

Time Capsule Transcript: Dr Lola San Martín Arbide and Prof. Natasha Loges

Lola [00:00:00] Hello. It's a pleasure to be here celebrating the RMA's 150th anniversary in conversation with Natasha Loges to record a time capsule for the future. Hi, Natasha. How are you?

Natasha [00:00:13] I'm really well, Lola: it's lovely to see you.

Lola [00:00:16] Lovely to see you too. So, I was thinking when we were invited about that one first time when we met. Wasn't that in Manchester? What's your memory of that conference from, I believe, 2019?

Natasha [00:00:32] Well, the topic was great and one that was obviously close to both of our hearts, because there was a very strong gender theme underpinning that conference. So, that particular contact with the RMA really symbolised for me lots of good things about this scholarly association, that there would always be a conference that was talking about something that felt important. It was a very joyous and collegial event, and it was really fun to chair your paper on that occasion. And what did what did you take away from that one?

Lola [00:01:04] Well, I agree with you. For me, it was a very, very, very – I have to stress this – special conference, because I think I took part in four different events during those days. I looked back at the programme to make sure, and I did take part in the panel that you were chairing, with a piece about French popular song, but I also delivered a paper about Bizet's *Carmen*, and I chaired a session about soundscapes. And then there was a very special meeting, very unorthodox for me: that was the first time, definitely, talking about transnational careers, in a panel with the directors of different musicological societies from Europe. NEMS was founded at that event, the Network of European Musicological Societies. So, the first thing that comes to my mind when I think about that conference was its emphasis on building bridges with European institutions, and the great emphasis that was put by the RMA on making the association closer to its European counterparts.

Natasha [00:02:10] Well, maybe that leads very nicely to something you and I have talked about, many times in preparing this little time capsule, which is what does the RMA mean to both of us? And how perhaps, has that changed also in the years that we've belonged to the RMA?

Lola [00:02:26] Yeah, and that's, I think, it's what the people from the RMA that I've met, we've always had long conversations about transnational careers, especially. And I know this has been a very important focus of the RMA's activities recently: about how to help early career scholars navigate the very, very tricky landscape of securing funding, securing positions, securing different types of opportunities for collaboration with colleagues from overseas. And yeah, that's what I take away, that's to me what, yeah, what the RMA symbolises: the willingness to connect, to stay in touch and to incorporate the voices of people who are early career fellows, who have different experiences, who can share their knowledge about different academic landscapes, and the willingness to integrate all of that in a holistic practice.

Natasha [00:03:25] Don't you think it's a really nice balance between doing academia within the ivory towers and the dedication to academia at the highest level, but also recognising that the ivory tower is an ivory tower, and that all of us have to do things like raise funding and get jobs

and balance with other parts of our lives, and perhaps what the RMA means to me most of all – and this was something I grew into over nearly 20 years – was the sense that the Association wanted to look after us holistically: they wanted to look after us as evolving professionals and not just people who had the luxury to write abstruse and erudite papers in ideal conditions, which is not the case for most of us. I have a sense, when I think about my RMA colleagues, of people who are always intensely overworked, inevitably overworked, but absolutely dedicated to music scholarship in the widest sense and very often very humorous, very creative and very open-minded. And my RMA encounters always stimulated my thinking, made me think, ‘Oh, I never looked at the phenomenon, or the event or the possibility in that way’, which I always thought. I was, reflecting on this time capsule: how grateful I am for that stimulus and creativity each time.

Lola [00:04:49] Yes, yes, I have the same experience, and I remember there were panels at that conference that were about the context in which our research unfolds and takes place. Wasn't there a panel about motherhood? There were workshops about publishing. There's all of the stands from publishers also, which are great for keeping an eye on what's new and also meeting editors. So it's a very holistic, it was a very holistic event in that sense. There was a concert as well, so yeah, in that sense, it was committed to music scholarship in all its breadth. And I think it was very, to me, it was very useful and it was very meaningful, in that I had just returned to the UK for that conference when I was then working in France, and it was really interesting and also heartwarming to reconnect and see my colleagues from previous years. It was very, very, very, very touching. And, other than being a great conference, it was also great fun, and I still have fond memories: that must have been one of the most enjoyable conferences ever to me. And, like I said before, also one of the busiest: I couldn't believe as days went by, 'Oh, today I have another gig and this conference': it kept going. I really enjoyed it, and I remember coming home with a huge surge of energy to keep working and to hopefully match the expectation that such an event had left me with.

