

Time Capsule Transcript: Jonathan (Jo) Hicks and Mollie Carlyle

Mollie [00:00:00] I'm Mollie Carlyle. I'm the current Junior Student Representative [on the RMA Council], soon to take over the role of Senior Representative in a few months' time.

Jo [00:00:08] I'm Jo Hicks and I was a Student Representative a long time ago – I'll count the years at some point – and it's really nice now to have the chance to think about that with Mollie, who's in the role now. Mollie: I am curious why you wanted to get involved with the RMA.

Mollie [00:00:25] Well, to be perfectly blunt, there was an element of I did want it to go on my CV, if we're being honest here. I think also it came at quite an interesting time of my PhD life, in that I just decided to go, 'Yes, any opportunity that comes up, I'm just going to apply for', thinking 'There's no way this will be successful'. And then, lo and behold, an email [arrived] out of nowhere saying, 'Oh yeah, you're now the Junior Student Representative', so that was a lovely surprise.

Jo [00:00:50] That is a good surprise. That strategy of 'Just say yes to everything': I feel it's really dangerous, but it's also really successful sometimes.

Mollie [00:00:58] Yeah. It did mean that there was suddenly a lot, because I got quite a few things, and so trying to balance, like, RMA bits and pieces with everything else that was going on has been... a bit of a challenge, but also very fulfilling.

Jo [00:01:11] So, this must be much fresher in your mind [than it is in mine]: what are you actually doing in your role at the moment, as a Student Representative?

Mollie [00:01:18] Largely, it does seem to be supporting the Senior Student Representative, who is absolutely fantastic – we've been so lucky with that, particularly as she took over the role this year, so the same year as me, which isn't how they usually do it – attending Publications Committees, attending the Annual General Meeting; I'm on the RSC (so the Research Student Conference) organising committee – that's one of my roles. But a lot of it does seem to be delegating, which again is a nice thing. We have a fantastic communications team, a publications team. So, it's kind of catching up with people and saying, 'Oh, could we do this? This might be nice to do', and then they just do it, which is fantastic.

Jo [00:01:55] I imagine one of the big difference[s] between when I was a Student Rep, more than a decade ago, and when you're doing it now is probably you have more online meetings – or maybe not: maybe the emphasis is on meeting as part of the Research Students' Conference or the Annual Conference, and so you manage to have that, that kind of face-to-face time. But I think, at the time when I was a Student Rep, it felt like being in the room with people was a big part of it: that was part of the opportunity. And I think that's how it was sold, actually, you know: 'You won't do a huge amount of work as a Student Rep, but what you will do is be sitting there with other people who are more senior, you'll get to know people who are working in the field. You'll get to see behind the curtain about how people put together a journal or organise a conference and what goes into that'. And that was a fantastic opportunity, because you were able to see, see decisions and some of those are really pragmatic: it was to do with changing publishers and certain kinds of access, and what kind of file formats would be available, and these kinds of processes. And at the time I had very little opinion about that, maybe I don't have much opinion now, but I know it's an important thing to be able to understand and work with. And on the

conference side, it was really impressive, actually, to see, not only practical discussions – you know, ‘What weekend should this be held on so that it’s most convenient for term times’, things like that – but also discussions about the way that the theme of a conference would or wouldn’t enable various people to be involved, or might centre certain kinds of things, might allow connections with organisations outside the university sector, and so on and so forth. So that was really, really eye-opening in terms of what goes into planning events. And then I think you keep all of that in your back pocket, right, and then when you’re in a situation to organise something, you have a point of reference for, like, ‘Maybe this would work, maybe that would be a problem’. Otherwise, I don’t really know how you learn admin, right – if you don’t do it. And that sounds like the dullest possible thing to say, but I also credit the RMA with some of that important work – how can you do that well or how can you have a view on what good administration might be? – I suppose.

