, there’s no kind of branch of the study of music that the RMA doesn’t feel that it should be fostering.

Simon [00:08:08] I mean, if I can just sort of add to that, when you took over, there was a danger that, with so much diversity and so much fracturing, if you like, of the landscape, as we had perhaps known it as students, that the RMA would cease to have a role. How do you think you were able to bring that all together? Because I think it would be fair to say that there was quite a big job of work to be done in that regard.

Mark [00:08:40] Yeah, no, that was absolutely right. I mean, I guess I took the view that everybody – whether they're a music psychologist, whether they work in music education, whether they work on 17th-century Italian opera, whether they're a Fortean set theorist – they all work in departments, and they all have offices next to people who do very different sorts of things. And it seemed to me that what the RMA needed to do was just to foster the same kind of amicable coexistence that you get in a well-functioning department, expressed more broadly. And that's not to say, of course, that even within departments, you know, people will try and carve out corners for themselves and exclude others. But I was very heartened by the amount of ground we were able to cover. I think there was quite a lot of suspicion. I think quite a lot of the ethnomusicologists were quite rightly concerned about a perception of scholarly institutional colonisation on the part of the RMA. And that was a particularly hard one to handle. But actually, getting all the ethnomusicologists to host things worked very well. The Research Students' Conference now is badged as an RMA–BFE event. And, I haven't actually seen the programme for the 150th anniversary conference, but I'm kind of hoping that our ethnomusicological colleagues will be represented there as well, because that's kind of part of what we do. Plus, you know, there's an obvious disciplinary reason for the musicology of Western Europe, up to the present, to adopt methods and practices from ethnomusicology and conceivably vice versa as well. So, you know, that kind of thing is win–win, I think, at a scholarly level: unquestionably.

Simon [00:10:39] Well, I'm certainly very aware, whenever I go to the Research Students' Conference in particular, because the organisers are very careful not to indicate from which side of that divide (if there is one) the students themselves come, and it's often very hard to tell.

Mark [00:10:52] Yeah, no, exactly, exactly. Isn't that great? I mean.

Simon [00:10:53] And that must be a good thing.

Mark [00:10:55] Yeah, yeah.

Simon [00:10:56] And of course, it extends very clearly across all sorts of kinds of popular music, sound studies, the whole diversity of different ways of approaching our discipline have become the norm and the RMA has had to, against again, I would say, some resistance, has taken that on board without losing, I hope both its sense of history and its commitment to its longstanding musical traditions as well. We've just got this new bequest, the Hanson Bequest, which is devoted to the publication of music editions from earlier British music and publications relating to that field. So, I think this balance is still there at the same time as the Association has rightly had to embrace much wider fields than it ever had done in the past. And that also extends, of course, to ideas about the membership. I think this was something that was gathering pace in your time, but has certainly moved on with great speed and enthusiasm to actually just say and look at ourselves as an association to think about the diversity of the membership, both in their, as it were, personal characteristics, but also in their approaches and their methodologies, the subjects they study, and so on. The RMA was certainly at the forefront in developing equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives. And that has again been something which is in tune with our times but needs to be addressed with care, sensitivity, but also enthusiasm for all the new things that can be brought into the Association's work.

Mark [00:13:04] No, absolutely, and regularly reviewing it and subjecting it to constant change. But don't you think, Simon, that the key players here really are the ordinary members of Council and the Vice Presidents? I mean, the people who do all the work while you work your way through

the agenda, through all the Council meetings. I mean, I did this for six years, and I was just endlessly impressed, I think almost honoured really, to work alongside the members of Council and the Vice Presidents. It was an enormous pleasure from an intellectual, scholarly and social perspective just to work with people who were at the top of their game, were giving up their Saturdays for nothing to come and do this kind of work. And I got a real buzz out of that – I mean, out of the intellectual exchanges we had, which went far beyond the kind of, sort of agenda-based objects that we were trying to interrogate. And, in a sense, getting two old-lag Presidents like you and me together is very nice, but what it doesn't do is it doesn't really envoice all those people that we worked alongside and that continue to do so much for the Association. It has to be said, I think, that the average age of the ordinary members of Council, and indeed Vice Presidents, has dropped radically in the last 15 or 20 years. And I'm delighted whenever I see the results of elections, to see names of people I do not know. Because that usually means that they're from disciplinary backgrounds with which I'm unfamiliar. And, you know, there's always stuff to be learned about people who are coming and bringing different perspectives to the Association.

