

Time Capsule Transcript: Scott McLaughlin and Mieko Kanno

Mieko [00:00:00] Okay, so, this is the beginning of a conversation for the celebration: [the] 150th anniversary of the Royal Musical Association – it's not a *Musicological* Association.

Scott [00:00:16] I think it maybe used to be more of a Musicological Association, but now there's more – well, music seems to be a bigger thing now.

Mieko [00:00:24] Yes: it's interesting how this perception is changing – perhaps more so in your field, as a composer – that the subject is, kind of, expanding beyond music into what is often called 'sound'.

Scott [00:00:42] Yeah, absolutely. I've only really been involved with the RMA for about 3 or 4 years, and I've come in from the side: I haven't come in as a Council position or as an elected Council member. I've come in running this Practice Research Study Group, which was passed on to me essentially by Nick Fells. Nick Fells started it; so, I took it over. And since then, it's just been slowly integrating that with what the RMA does. So, this year, for example, we've just initiated a Practice Research prize for the RMA, which is like the existing prizes – the Roche Prize and the Dent Medal, and all of these. But the point is to see what good examples of practice research are there out there this year – what things can we shine a light on? It's much less about saying 'This is the best thing this year', and much more about saying, 'Here's some good examples of stuff', because I think that's mostly what people need to see: people need to see examples of things being done well.

Mieko [00:01:38] That's great, because I remember, it was in my time when I was on the Council – so that's between 2016 and 2018 – that was around the time we started talking about, 'Well, we also need a prize for practice research'.

Scott [00:01:57] That's amazing, that's great. And those conversations just didn't ever get as far as doing it?

Mieko [00:02:13] Well, I wasn't following up after I left, so it's really great to hear that, you know. Is this the first year or has it been around for some time?

Scott [00:02:13] No, this is the first year. So, we're still just feeling our way and working out what kinds of things need to go in. And I think this is one of the big challenges in practice, because it's so broad. We've definitely learned this year that we're going to have to narrow things down a little bit more, so we're not trying to compare things that are completely incompatible.

Mieko [00:02:31] Are you having criteria for example?

Scott [00:02:35] We've modelled it a little bit after REF criteria, because that seems to be the thing that practitioners struggle with most. The practice is great, but then finding a way to frame it as research and point out how it's being shared as research: that's the place where things seem to be... that there's less good examples and good models of that, because it's so different. How does a violinist doing contemporary music or Baroque music do that relative to a composer writing an electronic piece, relative to a music technologist coming up with a totally new type of interface? There's so much variety. No, the issue this year has been more that we've had small things submitted and huge things – entire five year projects – trying to compare that with a single

composition or something. So, we're going to just narrow that down a bit more. But when you were involved, back when you were on Council, what kind of discussions were going on around this?

Mieko [00:03:24] Well, it was a reaction to the 2014 REF, where there was lots of practice research having been submitted – much more than what we had expected: even the panel hadn't expected quite how much it was going to be. So, in reaction to that result, I think the Association tried to somehow move ahead and predict what might happen in the near future and how we need to support Music as a subject. And then, you know, talking about initiatives such as the specialist group, talking about what kind of support they need, compared to the established support system that musicologists have had. So, what else is happening these days?

Scott [00:04:18] Well, it's really good as well, just to hear the way this is all framed as support, which is what I think the RMA has always been really good at. It's about creating an environment in which people who are just trying to talk to each other, trying to find a way to get their research out there, to talk to other people, get inspired by other people – find ways of connecting all of these things. What's happened recently in the last 4 or 5 years (and this is maybe where Nick Fells comes in as well) is the Practice Research Advisory Group. That's probably also a response to the 2014 REF, in that they came together cross-disciplinary. So, there's people on there from Music, Fine Art, Theatre, Architecture: all of the practice-adjacent or practice-related disciplines. And I think that was mostly REF panellists, etc., who were coming together to try and find a way to say, 'How can we all agree on a baseline for what we're calling practice research so that everyone knows what they're aiming at? Everyone agrees on some basic minimums that are needed'. So, the conversations that came out of them, they had a bunch of conferences, etc., and they then commissioned two authors to spend a year writing a report on this. And that report – sponsored by Research England, written by James Bulley and Öz[den] Şahin – and that report really did a great job of coming together and saying, 'This is what all the disciplines think, we probably agree, is what practice research more or less is', without trying to nail it down too much. So, I think, when I took it over, part of what I thought we needed to do was then try and integrate this into the RMA: to use the RMA as a way to get these ideas out to all of the constituents, and try and, again, find a level playing-field where you could actually compare a piece of practice that's some Baroque-violin playing with a piece of practice that's an electroacoustic composition, and everyone can see that this is the baseline that we're going for. As long as the people trying to submit things understand what they're aiming for, I think that's the important bit.

