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PRIMA LA MUSICA AS MUSICOLOGICAL CREDO

Conversation with David Fallows



David Fallows, PhD, is a musicologist, a world-renowned expert in early music, professor at the University of Manchester in the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures.

An abundant list of his musicological achievements includes books, articles and publications predominantly on Medieval and Renaissance music. His pivotal musicological contributions are in the research field of the output of G. Dufay, J. des Prez and J. Ockeghem, to mention just the most famous composers who have attracted his scientific attention.

He has been a member of the Editorial Board of *Musica Britannica*; of *Early English Church Music*; of *Early Music History*, etc. He was Senior Consulting Editor for the Second Edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (ed. Stanley Sadie, London 2001).

Dr. Fallows has been a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (République Française) since 1994; a Fellow of the British Academy, since 1997; Vice-president of the Royal Musical Association since 2000; and current President of the International Musicological Society (2002-2007).

When we met for the first time a long time ago, you told me that your entire working life has actually been connected with the University of Manchester because – I remember you saying this – you liked it there, living in that city. Without any doubt, Manchester is a nice place to live in, not only because of its specific beauty but also because there is a kind of spiritual

aura there one is immediately captured by when visiting the core of the city. So, let me start this conversation with a more or less personal question: What are the particular scientific, music, artistic, academic...aspects of the Manchester milieu, which permanently stimulate your musicological creativeness?

I am not sure that “specific beauty” is quite how most people would describe Manchester, though it has come a long way since the Industrial Revolution began here and there has been an astonishing expansion of new constructions since you and I first met here on that rainy day all those years ago.

Near Manchester we have a marvelous countryside: the Yorkshire moors, the Lake District, and most particularly the Peak District in Derbyshire (the bit of England that no tourist gets told about).

But the musical ambience is very good. We have two excellent orchestras, the Hallé Orchestra and the BBC Philharmonic. Many of the world’s other orchestras come to our Bridgewater Hall. We have rich and varied chamber music. We have the Royal Northern College of Music, which in many ways counts as one of the finest conservatories in Europe. We have an enormous broader musical culture and indeed a broader non-musical culture. That may be the first reason I continue to live and work here and have so far resisted any temptations to go elsewhere.

Library facilities for research in music are surprisingly good here. I say “surprisingly” because we obviously do not have the facilities of the Bodleian in Oxford or the British Library in London. What we do have, though, is access to three fine libraries with different and complementary interests. Our University Library is one of the largest in Britain. Less than a ten minutes’ walk away is the Henry Watson Music Library, one of the largest civic music libraries in Britain. And less than a five minutes’ walk away is the Royal Northern College of Music library, with its greater emphasis on performance. All three libraries have major collections of research material.

We have an excellent university, one of the largest in Britain. With two more universities nearby (Salford and Manchester Metropolitan University) there is a massive student population. We are now far from the days of the Industrial Revolution; Manchester’s biggest industry today is education. That helps to create a vital and exciting atmosphere.

Life here is a lot cheaper – therefore easier and more comfortable – than in most other great cities. I can live within a five minutes’ drive of my work.

Is support of musicological activities by the relevant institutions and authorities of your city also among these aspects?

Not really. That’s not how these things work in Britain. If anything, support for research in the arts is on a national level, though there are occasional smaller funds. There is a

nice foundation, the Ida Carroll Trust, which supports the yearbook *Manchester Sounds* (six volumes so far, running to over 1,200 pages), in which you can read lots about the past and the present of music in Manchester. Although I edit it myself (with a lot of help) I am constantly astonished at the quantity and quality of material being offered to us. There are lots of people out there with real enthusiasm for Manchester's music. That is what I call institutional support. Anyway: *Manchester Sounds* greets its much older colleague *New Sound*.

What is the extent of this support in your country in general? More precisely, is there any regular coordination between these institutions and musicologists regarding the scientific strategy of your country in the field of sciences of art and culture, and how significant is this coordination? Do musicologists have any input on this strategy?