Simon [00:14:57] Let's not forget the role of students in this, but also doctoral students [and] early career researchers. I think that was something that you put a lot of emphasis on in your years: the way in which students have continued to challenge us, push the Association forward and develop their conferences and study days, and so on. I think [this] has been a fantastic legacy and something that we should really celebrate. Can I add another point there? And it's something that I'm sure we're very aware of, [which] is the international role of the Association and building those connections, whether it's with the AMS, with our friends, colleagues, with the IMS and all of those, but also now the Network of European Musicological Societies that I was involved with, and Barbara has been lately greatly involved with setting up following a conference in Utrecht, in 2018, I think it was. And that was founded that the next RMA conference: the network was founded in 2019, and the RMA again has had a prime role in that, not only so we can keep our foot in Europe, as it were, but also so that we can speak together, as an intellectual and musicological community in the very broadest sense. It's been tremendous, I think, for the RMA.

Mark [00:16:30] No, absolutely. And it's so important, isn't it? It's interesting because, I've been an avid devotee of the American Musicological Society since I went to my first conference in 1984. And they very generously made me a corresponding member a few years ago. And when I was President, I always kept kind of mentally benchmarking against the AMS. And my rule of thumb was to divide everything by five. So, you know, membership of the AMS is x , so membership of the RMA to match it should be $x/5$. And actually, once you do all of that, you realise just how far we out-perform. You know, I mean, punching above our weight is something that we do extraordinarily well. You know, because we run two journals, we run a monograph series, as I said, you know, badged RMA events every 11 days. Even with its regional chapters, the AMS doesn't really have that kind of reach. The difference is because it has the massive scale, but its annual conference is such a such a great event which, you know – I rarely miss an annual meeting of the AMS. It's packed full of exciting stuff; everybody is there; you can conduct immense amounts of business. The RMA annual conference is an interesting beast now. I mean, I can remember when it was, you know, basically trad musicology from the medieval period up to, kind of, 1900. And that was kind of fine because there was a kind of shared understanding, everyone would go, and so on. Now, because it's this umbrella for such a wide range of subjects, it's not quite clear who would go to the conference, who would propose panels for the conference, and so on. And I think even when I was President, I found the annual conference possibly the biggest challenge in terms of finding a logical purpose for it, which aligned well with the ambitions that we actually had for the Association. And it's true of lots of European national associations, as well: France, Germany,

Spain, Italy, all the larger Eastern European countries – they're doing the same kind of thing. They're trying to embrace, you know, a broad range of subject areas, and their annual conferences are, sort of, interestingly eclectic.

Simon [00:19:01] Sure. But probably the RMA has been at the forefront of that. That's certainly my experience with this new Network, is that some societies have quite deliberately, I think, constrained themselves to more of a musicological place, in terms of both their subject matter, but also things like their commitment to national Denkmäler editions of one sort or another.

Mark [00:19:30] Right, right.

Simon [00:19:31] So it's an interesting question in itself as to what is the role of a national society like that, like ours: I absolutely agree. But isn't there another thing? The RMA's role: if it's to do anything, it's going to be in the broadest sense an advocate. And whether that's an advocate for the highest standards of musicological work, or whether it's an advocate for the need for music education, for the state of the arts in our country. And these are things that, as we well know, are under considerable, well, re-examination, if not threat at the moment. And the RMA has a voice in that discussion, I'm sure.

Mark [00:20:23] I'm sure that's right. I mean, I think the question of (quote) 'maintaining standards' (end quote) is a kind of threshold level for us in terms of gatekeeping quality. There's just no issue for us, really. But the question of advocacy is a really interesting one. I did try and pull together as many scholarly music organisations as I possibly could. There was something like 20; I got them all together. There was even a website at one point with, you know, logos and everything. And we had one truly amazing meeting in London – I'm guessing it must have been something like 2016, 2017 – where everybody was there. I mean, from the RMA to the Galpin Society to the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. Sound and Music were there, you know, and I regard that as one of my greatest failures, not being able to kind of pursue that with the kind of relentless energy that it actually required. Because once you've got, you know, 20 organisations advocating for a subject and speaking with a common voice, then you're kind of moving, aren't you?

Simon [00:21:36] That's right. Maybe that's a good place to end. Mark: I'm not sure.

Mark [00:21:39] Well, I suppose the obvious way to end it is with issues about the future. And I think as long as we have open-minded Presidents, open-minded Vice Presidents, open-minded members of Council – and I have every confidence on the basis of what I've seen in the last 15, 20 years, that that's exactly what we have – [then] that process of responding to change in the UK music-research scene in all its forms, that's going to continue. And I think that will only be the very best of all worlds, I think.