

# Presidential Reflection

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I had an opportunity to reflect on the early days of the Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI) and the work of many of the personalities key to its inception and initial progress during the SMI's colloquium 'Music for Stage and Screen: Celebrating the SMI at 20' in Wexford in March 2023. On that occasion it seemed entirely appropriate to mention names in celebrating a job well done, but there is also a place for a more abstract exercise, one which examines process and operation in the society's early years; no names are mentioned here, but many will know who the key personalities were.

Taking on the role of president still relatively early in the society's existence was a daunting and exhilarating privilege. The weight of presidential responsibility was matched by a buoyancy in working with colleagues in a young society with ideals shared explicitly in the constitution and implicitly by every member of the SMI Council and, as we soon found, the reflective, supportive membership. Key to development in these early days was the constructive enthusiasm of officers and council in paving the path ahead. While nothing was ridden over rough-shod, the ability to see ways through potential problems was marked by a freshness untrammelled by precedent; at no stage was there any attempt to take refuge behind the battlements of procrustean tradition, perhaps mainly because we never really felt embattled. There were causes to fight, and no-one should underestimate the sheer amount of work involved in making sure the foundations of the society were sound, not least in navigating the Kafkaesque labyrinth of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners when it came to establishing charitable status. That said, far from council meetings being furrow-browed occasions, there was a good deal of hilarity at our own foibles and those of others (my watchword is 'no names!').

Over six years I was constantly surprised that the habit, beloved of many new societies, of developing officious, creaky ways of dealing with matters through a proliferation of superfluous subcommittees and working groups in pursuit of virtuous decorum was avoided. Ensuring a respectable 'onward' does not necessarily guarantee an effective 'upward'; the approach adopted in these early years was not so much 'can do' as 'why not?', a characteristic I heartily commend to the SMI Council as it approaches maturity. This liberal tendency engendered a sense of ownership which, coupled with new ideas and initiatives from all parts of the table, in the main led to

constructive action. This sense of endeavour was matched by remarkable generosity in the time given; the large majority of council members were doers rather than watchers. In a world where institutional demands were increasing and the need to publish crucial in an aspiring career, I was constantly moved by the selflessness with which colleagues gave of their time. There was a similarly responsible attitude toward finances. Nearly all the money we had was from the membership, and it was used wisely for the benefit of musical scholarship. There were no travel expenses, apart from those of student members, or lavish lunches (there was some resistance here which was swiftly, albeit wistfully, abandoned). While not mercilessly opportunistic, we knew when to seize a chance, and there were some golden ones, not least the very generously-priced venue offered by the Freemasons for their magnificent Hall in Molesworth St.

There were issues that divided us, though they never prompted any enduring ill-feeling among what was, after all, a company of friends. One of these was the possibility of finding a permanent home for the SMI. There were good reasons for this, in addition to providing a venue for council meetings: a place to house the society's growing archive, space for visiting scholars and home researchers in Dublin being among them. There were also arguments against it, not least the cost; although the SMI disposes its funds with exemplary probity in the service of its community, it is not yet a wealthy body. Speaking personally, I found our nomadic existence where council meetings were concerned distinctly bracing: Nissen huts in car parks, lecture rooms empty between classes and the occasional, more smartly disposed chamber. In all cases we were warmly welcomed (most frequently, and I say this with great gratitude, by TU Dublin Conservatoire), and from SMI Council's point of view it gave us the chance to get to know our constituency and understand its working circumstances the better to serve it which, after all, is the society's prime function.

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