Mieko [00:06:12] Interesting, as I left Britain [in] 2016, so it's more than five years – and then in Britain this practice research, it's still going on as part of the Research Assessment [Excellence] Framework. Are there more people doing practice research? How are the, you know, media changing? Because, in some subjects like gaming research, that's a new, relatively new field, where they may write less in terms of sentences but produce, basically, code. So, how is that changing in Music?

Scott [00:06:52] I did go to the REF and the AHRC a couple of years ago and ask, 'How many people submitted, calling it practice?', and they couldn't give me an answer. So, read into that what you will! Certainly, it seems like more people are doing it. I hear a lot of anecdotal stories on the ground from people who said, 'Oh, back in the last REF, I had practice that I wanted to put in, but between various conversations with line managers, and research support and things like that, we eventually decided: let's not do that – let's put just, let's just put in an article'. There was a lot of people, I think, playing safe. There was a lot of institutional fear about this, because they didn't

know what it was – they didn't have clear examples, etc. So, while the REF and the AHRC are saying, 'Yes, practice is great, please give us practice research', the institutions didn't know what they were dealing with, so everyone played safe. But it seems like this time around, coming out of the last REF, out of [20]21, there seems to be a lot more people now saying 'No, I really want to put my practice in'. I think visibility is playing a big role, and I think that's a place where the RMA has been helping and is continuing to help: just increased visibility. The RMA has been really good at pushing practice within its conferences, etc., trying to create a space for this, so that people can see what's happening, and the positivity of that brings more people into it. But I think, as well, it's worth pointing out that one of the starting points of the Bulley-Şahin report from PRAG UK was about 'Practice research shouldn't be exclusive': it's not about saying 'This is what it needs to be called practice': it's more about saying 'Practice is involved in everything', so it's more about spreading the net very wide to allow people who maybe didn't feel like their research would work in a standard musicological box or anything, to be able to bring their practice into research. But of course, as well, if you're working in Finland, the artistic research paradigm is slightly different, so it's interesting to know how things look over there as well.

Mieko [00:08:53] Well, the equivalent is what we call artistic research here. Some people like to articulate it as a specialist subject, while some others are quite comfortable that it's one variety of research. But again – and probably the same in the UK – it depends on what the government wants to see out of research done at educational institutions. And then also the Ministry of Education and Culture – the culture part is important – whether the culture part is supportive towards artistic experiment, or does it have to go via the education budget? And in countries like Finland, there is still a lot of support for Music from the cultural budget, let's say, compared to the UK. You could say that, in Finland, the education side is less favourable towards anything to do with artistic research, because they would say, simply, 'Well, you've got this cultural funding available'. That is quite an important aspect of whether artistic research is thriving in Finland, or in the UK, or Norway, for example. Norway – they are doing a great job when it comes to that. And then in Sweden, it's been a well-established area for more than ten years. In Finland it's less so, but, at the same time, we are very much aware that there is a lot of cultural funding still in place. So that's the background.

Scott [00:10:39] Yeah, that's a really interesting observation, because I think in many ways there are similarities in the UK where maybe ten years ago there was a bit less understanding of the difference between, say, getting Research-Council funding for art or getting Arts-Council funding. And now it seems to be a little bit more clear that, if what you're doing is purely an artistic output, then it's probably Arts-Council funding you're looking for; if what you're doing has an experimental nature to it, even to the extent that the final artistic output might be secondary to the process that takes place along it, then it's probably more to do with Research-Council funding. But I think, as well, there is, there's a lot of confusion among people who are just trying to do good work. They're trying to do something that's interesting, and it's not always clear what's going to be the best funding route for that work. And there's also been a lot more conversations around, while everything you do as a practitioner *can* be research, not everything *has to* be research. In the older REF models, where everyone had to submit four things, there was a real pressure to just put in everything and try and make it look like research, whereas now it's much easier to say, 'Okay, I have these three pieces I made, which are really good pieces, but they're not doing anything particularly experimental or new, whereas *this* thing is doing something that I think people should see'. It allows us to make that distinction a little bit more easily. I think something that we're pushing for as well is – and this is something that came out of PRAG – is just greater visibility for all of this. It's so difficult to find, unless someone has produced published research in a journal article

