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# A Forum for the Practice of Musicology in Ireland

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With Mary Immaculate College's long history of educating teachers setting an appropriate atmosphere, the fourth SMI annual conference sought to bring together the increasing number of music researchers in Ireland. While the emphasis was on delegates from the island itself, a healthy number of countries and universities were represented. Over one hundred delegates from twenty-five universities in Canada, England, France, Germany, Spain, the USA, and all over Ireland presented papers on a broad range of topics: from liturgy and chant to the structures, politics and aesthetics of twentieth century music, from musical analysis to explorations of music as performance, and opening up from individual Irish musical personalities and social values to the use of music in public broadcasting and wider national and ethnic identities. As Dr Gareth Cox, the conference organiser, noted, in the three years since the inaugural SMI conference the number of papers presented has doubled. With this expansion, the SMI has continued in its quest to be 'a forum for the practice of musicology, reflecting the gamut of musical research in Ireland.'<sup>1</sup> The seventy papers given utilized a wide range of sources, from the academic to the anecdotal and from original manuscripts to archival recordings, and the varied approaches to these presentations reflected the diversity of approaches to musicology in general in Ireland today. The 2006 SMI Conference was a celebration of the growth, diversity and good standing of research in music throughout the country. But, considering that these official gatherings of Irish musicologists are still in their infancy, what can one envision for their future?

## Musicology Conferences and Live Music

Mary Immaculate College's rooms generally provided a space for unamplified speech and comfortable discussion. Some speakers bypassed the audiovisual requirements form, instead providing their own demonstrations of the music in question. Personally, I found this a rather refreshing way to communicate with the audience. For example, Friday's session on Seventeenth-Century Music in England, France and Ireland commenced with 'Francesco Corbetta's *La guitar*

*royale dédiée au Roy de la Grande Bretagne* (1671): a window on guitar practice in the seventeenth-century England and France.' Eamon Sweeney (DIT) described how the guitar found its way from the folk to the court repertoire, with Charles II of England and Louis XIV of France both able to play the five-course guitar. Discussing the use of guitar as a continuo instrument, Sweeney very entertainingly gave his own demonstration of a typical tuning on a five-course guitar. Another paper to engage members in this way was by Anna M. Dore (UCC). 'The Pride of the Coombe: Music and Social Commentary in the work of Jimmy O'Dea,' explored the importance of music in comic routines of the 1950s and the connections between these routines and Irish culture during this period. Singing sections of the presentation herself, Dore, along with Sweeney, was one of the few presenters at the conference to make use of their own performing abilities in a presentation. A weekend of academic papers can also be long and tiring; a live performance, if possible, of musical examples is surely to be recommended. The extended question of how 'on-site' performances of live music can best enrich SMI conferences in general is also something that will doubtlessly undergo much more discussion in the future.

## Categorisations of Music

Discussions that go off on a tangent to the papers often seem to be at odds with the purpose of the papers themselves. At times, however, these tangents have a way of highlighting the issues at the heart of the material. One such discussion was that concerning the use of terminology by which we describe music on the island. Descriptions of music as varied as 'serious,' 'light,' 'low-brow,' 'high-brow,' 'art,' 'western art,' 'folk,' 'traditional,' and 'classical' appeared throughout the weekend. One session presented its chair, Professor Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, with time to address the use of different descriptions of music in the presentations. Asking the question, 'how comfortable are you with the term "traditional"?' to which both speakers, having used the term, answered in the negative, Ó Súilleabháin challenged the audience's general complacency with the terminology. Speaking from the floor, Dr. Barra Boydell suggested that the context of presenting to an Irish audience, among whom there was ongoing discourse on terms such as folk music and traditional music, was one reason for the ease with which those words were used in the session. Dr. Boydell also proffered that, whilst Irish musical scholars are far from finding words to describe these differing styles of music in more appropriate ways, at least the phrase 'western art music' had now long effected the disappearance of the word 'classical' from musical terminology.

It is hard to imagine a time when all will agree a definitive or supremely ethical way with which to describe any music, on or off this island. Yet, while it will be helpful to see the ways in which the *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* project sets out a stall for a terminology(ies) for music on the island of Ireland, it would also be helpful, before that project finishes, to see more open and energetic debates on the subject at the society's conferences, and particularly

from the point of view of postgraduates. The emergence of an Irish branch of the International Council for Traditional Music and its recent postgraduate and general symposia means that there is now more provision than ever of suitable fora for debate. Thoughtful discussion of the different words by which we describe music on this island, and music that is being researched by these two societies' members all over the world, can only create a healthier forum for the practice of musicology, and music in general, in Ireland.

## **Bilingualism**

Considering the growing number of musicologists in this country who conduct their work in either Irish or English or both, it would be nice to hear papers in both languages at the meeting, a point that arises from all previous SMI conferences. Could there in future be a facility for translation at the annual conference, similar to that at other conferences in Ireland? Given the many researchers on the island, it would be nice to facilitate those who conduct their work bilingually to present their work bilingually. As the *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* itself already uses both Irish and English as its main languages, and if conferences form an important step for academics in the process of their research by using them as a public testing-ground before publication, then it makes sense to also facilitate and encourage the submission of conference papers bilingually.

