

Presidential Reflection

Belonging

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I remember the surge of happiness I felt at being elected President of the Society for Musicology in Ireland (SMI) in 2015. It meant – and still means – an enormous amount to me to have been the first female president of this learned society. Much more than that, being elected by my colleagues and graduate students gave me an enormous sense of belonging on home ground. I set out to invite others into that feeling and to make a very active contribution to our discipline.

I worked hard. We all did. I thought long and hard about what the society needed, current challenges within our discipline and drafted potential goals. At the beginning of my two terms of office, I spent time with each council discussing what we might achieve, what was valuable to the people around the table, what unique strengths each of us could contribute to make the society stronger. Such beginnings gave council members a sense of ownership in shared outcomes, a sense of mission with others, a shared sense of purpose of leaving the society stronger. We worked hard. Together we achieved a great deal.

Writing about music, like any other artistic and scholarly practice, is a vocation that calls to deep, resonating parts of ourselves. It was vital to me to nurture in our graduate students their commitment to self-growth and to share experience we had gained through our positions with those entering the field. The SMI has always been a society of scholarly encouragement. The long-established policy that every member has a right to read a paper and be heard, has nothing to do with lowering standards and everything to do with success. Central to this practice is the understanding that graduates who feel accepted, valued and respected are more likely to be successful in their academic pursuits. Both councils strove hard to build on this inclusive supportive environment by joining forces with ICTM for our Postgraduate Conference Forum, which brought a greater cohort of students together and recognized belonging as a central part of diversity of being. Before the graduate conference we arranged Workshops in Public Speaking and through the SMI Careers Forum sought to support students in their career development. We streamlined our website so it could act as a repository of resources for

future graduates and updated the SMI Thesis Register. Another way in which we validated graduate research was through the establishment of two prizes which formally recognized the contributions of two key members of our society: the Alison Dunlop Memorial Prize for Masters Students (2017) in recognition of a brilliant SMI doctoral graduate departed all too early and the Harry White Doctoral Prize (2021) in honour of our much-loved colleague, whose brainchild the society is.

Genuine belonging means feeling acknowledged for unique contributions and being connected to SMI's values and purpose. One of our aims, therefore, was to establish greater communication with our members, both nationally and internationally. The emotional reach of that goal was to embrace SMI members who were working abroad, bridging the gap between the experience they gained here and what they bring back in their homecomings. Recognizing such members as a crucial part of our society, also a guiding light to graduate students in challenging times, we established new ways of keeping contact with them through social media and the *SMI E-Newsletter* which has now reached its sixth edition. Through both forums and numerous surveys, we took time to listen and act upon what was important to the broader constituency of members.

At the very centre of our mission is the celebration of fine scholarship: the creation of an SMI YouTube Channel began a repository of keynote lectures through which we welcome distinguished scholars from other parts of the world. It has always been central to SMI that scholars who visit would return home with a strong sense of a society that is uniquely welcoming and encouraging, and through that maintains exceptionally high standards. Such intentional inclusion was part of the fabric of both councils and one of the ways we reached out and rallied around in support of each other during COVID-19. That sense of connectedness through community was enhanced through the SMI Online Summer Lectures Series (2020), through which three members shared their research nationally and internationally.

When I set out as president, I could not have known the different inflections that sense of participation within a community – that Irish tradition of *muintearas* – would take during my second term of office. The COVID-19 pandemic – alongside an overdue and ongoing reckoning with systemic racism – cast connection in a new light, and showed us that isolation and belonging are more nuanced than we think. One of the extraordinary measures we took was the hosting of three online conferences organized within the space of eighteen months. We also reached across the country and formed an SMI Steering Student Committee (2020–2021), with one student representative from every university across the country, and together we discussed how best we could support our graduates through the particular challenges the Corona crises presented for them. I was also conscious of that shared humanity with SMI officers working closest to

me, 'my council within a council' as I often referred to them. We were a source of strength to each other and grateful to be part of something larger than ourselves.

Although much of our time in lockdown was devoted to the enhanced professionalism of the society through the establishment of many policy documents, we also continued to reach beyond ourselves and forge links with learned societies, both nationally and internationally. New affiliated memberships were formed with ITMA and IMRO, for example. During my first term of office, I had secured an IRC New Horizons Grant (2016) to fund the SMI Public Musicology Symposium in the National Concert Hall. During COVID I worked hard to consolidate that alliance with members of the Irish Research Council who agreed to fund our Harrison Medal: an important partnership not only in terms of ongoing funding but a signal step in terms of scholarly distinction. At the beginning of our second term of office four council members presented an SMI panel at the KVMN conference, 'Musicological Societies as Intermediaries between Society, Musical Life and Academia' in Utrecht, which formed the beginnings of a greater collaboration with the European Network of Musicological Societies. We honoured the outstanding contribution of many international scholars by creating and awarding affiliated memberships.

One of the high hopes of our first council was the establishment of a physical premises for the SMI as a Research Centre and Library, an aim which we knew could only be achieved through persistence across many councils. Many conversations were had, many stepping stones crossed in an attempt to mediate between the Academy and the SMI, including enquiries made with the Office of Public Works and government ministers through my membership of the Royal Irish Academy. Acting on advice about first steps to securing an office, we advertised and appointed a part-time administrator two months before COVID stopped us from reaping the benefits of that position in terms of physical space. Another avenue of public outreach was the Royal Irish Academy commission to write a position paper in response to the Creative Ireland Forum, a high-level, high-ambition, all-government five-year initiative that aimed to place creativity at the centre of public policy. "'The Earth has Music for those who Listen": Creativity in Music in Ireland' was the first position paper on music to be published by the Royal Irish Academy. Central themes were discussed by council. Writing the paper, I was keenly aware of the need to navigate tensions intelligently, to take into account what society expects in this changing world from a learned society while safeguarding the intellectual value of our discipline. In essence the paper was a forum to argue for the importance of music education and the role of music research in the public forum of society. One of my priorities was to raise awareness of current challenges we face in higher education in Ireland, and in particular the lack of permanent employment our graduates face. The published paper was launched by the Minister for Education in the Royal Irish Academy on 20 June 2019 and responded to by Tania Banotti, Director of

Creative Ireland. The outcome was the creation of ten postdoctoral scholarships in the humanities jointly funded by the Irish Research Council and Arts Council.

Often different things are achieved when we chase after such goals, and during my two terms of office I had the feeling that I lived my presidency at a watershed as I strove with both councils to make a significant contribution against the background of the world rearranging itself. This feeling came through my sense of being a voice in the middle between the council and learned societies to which I belonged, through the speeches I made where I was always conscious, how beyond the self, there was a community of scholars.

Beyond the many practical steps taken to connect with others, to welcome others into our fold, I had – and still have – a deep recognition of being part of a society that connects and deeply respects the private inward subjective aspect of educational experience, which John Keats once called the schooling of the intelligence until it becomes a soul. That early decision (and wisdom) to accept papers in the belief that every member has the right to be seen and heard – the ‘I am because you are’ concept of Ubuntu – validates that very dichotomy of individuality and belonging. It accepts others whose views are not the same as our own in the belief that there is value in everyone’s thinking and truth can be found in even the most difficult-to-understand, because beyond our individual endeavours there is value in tradition. Beyond Cartesian doubt there is trust in our shared humanity through the dreams we chase after and the goals we achieve. It is a profound privilege to have been president of this society and to spend a life in this community of fine scholars, hard-working and warm-hearted individuals.

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