

## Presidential Reflection

### *Time Signatures: The SMI at Twenty*

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On 24 February 2023, I stood on the steps of the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, chatting to three people (two women and one man), all of them musicologists, and all members of the Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI). We had just come from the wonderfully well-attended launch of *Women and Music in Ireland*, edited by Ita Beausang, Jennifer O'Connor-Madsen and Laura Watson, and published by Boydell & Brewer as the thirteenth volume of Irish Musical Studies. As we dispersed, it suddenly struck me that not one of my three interlocutors had been born when the first volume of that series appeared in 1990. Two of the three would soon be bound for the University of California, Irvine, to take part in an international conference on 'Women at the Piano, 1848–1970' organized by Joe Davies and Natasha Loges (both of whom are also closely connected to the society) a few weeks afterwards. Meanwhile, the third person was to play a central role in organizing the SMI's twentieth anniversary symposium on 'Music for Stage and Screen' that took place in the National Opera House, Wexford, just a week prior to the Irvine meeting.

I begin these brief reflections in this way because the present tense of musicology in Ireland still seems marvellous and absolutely compelling to me. I'm not sure when I first dared to designate myself as a musicologist (my first papers appeared almost forty years ago, in 1984), but I can at least affirm that practically half of my career in musicology to date took place before the formation of the SMI in 2003. Nevertheless, the rapid growth of the society since then has altered my sense of time, so that I have to make an effort to recall that it wasn't always there. Forty years ago, Irish musicology seemed, for the most part, to be lying offshore. Notwithstanding the vital work of scholars such as Ita Beausang, Hilary Bracefield, and Paul Everett, its institutional presence was sporadic and uncertain. Despite this (well-founded) impression of a comparatively meagre estate, it is possible to identify a sequence of time signatures, so to say, from the late 1980s onwards that mark the evolution of musicology as an institutional discipline in Ireland. Some of these signatures, in fact, progressively indicate the path that led to the formation of the SMI and all that was to occur in the

immediate aftermath of this event. Even within the constraints of this modest remembrance, I feel the impulse to inspect five of them here, albeit very briefly. This is partly because it seems doubtful to me that the SMI could have flourished (as it did from the outset) without the initiatives which these signatures represent.

The first of these five was the formation of an Irish Chapter of the Royal Musical Association in 1987, an enterprise led by the late Hilary Bracefield at the University of Ulster. Hilary's initiative got us going: although numbers were small and meetings of the Irish Chapter were limited to annual one-day events for several years afterwards, the impetus to develop regular exchanges of musicological scholarship was no longer merely an aspiration. As it happens, I presented a paper on 'Musicology in Ireland' at the second meeting (held in University College Dublin in May 1988) which was published in *Acta Musicologica* later that year. My paper was a detailed survey of musical scholarship in Ireland since the publication of Aloys Fleischmann's *Music in Ireland* (1952). In the closing section of this paper, I made the case for an encyclopaedia of music in Ireland, partly because the representation of this subject in works of reference was then so poor, and partly because I regarded the project itself as a means of galvanizing awareness about the very existence of musicology as a self-standing discipline in Ireland. I also gave notice of the planned publication of *Musicology in Ireland*, although the series which this book subsequently inaugurated was not yet up and running. I might well have published that paper in any case, but without the opportunity to read it aloud to a gathering of my peers – an opportunity expressly provided by the very existence of the Irish Chapter of the RMA – it would have carried much less conviction than it did.

By 1990, Irish Musical Studies was also a reality (with a second volume in the series appearing in 1993 and a third in 1995). This second initiative privileged – and to some extent domesticated – the concept of ingathering new research specifically devoted to individual topics within the general domain of Irish musical history. Although this domain by no means represented the sum total of musical research in Ireland (then or now), the strategic value of Irish Musical Studies, in apposition with the newly-founded Irish Chapter, was unmistakably apparent to everyone concerned with raising the profile of musicological research in Ireland.

The third volume of Irish Musical Studies, entitled *Music and Cultural History in Ireland*, was launched during the Maynooth International Musicological Conference which took place in St Patrick's College, Maynooth (now Maynooth University) between 21 and 24 September 1995. As with the founding of the Irish Chapter of the RMA and the appearance of Irish Musical Studies, the Maynooth conference really was a landmark event, and for two reasons in particular. The first was its sheer scope and international complexion: as a mere matter of record, it was the largest musicological

conference to take place in Europe that year, and it brought to Ireland a host of delegates from Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Ukraine, the UK and the US in the company of a comparably large gathering of domestic participants. The second reason was the dizzying sense of coming-of-age for musicology in Ireland which this conference generated. Anyone who remembers those heady days and nights in September 1995 will surely agree. Musicology was suddenly in town, and on an unprecedented scale. It was here to stay. Even yet, I can feel the impact of that conference down the years, not least in the number of similarly large (and even larger) international musicological gatherings which came in its wake.