Things are changing fast here. Thirty years ago everything rather muddled through. Musicology – what there was of it – was done quietly and on spare evenings. I was appointed here mainly as a teacher. None of my colleagues really knew or cared what research I did; and I found that most refreshing after having lived a bit in the American system where you published or perished. More than that, I think it helped me to evolve my own style as a researcher and a writer, not worrying about what the institution felt, not worrying about publishing the right kind of thing in the right kinds of places. Since about twenty years ago research has become far more central to the operation of British university music departments and their financing. But the footprints of the older system are still everywhere.

Many scholars in other countries may find it surprising that the grand editions of *Musica Britannica* have absolutely no financial support, never have had (apart from some seeding money at the start). We publish the new volumes with the profits from the old volumes; we give the editors a royalty percentage, but until recently none of them had any institutional money to do the editing, and even now if they do, it is money that they have raised themselves.

How would you qualify the position of the musicological profession within the general cultural policy of your country?

The musicological community here is tiny. It is a tiny proportion of the musical community; and it is the tiniest part of most universities (I think that's true in all countries.) It seems to carry respect in the universities, but its place in any general cultural policy seems to me negligible.

At the moment, you are President of the International Musicological Society. What is your opinion on the common social status of the musicological profession today? Are there any problems within this context, which you would warn as being urgent points?

The danger is division. As the world of musicology grows and becomes more sophisticated, its participants become more specialized in what they do, so different parts of the musicological profession have no understanding of other parts. That is fine and healthy. The trouble arises when they think of themselves in competition with one another and they split up into subgroups. They forget that we are still the smallest group within almost any university and possibly the smallest group within the musical profession. We can gain strength only by keeping together, supporting one another, presenting a united front.

Funding pressures make it far too easy for music departments in different universities to be in competition with one another. This is disastrous. It is not just that it reduces musicology to the status of a supermarket. It is that it weakens everybody.

The last conference of the IMS was held in Gothenburg in June 2006, as the joint conference with IAML (the International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres) and IAMIC (the International Association of Music Information Centres). To my mind, it was a very fruitful conference, which demonstrated a considerable variety and range of musicology in the world. If you share this opinion, would you emphasize those thematic, methodological and stylistic coordinates of this musicological range, which you consider defining for the conference?

I can't see this in philosophical terms. Musicologists need access to information and materials; the providers of information and materials are themselves musicologists. We all have common concerns, which we need to share. We all have common ideals.

Do you find these coordinates typical of the current developmental features of musicology?

Yes: it is far too easy to think that IAML and IAMIC members are not musicologists. "Musicology" is not defined by university positions or enrolment in doctoral programmes. Even among those who happen to have chairs in musicology there is a vast range of different approaches and emphases, in many cases far greater than between what I do and what a nearby musical instrument curator does.

During the Gothenburg conference we had an opportunity to get a better insight into some advantages of the use of computer technology in the sphere of music library online presentations. What is your attitude towards the use of modern technological means in the field of musicology? What are – or might be – their most positive and most negative aspects regarding our profession?

With any new technology we see different things and that helps us to see and hear things in a new way.

How would you describe the current profile of musicology: is it a science with a visible tendency to unite local experiences and benefit from them, or is still just a sum of these experiences?

I would be most unhappy if musicology had a “profile”. From the end I occupy, we are dealing with works of art, with creativity. Pinning it down seems risky.

Is there anything today we can call “world musicology”?

I hope not.

In connection with the two previous questions: I have noticed, as probably you have, that sessions of international musicological conferences are very often based more on criteria of geographical or even national proximity of the participants than on criteria based on topics of submitted abstracts. I have also noticed that one of the rare conferences that essentially overcame this problem was the Gothenburg one. It seems to me that the session contents were well composed primarily due to the Board’s full understanding of the proposed themes and received abstracts. In brief: in your opinion, which are the ways to avoid mechanical, “decorative” internationalism in the field of musicology and reach a genuine international cooperation?