One thing I’ve not talked about much yet, I suppose, is the details of what I did when I was a Student Rep. So, maybe you’ve mentioned a little bit about this – that you belong to committees – but I think I’d split it into two, in a sense: some of things I was tasked with doing, so, ‘Come along to this committee’, and there may be jobs or work associated with that, right, so there may be a task that you can help with. The other side of the role is more [that] of a representative. You are here in the organisation and as part of these meetings to, in some sense, democratically represent, or at least nominally represent the perspectives of students. And I think they’re quite different, because, I mean, obviously they overlap in lots of ways and if you’re helping to organise things for events and for conferences, those are of benefit to students and you can be the one in the room to say ‘I think this would be a useful training session’, or ‘I can imagine people would want to turn up for that’, or ‘I can imagine this might help in some way’. But that’s also the part of the job that’s most useful for the individual who’s doing it, right: that you’re picking up the skills, you’re learning those tricks of the trade, as it were, that you can use later on. I remember it being quite a tricky thing to work out what I was supposed to do with the other side, right. Because there’s no regular mechanism by which you can canvas people. You can talk to the people you know, but that’s, that’s what no one at the time called a filter bubble but, you know, was some kind of filter bubble, like ‘All the people I know have similar concerns to me and so I’ll raise those’. That was something that I was conscious of. And, actually, if I were to be more specific or find one specific thing to mention, it was always money, right. It was always ‘What are the cost implications? We’re going to put on this great thing: can we support people to get there?’. And that was always tied up with, you know, literally counting the pennies sometimes of how much institutional allowance there might be for research visits or, like, can you get £50 by applying to this and get another £50 by applying to another thing, and they’d each ask for matched funding.

That was one of the things I remember, actually, now that I think about it. It was, you know, ‘How do I represent students’ interests?’, and the bluntest form you just keep asking about money. I’m not saying other people weren’t already thinking about that – I’m sure they were, and often, you know, the people with more experience were the first to make suggestions about subsidised travel, and so on, and things like this. That was one of the most important things, I think: when you are a graduate student, in the vast number of cases you can only be acutely aware of how much things cost and the risk that you are, you are spending inordinate amounts of your own money, whatever that is and wherever it comes from, on trying to get to things that may or may not be useful in your professional development. I don’t know if that sounds bleak. It’s just very, very practical, I think. How would you describe the main facets of the role?

Mollie [00:06:45] Well, actually, what you’ve just said is very pertinent because we’re living in a cost-of-living crisis, and I think that’s part of the issue that the RMA are finding at the moment: it’s that students don’t want to pay whatever the cost to be a student member. I suppose my role at

the moment is similar, except for that we do have the communications side of it. [Be]cause obviously social media is a massive thing now. We've got the student blog. So, I think that's changed what the Student Committee does, and that's more our focus now: rather than saying this is what the students want, we're saying, 'Actually we can do our own thing – this is what we're doing'. Yeah. What was that like when you were...?

Jo [00:07:19] That's really interesting. I did a really early – it's still there – I did a really early blog on the student blog, and if you go to one of the first pages, it's about a giant and landscape. But that was after I was a Student Rep: I think I'd just stopped, so that came afterwards. I'm going to totally make up history: I'm going to say there wasn't much social media. I don't even know if that's true, but I do know that it wasn't a big part, I think, of the role of the Student Reps and it certainly wasn't the situation that you've just described where, effectively, there's almost a parallel publishing concern, as it were: there's content and material and discussions. I think you can see that with other learned societies, right? You know, once upon a time [there] was a website that hosted information about when to go to things and how to pay your subs, is now a much more, kind of, dynamic place that involves commentary, involves the kind of hot-take responses to things that you wouldn't be able to perhaps get published in a journal because they're much shorter form, or they're not the kind of writing that lends itself to peer review. So, I think that's really exciting and has lots of potential. That is a new development. I'm stuttering, because I always have big reservations about social media: just in the like biggest general concerns about surveillance capitalism and providing content to enrich the tech overlords. But I'm not going to blame the RMA for that. I mean that feels unfair.

Two things I forgot to say. One is that we're both speaking from the University of Aberdeen: I teach in the Music department and Mollie's a graduate student here doing her PhD. So, it's not just a conversation between two people who have been Student Reps: you know, I'm really curious to see what it's like for Mollie because this is something that I did a long time before. And I do feel, I guess, that it was really useful for me, So, in the ways you've said: you're partly thinking about your CV, you're partly thinking about something you can mention – that was one of the reasons I wanted to get involved. But I also remember, not to get too, kind of, teary-eyed about this, I also remember the very first time that I went to an RMA Student Conference. And it was just fantastic: it was really exciting and exhilarating to be a part of such a varied set of discussions and people bringing in different kinds of musical analysis, different kinds of historical approaches, different, you know, ways of doing what they're doing. And that was at King's in London. I can't remember exactly what year that was – maybe we can look it up to put it in the notes! But as well as it being a great event to be part of and, you know, very eye-opening for me as a PhD student, it was also great to see that it was being organised by other students. And I think that combination of, you know, 'Welcome to a world of academic exchange where, you know, lots seems possible', but also 'Welcome to a world where you can get involved and you can be one of the people that's organising this and having ideas and trying to put things into practice', was really exciting. Hopefully, that kind of spirit is still there now.