I'm not sure when I first conceived the idea of an independent, all-Ireland society devoted to musicology, but I can discretely attest that it was an off-the-cuff remark during the 1997 Irish Chapter meeting, which took place in Limerick, that determined me to pursue this goal. The general reaction to that remark, in perfect truth, is my fourth time signature. And as with all the others I have nominated here, it is one which gained significance through a constant degree of collaboration with other scholars moving in the same direction. (This conference, incidentally, was the first Irish Chapter meeting to feature a keynote speaker, namely Jim Samson, who was to receive the IRC-Harrison medal of the SMI in 2018).

In May 2002, during what transpired as the last meeting of the Irish Chapter (also held in University College Dublin), I announced the formation of a steering committee whose purpose it was to bring the society into being. This announcement stands here as the last of the five decisive moments that led to the SMI. Everything that was to follow, including a drive to enlist membership, the election of the society's first council, and the drawing-up of a constitution, flowed from the composition, experience and collective wisdom of that steering committee, many of whose members are still active within the ranks of the SMI today. No fewer than eight of the fourteen members of the steering committee subsequently served on council, and three were to serve as president. The Irish Chapter of the RMA did not dissolve until after the first SMI conference had taken place (its membership was assimilated into the new society), although Hilary Bracefield continued for many years to act as an RMA representative to the SMI. In due course, the SMI held its first plenary conference and annual general meeting at Maynooth on 2–3 May 2003.

In the twenty years that have elapsed since then, the phenomenal growth of musicology in Ireland has been wondrous to behold. It is not complacent to acknowledge the SMI's enabling presence and decisive role in this profusion, not only because of its own scholarly enterprises, but also on account of its supportive participation in (and formal association with) so many individual and collective research projects. Beyond the boundaries of its plenary and graduate conferences, travel

grants, scholarships, awards and publications, the SMI has been a constant advocate, either through the participation of its individual members or as a corporate entity, in the promotion of countless musicological enterprises, and not only in Ireland. To cite just one memorable instance: the first international conference on Irish music, held in Durham University in July 2010, featured papers by no fewer than 30 SMI members (out of a total of some 63 presentations). This brilliant gathering was assuredly not an SMI event, but the contribution of its membership to the Durham programme was nonetheless highly significant (and deeply gratifying). It is perhaps sufficient to add that the landscape of Irish musicology over the past two decades has been incomparably enriched by this society, and that its own international reputation is now a matter of common consent and admiration.

If in these reflections I appear to have halted at the borders of my own role within the SMI, especially as its inaugural president (from 2003 to 2006), it is only because it falls to others to assess whatever contribution I may have made in that capacity. But I cannot close here without gently emphasising once again the degree to which I depended on the expertise and generous collaboration of so many people, and most especially the members of the inaugural council. Two of these members, Dr Anne Leahy and Professor Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, are very sadly now deceased, but their vital contribution to musicology in Ireland, and to the early years of the SMI in particular, is assuredly not forgotten, least of all by me. Along with so many others (and here I must at least name Barra Boydell, Emma Costello, Gareth Cox, Derek Cremin, Paul Everett, Gerard Gillen, Sarah McCleave, Michael Murphy, David Rhodes and Jan Smaczny), they shaped the immediate future of Irish musicology to palpable and enduring effect. Their legacy, vitally enriched by the councils which succeeded them, was to create a stable, protean and (this above all) welcoming environment for musicological discourse in Ireland.

All of which brings me back to where I began, which is to say the prodigious good health of the SMI as it enters its twenty-first year. This sunny state of affairs cannot be taken for granted. The tasks of enlarging the society's membership, and of encouraging a greater degree of participation in its affairs among faculty members throughout Ireland than has been the case in recent years, both loom. It is perfectly right and just to observe that some people in any profession simply prefer to go it alone, and to show due regard and respect for this preference. But a learned society can also materially improve and even increase the professional practice of the subject it cultivates, irrespective of the members it attracts. Above all else, however, the future of the SMI will depend on its capacity to sustain and further develop a truly inclusive musicology in which the oceanic enterprise of thinking about music remains of passionate and primary account. Therein surely lies its core purpose. When I consider my great good

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fortune in having been associated with the SMI from its inception, I feel honoured and exhilarated.

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