Since I was on the Board for the Gothenburg conference I can only be grateful for your kind words – though most of the credit must go to Chris Walton, who arranged the programme brilliantly. But at Gothenburg there were only two sessions going on at once. When you have a larger conference it is much harder to group the papers creatively, largely because it makes it so much harder for the delegates to know which session to attend. People who are interested in English music want to hear the papers on English music. In any case, the speakers are probably friends or colleagues, so we are probably under a certain obligation to support them. I have been at large conferences that were more imaginatively planned, but the result has always been confusion. Perhaps the answer would be to avoid large conferences, but that is where I come back to my main theme: it is vitally important that we support one another and get to know each other so that we can present a united front to the world outside musicology.

How important do you find the role of local musicological societies in this process? Referring to this, what would be your advice to the recently established Serbian Musicological Society, one of whose goals is to establish a collaboration with the IMS?

For the reasons just mentioned, I think local musicological societies are of an absolutely central importance. These are in some ways the best places for people to find out about other kinds of musicology, to begin to understand what they have in common (usually that it all started from a love of music), to get a better grasp on what other people are doing.

My own advice would be to try to keep it unpretentious and friendly. The moment power or money become involved there are jealousies and divisive (therefore destructive) tendencies.

As far as I know, Serbian musicology is mostly known in the world through the International Magazine for Music New Sound, proceedings of international conferences and some rare books of ours published abroad. Are you aware of any of these achievements?

I am, but partly because it's my duty and partly because you and others have made me aware of them. The broader issue is that there has been a vast increase in musicological publication, world-wide. I have a hard time even keeping track of new work in my areas of specialist interest. And libraries cannot possibly stock everything.

But that is not just a recent phenomenon. For anybody within the world of learning there have always been areas to which they devote their utmost concentration, areas that they find interesting and include in their teaching, areas of broader general interest and areas of which they know nothing.

You are a remarkably prolific and authoritative writer in the field of 15th and 16th century music. It is characteristic that your interest in musicological research and specifically in this music grew out of your performing activity. Can you remember the reasons for your moving towards musicology?

I just noticed one day that I was spending more time with musicology than with instrumental practice; so I concluded that this was what I needed to do. There came a point when I had been doing musicology for ten years or so and had nothing much to show for it, so decided that that only way to get anything done was to focus on the research. But that was just something to do with my own psychology: plenty of people manage both. I still do lots of playing, always have done; but I don't think of it as performing any more.

How would you explain your decision to deal with the scientific work from the perspective of your present musicological experience: was it just a turn "from playing to writing" or rather from one field of interpretation to another? From the sphere of interpretation of music to the sphere of interpretation of available facts about it?

Definitely. Writing about music is for me a musical act.

How interpretative is your musicological approach?

I get nervous with this word “interpretation”. But as a performer you strive to do something that feels right and at the same time is attractive to others; and that’s how I view my writing.

As a performer you also have to keep precision and fantasy in perfect balance. That seems important in writing (and in life, incidentally). There is no value in accuracy unless you also heed the hairs on the back of your neck.

Which of your scientific discoveries and results would you stress as your musicological “hallmarks” and why specifically them?

That is really not for me to say. But – to continue the previous answer – a lot of my work began from things that just felt wrong and I wanted to see them in ways that felt better.

If you agree with me that a scientific writing need not be “sterile” in its formality and hence rather “boring” (as people usually “expect” it to be), but that conversely, musicology is a kind of scientific creation, how would you define your musicological credo?

Prima la musica.

Has this credo determined your wide-ranging pedagogical work in any aspect?

In every respect.

Finally, how “happy” is musicology today, being “burdened” with its own memories, its own fallacies, its projects and perspectives, and in all these being challenged by our persistent attempts to change it and make it better than “ever before”?

We live in a changing world. What we do reflects those changes and is fuelled by them.