Mollie [00:10:08] Yeah, I would say very much so. And actually, being part of the RMA student committee has really challenged quite a few preconceptions that I had about the RMA, because the title – you know, 'Royal Musical Association' – it's quite formal, it's quite grand. 'Royal' is obviously tradition, maybe inflexibility. But I've been to the last, I think, five RMA conferences in a row and it is such a diverse range on display there, which I think has been really nice for PGR students and PhD students – to see that there are different ways, different methodologies, you know, different practices that they might not have thought of. So, like, [at] the last one I had an

amazing discussion with someone who's doing a PhD on a guitar that she's invented. So, it's that kind of like practice-based research, it's just fascinating.

Jo [00:10:51] Yeah. The diversity question is an interesting one I guess, in terms of the reputation of the RMA. You know, I've sometimes had conversations with people who've never been to RMA conferences or perhaps only dip their toe in, who have a strong sense that, you know, as an organisation the RMA is kind of less involved in expanding Music Studies, less committed to inclusivity than other organisations, you know, whether that's BFE [British Forum for Ethnomusicology], or whether that's other groups. And I feel that's not a question to sidestep. For all I'm reminiscing about how varied and exciting and diverse that conference was, I bet if I went back and looked at the Programme, there'd be some massive gaps in terms of the diversity of the students that were taking part, in terms of, you know, who felt welcome, the kind of musics that were being talked about. And so, yeah, I guess that if you're being very critical about the institution it can give this sense of diversity and vibrancy and all things are possible, while at the same time making it easier to do some kinds of Music Studies than others. But I also feel that these questions are regularly being asked and promoted by a lot of people in the RMA.

You've mentioned the name. I don't want to hijack this too much to talk about the name because I know the name has been a bit of a hobbyhorse for me and I remember one point talking to a friend at another conference, and I was like 'There's three problems with the RMA: it's the Royal, the Musical and the Association'. I could never quite fix what was wrong with the 'Association': that was just rhetoric. But the other two, I think, are really tricky. 'Royal' for all the reasons, right? All those associations. And that's a conversation that the RMA itself has hosted and tried to encourage. And there were lots of different views on that, you know. There are plenty of people who would much rather prioritise programmes that encourage inclusion, regardless of whether the name includes 'Royal', and might even sort of leverage the 'Royal' association to try and get more attention for the organisation. So, there are people who can see benefits in the 'Royal'. I'm a Republican, so it's not something that appeals to me and I think there are big, you know, questions of historical association and the baggage that comes with that. But the 'Musical' as well, I think that's another term, like, there's times when I've wondered what it would be like if it was the 'Royal Musicological Association' or another Musicological Association. And obviously other countries have a professional body which is for musicology. The RMA isn't that and, the example you gave of someone who's made a guitar: that's the positive case, that you have these exchanges across the whole spread of Music Studies. But it is something that I do keep coming back to. We were told in our brief for this that we could be critical or ask these questions. I wonder sometimes if the RMA spreads itself really widely, and if there are times when the people who gather under its umbrella don't necessarily have that much in common, in terms of their professional work. I think you could say the same for Music Departments, actually, more generally. What's your take on that?

Mollie [00:13:49] I think it is an interesting one because I'm more inclined to seek out people who are on the periphery – and the fact that we're talking about periphery and mainstream is an issue in itself. So, like, I actively sought out the practice-based researchers and so on. I think that the RMA does have associations with other groups, so like Music as Practice [the Practice Research Study Group] has a really good mix and they're not all RMA members. So, I think they are trying: there have definitely been conversations around, you know, 'How do we make this more interesting? How do we make this diverse?'. Yeah, it's really interesting what you say about the 'Musical' compared to the 'Musicological', [be]cause they both have stigma attached to them: I think they both have their own associations. So, no, it is a tricky question.

Jo [00:14:32] Yeah. In the pecking order of organisations that are really important for you, as an early career researcher, where's the RMA?