## **Continuity in Themes**

Notwithstanding the diversity of research areas, there were some recurring themes to this year's conference – some, indeed, making their annual appearance. While one naturally avoids portraying the whole musicological community in Ireland as one homogenous glob, themes of musical influence, identity, mythology, and nationhood all returned repeatedly. The host university headed up one of the first sessions of the weekend with a theme that was particularly apt for Limerick's first SMI conference. Entitled *Local History: Music in Limerick*, this session was begun by Gareth Cox, who introduced the department's work in this area, emphasizing the rich musical life of the city by listing several famous visitors to Limerick and many local performing groups. Centering on the history of the Limerick Music Association (LMA), he examined its contribution to the development of chamber music in Ireland. Paul Collins, speaking about Psallite Sapienter and Catholic church music in Limerick between 1860 and 1950, emphasized the contribution made by Belgian organists to the musical life of the city. In addition to working in Limerick churches, the Belgians also gave private lessons in organ, singing and harmony, thereby contributing to the wider development of music in Ireland. Concluding the session, Michael Murphy presented a paper on Joseph O'Mara, an Irish tenor whose work included the promotion of newly composed Irish opera despite poor financial returns and the necessity of carrying a largely amateur cast.

## **Conclusion**

On Saturday evening, the President for the Society of Music Theory and Professor of Music Theory in the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Canada, Prof. William Caplin, delivered his keynote address to the conference audience. His address centred around a form-functional analysis of a piano rondo in D by Mozart, complimenting nicely the preceding ConTempo String Quartet's performance of Mozart's K548 'The Hunt'. Although we often speak of form using 'spatial' metaphors, Caplin stressed how musical form relates more fundamentally to the 'temporal' dimensions of the listening experience. Advocating for the importance of the sentence theme-type in the 'classical style' as first identified by Arnold Schoenberg and his students, Caplin described his delight at the opportunity of discussing it in the context of visiting the city of Limerick, given how the sentence theme type has been characterized at times 'as a kind of *musical* limerick.'

As Prof. Caplin's keynote speech highlighted, it has been extremely encouraging to see the welcome given by SMI conference audiences to different methods of musicological research and to research conducted on hitherto ignored areas of musical culture in Ireland. Even more vital, from the point of view of postgraduate researchers in Ireland, is the support for these new research directions as displayed in the conference programmes of each SMI organising committee since 2003. Hopefully as the society and its annual symposia continue to grow in size and stature their critical strength as a forum for new areas and methods of research in Irish musical studies, as well as for the more established areas, will be maintained. Professor Jan Smaczny, who is to be congratulated at taking over the presidency of the SMI at the 2006 conference, displays continued leadership in this area two years on. In his keynote lecture to the first SMI Postgraduate Conference in January 2008, Professor Smaczny highlighted the importance of diversity and open-mindedness in a musicologist's approach to their work and sources.

Unfortunately, not since Barra Boydell's work in making the proceedings of the inaugural conference of 2003 in Maynooth available online has there been any written output from the SMI's annual conferences. What has become of the conference proceedings documents of the SMI? If every conference is not, as was originally planned after Maynooth, to result in a collection of papers and a circulation of the informal conference proceedings, would it not be prudent to at least make an audio recording of each paper presented on the day, or even podcasts or mp3s available over the internet? Besides posterity, to have at least some record of the papers – not to mind including the subsequent discussions, sound recordings and musical examples which form important parts of most presentations – would be an immediate boost for the study of musicology in Ireland.

The reputation of the SMI is that of providing a receptive and welcoming atmosphere for first-time presenters, and 2006 was, by all accounts, no different. It is also encouraging to see that the SMI conference has since incorporated poster presentations, as some

projects are best expressed in the visual. This new facility is also a welcome addition for postgraduates who, while in the initial stages of the research process, would still derive much benefit from a forum for presentation and discussion of their work and ideas without the raw ritual of a full paper presentation. Another idea that might further encourage postgraduate presentations is designating a prize for the best postgraduate paper at the conference, for instance. This is in place in many other musicological conferences and, even if not of monetary value, such acknowledgement would surely give great strength to those on the cusp of contemplating a life in musicology and academia. Furthermore, how about a reception, with a workshop or talk, for postgraduates at the conference?

SMI's postgraduate members welcomed the plenary session proposal to elect a student representative to the council. At the time of writing, the first SMI student representative, Ms. Anne Hyland (Cambridge), has been elected, and the postgraduates are already looking to where the second postgraduate SMI conference will take place. By all accounts, this new bifurcation of conference activity in the society merits a separate and full review, but suffice to say here that the first postgraduate conference displayed a healthy and vibrant postgraduate community, itching for opportunities to create and question dialogue on music and musicology in Ireland. It will be exciting to see what further changes the student presence on the council will bring to the SMI dynamic in future.

The field of research of music in Ireland is maturing, with more research publications available or in planning, increased conference and symposium activity on the island and more consideration of previously unexplored topics. With its healthy number of postgraduate students offering papers, and a range of research, presenting and chairing styles at work, the 2006 SMI Conference encapsulated that energy.

## FOOTNOTES

1 The SMI constitution may be seen at [www.musicologyireland.com](http://www.musicologyireland.com) [Back](#)

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