Natasha [00:06:23] You touched on something just now, which I do think is really distinctive and has evolved in the RMA, in my time with the RMA, which is the devotion to music as actual experience, the devotion to practice–research, which meant that so many of our events in the RMA involved, really seamlessly, live music-making, which is not the case for so many other scholarly societies where music is kept at arm's length. I think there was the sense of *joie de vivre* and dedication to risk-taking and creativity within RMA events, as expressed through the live music. And I remember through conversation after conversation, the momentum for that building up and the willingness of people to support it, even if it didn't necessarily align with their research expectations, there was a generosity, there is a generosity amongst RMA colleagues towards different kinds of research.

Lola [00:07:24] Yes, that's very true. And I always think of how art historians, for instance, can go to a museum to admire and examine the originals, and how, for us, the originals can mean various different things: it can be looking at a score, but how a concert – I always, when I go to a concert, I always think this is me getting to explore an original and creation. But we don't have the equivalent of having an art gallery, so concerts are essential and it's important to include one, I think, in this kind of academic meeting, when we make music live and we can listen to it live.

Natasha [00:08:03] Yeah, and also supporting practice–research as an emerging arm of research. I'm now showing my age by calling practice–research an emerging arm of research, because, of course it's been established in British academia for a very long time. But again, reflecting on those really interesting discussions about what kind of research is this, how can we as an association

support it, thinking about things like research evaluation, something to which we are all subject in our different ways, thinking of ways that we could support people to feel more confident when we let go of words. And there again, I have to speak with admiration for my colleagues: the way, around the table, we worked towards finding something coherent, something that an association could say, yes, we can stand behind this, even though we were all very individual as human beings and as researchers.

Lola [00:09:00] Yes, that's perhaps one of the things that, I often think we need to – well, we: I'll speak for myself – need to get better at, which is, working as part of teams. I find that in the arts and humanities, we're very used to being single authors, to doing each our own work. Whereas in other fields, like science, different fields within science, it's inconceivable: people work in labs as part of teams. And those panels from the RMA are a good example of how, if there is goodwill to do so, it can be very, very fruitful to work as part of a team. And there's been a number of occasions when I've collaborated with different members from the RMA, and when we've tried to bring to the table our very best to help each other, especially in terms of applications, writing projects, writing abstracts, helping each other with English-language texts. That has also been a very important conversation within NEMS: what to do with language, how to respect the variety and the richness of languages in Europe, while also being able to communicate with one another, thanks to this *lingua franca*, which is English. I wanted to ask you, Natasha. What did you take away with you? What are the main points that you would like to highlight from your experience at the RMA?

Natasha [00:10:29] So, I'm looking at this from the perspective of someone who has now left the United Kingdom and is working in Germany, so there's inevitably a tinge of nostalgia in what I say. But, when I look back on those conferences and those conversations: the conversations in the corridor, the conversations over coffee and biscuits, and also the committee meetings – I know, you know, people will laugh if they hear me talking about committee meetings as something I remember fondly. But, in fact, you do get to see aspects of people through committees which other contexts don't give you. So, I think, what I took away is a sense of an association that did not want to acknowledge boundaries, an association that felt that our discipline could stretch in almost any possible direction that we wanted, provided we were open-minded enough to accommodate it. And that, as you so beautifully said earlier, that extends beyond our national boundary as well. A sense that, yes, the RMA was clearly a national association and had to confront often really demanding national agendas: for example, financial pressure, the reduction of music in schools, the closure of music departments, which at the time of our recording this time capsule feels very relevant and very poignant. But, at the same time, despite those really pressing national agendas, the RMA always looked beyond – possibly because so many of us, you and I included, come from backgrounds, come from countries, not Britain, come from other countries – we particularly cherish the way we were made to feel welcome. Certainly, when I first came to Britain, I did not always feel welcome, I did not always feel legitimate within academia. And the RMA was the association which helped me feel, actually, yes, I did have something to say, as a scholar, I did have something to contribute to this discipline. And perhaps that sense of confidence and sense of self-belief is what I value most from my RMA encounters. And what about you, Lola?

Lola [00:12:42] Well thank you: that's a very beautiful reflection to share. I feel quite like you: I was very moved to have been invited for one of those appearances or contributions to the RMA 2019 conference, which was a very unusual paper to give. It was very much a personal paper, in which I was reflecting on the highs and lows of having an international career. Like you said, it always takes some time to settle into a new context, even to just understand what constitutes