or a book: it's very difficult to find practice. It's sitting on someone's website, or it's on YouTube, or somewhere. It's very difficult to actually dig it out. And even then, it's often not talked about in research terms. You get to hear the piece, but you don't really know what the player or the composer was trying to do. So, we're looking towards technological solutions to try and make that easier, make it easier to find stuff, make it easier to tell people about stuff. It seems like all the tools are there: we just need some money put behind how we're actually going to do this.

Mieko [00:12:47] Are you in contact with other practice people – meaning non-artistic practice people, like nursing or religious practitioners – those researchers for whom practice is such an integral part of their work and their research? Are there contacts?

Scott [00:13:12] Not enough. I learned a lot the day when I was reading in the Bulley–Şahin report, talking about, 'Oh, there's also practice research in nursing, as you said, and health sciences, and doctors, and all of these other people'. And I had to sit back for a second and go, 'But they're not artists. How does that work?' And then, when I started looking into it, it was all really, really clear. Yes, these people are also doing a practice, they also relate to these other things. I've tried reaching out sometimes, but it's the standard siloing problem: it's very difficult to find people across that divide. I would be very curious to talk to people in those other non-artistic areas about this, because there's so much crossover. And in fact, in the last couple of years, it's just been really fruitful through the PRAG organisation, talking to people in Dance and Theatre and Architecture, and just finding the points of connection. When you look at our own disciplines, it feels already like it's difficult for a composer to, say, compare with a performer. But actually, that seems incredibly simple when you try to compare a composer with an architect or someone who's designing, doing design. So then leaping even further outside art completely into professional practices: I think we really need that. I think we need – there's a humbling aspect to that. We're not that special, where we're all just doing a practice and trying to tell people why it's interesting.

Mieko [00:14:30] Well, we've talked long enough. Meanwhile, are there any aspirations regarding the RMA?

Scott [00:14:39] Well, like I said at the start, the RMA has been really positive and generous and generative about reaching out and inviting in practice and saying, 'Yes, you must also be part of this, in all the forms that it takes'. And, also, in not trying to apply a musicology lens to all of this: it's, it really is just about inviting in more people from different areas onto Council, getting more voices on Council, more diversity, more different people bringing different perspectives, and just really making it about all of the music landscape, which I think is really wonderful. And I think it's probably always been like that: as I come in as a newcomer feeling like, 'Yes, I'm bringing a new thing', but I'm not really: it's always been there. Was it the same when you were on Council?

Mieko [00:15:24] Well, my involvement with the RMA was first as a student, in the last century. It has always been quite open, perhaps [a] more open community than the name suggests. I have nothing against the name, yet 'The Royal Musical Association' comes with a particular air.

Scott [00:15:47] Yeah.

Mieko [00:15:48] And you are actually surprised once you are in it that, actually, it's ordinary people, who are all fond of music in some way, whatever your means and your specialism may be. And it's a nice group of people, yes.

Scott [00:16:05] Yeah. I don't know if you felt this, but, as a non-musicologist, I was projecting a bunch of anxiety about 'Oh, now I'm stepping into musicology territory'. But, of course, you go in there and it's like – it says more about my insecurities than it does about the RMA. But, in terms of aspirations and moving forward, the support of the RMA is really vital here, because the RMA is, has fingers and threads in every Music department in the UK. It is the best way to get conversations about what we need, what resources we need, etc. So, I think, from that sense – yeah, I'm very happy with the situation as it goes. But we also know it's a long, slow cultural shift to try and streamline practices in certain ways.

Mieko [00:16:46] Thank you. I think we stop here.