Mollie [00:14:40] I have to say, the RMA is quite important to me personally, because it was the first formal musical institution that I got involved with. So, at Oxford, they had an institutional membership, so I got access for free. And then afterwards I thought, 'Well, actually that's been really useful: they're interested in my research'. So, the fact [is] I've presented at the last five conferences or whatever in a row, even as a Masters 'student, which isn't typical. I think there are lots of benefits to joining the RMA. I think it's been really useful for me, to be honest, to have that prestigious aspect as well, because it is a prestigious institution, it is considered to be. I can't think of a – maybe you can tell me – I can't think of a bigger musical organisation, like generally.

Jo [00:15:23] In the UK?

Mollie [00:15:24] Yeah.

Jo [00:15:25] No, no, I guess not, you know. There's BFE and there's associations for Analysis and then there's associations for Music Education, then there's, you know, there's EDIMS [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Music Studies Network], and there's a bigger network. Maybe one of things that looks a bit different now as opposed to when I was a Student Rep is that, when I was a Student Rep it seemed really clear that the RMA was totally important. And maybe, you know, some people would have a moan and say, 'Such and such a conference wasn't a great year, and not enough people came', you know: there will always be that kind of 'Was it as good as last year?', or 'Is it as good as other international conferences that might be bigger and might draw more people'. But it definitely seemed, you know, in the foreground of where you'd want to present your work, where you would want to kind of show people what you were about, where you'd want to meet people, where you'd make those networks. And that's kind of borne out for me: you know, a lot of the colleagues that I work with now at various institutions are people that, yeah, I did first meet, like, in a room somewhere at a session at an RMA conference. And we were able to chat, we were able to ask questions, we were able to kind of suss each other out, I suppose. And being able to attend multiple events is a good way of doing that as well, [be]cause it's not a one off: you start to get a sense of, like, 'We keep coming to the same sessions', like, there's some kind of commonality there.

But then further on now, you know, being in a Music Department which has people working in lots and lots of different areas, so not necessarily grounded in musicology or perhaps [working in] areas of creative practice where they don't rely on the RMA. And that for me is an interesting dynamic and it's a dynamic that's going to keep working: the RMA is really open to lots of areas of Music Studies, but not everyone in all areas of Music Studies sees the RMA as the place where they want to kind of commit, I suppose. And no one has to, it doesn't have to be a question of commitment. But that's an interesting thing for me, like, the extent to which that big tent is one that my colleagues working in different disciplines are really concerned about being in – or not. So, when the RMA conference comes around, I don't see an exodus from my department of everyone saying, 'I've got to be there'. And partly – and this is gonna sound like a north of the border complaint – partly that's a term-time thing, right, like: it actually fell in welcome week, the conference, this time round, so it would be really quite tricky for some people to get away. But that sense of where it fits in a bigger kind of patchwork of learned societies and professional organisations: that's something I guess I think about a lot.

What differences do you think there'll be between the RMA now and the RMA in 10 years' time?

Mollie [00:17:57] Well I'd hope that there would be more diversity, particularly in terms of the people giving the talks – and there are, there are movements, you know, to make that a reality. It's a really difficult question to answer, to be honest, because there are just general social movements that are going on which will impact the RMA: so, the fact that we do want more diversity, the fact that we are advertising, like, EDI groups at the RMA. I'm hoping that they'll be able to facilitate different branches of music a bit more. So, yeah, I think better facilitation of different branches of music, maybe?

Jo [00:18:32] No, I can absolutely see that and that would be a kind of, an acceleration of what is already, like, an agenda, right, so that's already something that's, that the institution is kind of publically committed to doing. I don't think it'll be that different, actually. I could imagine quite a similar collection of organisations that [as] there are right now. I don't really see, you know, one organisation in the UK eating any other ones, as it were. I think the RMA has no obligation to solve everything, right: it has no obligation to cover everything, to be everything for everybody. And that doesn't mean that equality, diversity, and inclusion aren't important: not at all. But it's always part of a bigger mix. And I feel, in saying, that I'm at risk of stating the obvious and stating something that probably everyone would agree with because increasingly there are all sorts of connections, right, between the work that happens with the RMA and the work that happens with other learned societies, and other professional bodies and, you've mentioned the Practice as Research Group, which is supported by the RMA but includes people who aren't RMA members. The student conference is a collaboration – always and has been for a long time – with the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, and so on and so forth. So, I guess, if anything, perhaps the edges of the RMA would overlap even more, I suppose. Although I'm still returning to an edge-centre: I mean, that's just a very difficult thing to get away from, isn't it? The amorphous, blobby form of the RMA will translucently, yeah, overlap more with others.