excellence, the criteria for good research, or the excellence framework. It varies greatly from country to country, and it can cause some state of disorientation for people like myself who've moved from one country to another. And after a few moves, certainly I was left with a sense of wonder about how, what to do, what was a priority, what wasn't, what has value, what doesn't have value. And that paper was very interesting, as many people came talk to me afterwards to say they had really appreciated hearing a very personal note. And I won't lie to you or to anyone listening: there were times that I felt a bit embarrassed afterwards, where I said, 'Well, I can't believe I said this in front of my peers, of an academic audience. Why was I talking about this?' But the fact that I was asked to speak up was, in itself, quite moving. I'm still very nostalgic about my time in the UK. I then moved to France and then to Spain, and there is still a big part of my academic drive which is based on those formative years in the UK, that, I still retain a lot of it, of what makes me excited about academia. And part of it is the stress on collaborative work, the very original themes, the very original methodologies that I was exposed to over there. And something that you've mentioned: how fun it can be. Musicology can be fun. I've read many articles that are rigorous and thought-provoking, but also very enjoyable in terms of literature. Very, very enjoyable, yeah. And I'm also very moved about the, by the generosity. And that's something I can't quite, I don't think I'm in a position of giving back just now, but I always think I'll pay forward and I'll try to emulate the best people I've met who have been so generous to me. In the future, whenever I have a chance, I'll remember them and try to live up to their names in how I help other people if I ever have the chance, because I certainly feel very lucky to have been mentored very informally by people from the RMA.

Natasha [00:15:38] Can you share with me one specific experience, just so our listeners can imagine what your, what your link with the RMA was like?

Lola [00:15:46] Yes. So, for instance, I was at one point invited to give a short talk about securing funding and helping people who had just earned their doctorate. It was an informal conversation about securing funding, and the emphasis was put on different national schemes. So, I had an opportunity to join them and talk about different programmes that were available in the UK and elsewhere. And that's meaningful. And that's something I wanted to go back to that you mentioned: how it's a national association, but it's not devoted exclusively, of course, to national music. And there's been a debate – well, I've read on comments, Twitter, on social media – about the Spanish National Musicological Society, how it's, on whether or not is mostly devoted to Spanish music. And that's something I think is an interesting topic for reflection as well, because I was very welcomed by the group of scholars who work on French music in the UK. It's a very rich group of scholars working on different types of French music, all kinds of periods, and I don't see a large community studying French music, for instance, in Spain. So that was a very nice thing for me, arriving in the UK to find people who are working in the same field that isn't the national music of the national association, if that makes sense. How about you?

Natasha [00:17:22] I was just thinking, I know exactly what you mean. So, I was ploughing through my memories of RMA events, and I think my best memory, my favourite memory, was getting out of the train station in Durham in RMA 2022, which was the first year that we could really properly meet in person after the [Covid-19] pandemic. And Durham is an utterly beautiful city, and I had missed so many of my colleagues, and of course it was raining – of course it had to be raining – and nevertheless, there was a spring in my step. As I walked towards my accommodation, I thought, how much we benefit, how happy it makes us to spend time with each other. And in my memory, I had contrasted it with being in Plymouth for RMA–BFE Student Conference in January of 2022. It was a terrific conference in Plymouth, don't get me wrong, but I remember particularly

Lindsay Copeland's hypnotic and really very unsettling keynote on ASMR – the sort of strange noises that people listen to on the internet when they're completely alone. And it was this antithesis of the loneliness of the pandemic, and then the sheer pleasure of seeing my colleagues again in a city as beautiful as Durham in the autumn. And I think that was one of my happiest RMA moments, probably shaped by the contrast. Now, we should bring this to an end. So, I'm going to ask you the hard question: what do you think an institution like the RMA can do in the current climate: very limited resources for the arts and humanities – it's a tough time in the UK for Music Studies. How could how do you think they can strategically deploy resources in these troubled times?

Lola [00:19:10] That is indeed a tricky question, and I feel, I'm not sure I have the right answer, but we were discussing earlier about issues related to life–work balance and how there is still a lot of work to be done in terms of parental leave, for instance. You also mentioned the closure of departments, so, in that respect, a big task is to raise awareness of the importance – and I think the pandemic helped a little bit, but that effect might have gone away now – the great importance of culture and the arts to keep us human, to not alienate ourselves from our very nature. I think that's perhaps one of the most big, the biggest and most noble tasks the RMA has to do, together with more mundane things: day-to-day management of research and teaching in daily life, of departments, helping and offering support to individuals to carry on with their work, yes. Like the schemes I mentioned with, that offer help to apply for different projects, jobs. And I also think the mentoring schemes are very important too: precisely what you mentioned about that memory of connection with people. I think that's something that is immaterial, but so valuable: precisely the connection, the human connection, guaranteeing that we still have a forum where we can, that we can rely on to see and meet our colleagues and our peers.

Natasha [00:20:56] Thanks, Lola, that's a beautiful way for us to end, and I hope people have enjoyed this recording.