

INTERVIURI

Un dialog cu Frank J. Oteri, președintele Societății Internaționale pentru Muzică Contemporană¹



Compozitorul Frank J. Oteri este președintele Societății Internaționale pentru Muzică Contemporană (ISCM) începând cu anul 2025. Acest forum al excelenței în muzica nouă din toată lumea a fost fondat în 1922, s-a dezvoltat treptat iar astăzi numără peste 60 de organizații din peste 50 de țări. Festivalul anual pe

care ISCM îl organizează sub numele de *World New Music Days* a fost găzduit în 2026 la București în perioada 23-31 mai de Uniunea Compozitorilor și Muzicologilor din România, alături de partenerii săi. Sub simbolul *columnae infinite* a lui Constantin Brâncuși, echipa de organizare din România a spus o poveste fascinantă a muzicii noi. Dialogul pe care l-am purtat cu Frank J. Oteri pentru revista noastră oglindește reușita celor 24 de evenimente din programul ediției 2026 dar ne oferă și detalii interesante despre misiunea *International Society for Contemporary Music* într-o lume aflată în continuă schimbare, și despre provocările pe care această rețea profesională mondială de prestigiu le înfruntă în vremurile actuale.

Foto: Jeffrey Herman

¹ Interviuul a fost consemnat și este publicat în limba engleză.

- **A.A.:** You are president of the ISCM. Can you tell us more about this position, about your journey up to this point, and what it means, exactly?

F.J.O.: My presidency of the ISCM, which is for one year now, started last year in Portugal, during our general assembly in Lisbon. It's a fixed term but I've been on the executive committee of the ISCM for 10 years. When you're elected as an ordinary member, you have a two-year term and you can run for reelection once. After the four years, that's it, unless you go for a higher office. You can only do four years continuously as an ordinary member. The ExCom (Executive Committee) consists of the president, the vice president, and three ordinary members—that's what's called the presidential council, those are the elected positions—and then there are the appointed positions, which are secretary general, treasurer, and legal counsel. Legal counsel doesn't participate in all our meetings, just for things that we need. I was elected as an ordinary member in Tongyeong, South Korea in 2016 and re-elected in 2018 in Beijing. But the following year in Estonia was the end of the second term of the then president of ISCM, Peter Swinnen from Flanders in Belgium. So the then vice president, Glenda Keam from New Zealand, ran for president and I decided to run for vice president and was elected. Terms for president and vice president are three years and you can only serve two terms. In 2022, in Auckland, New Zealand, I ran for reelection for my second term as vice president. So my first term as president ends in 2028 and if I run for reelection, that term will end in 2031.

- **A.A.:** What are your goals as president of ISCM?

F.J.O.: I have many goals and that's why I have stayed a part of the ExCom for so long. I think it ties into what this network means. ISCM was founded in 1922 and we did our first festival in 1923, in Salzburg, Austria. Over a century focused on new music but, of course, the new music from those early years is now old music. There was a lot of talk about our centenary before the pandemic; many people thought it should happen in Austria, back in Salzburg, back where it began. I was part of these discussions in South Korea in 2016. At one point that year's delegate from South Africa, S'fisokuhle Jiba Xulu, said that if ISCM is really about celebrating the new we should all come to Africa. And I thought, the ISCM says it's a global network, music from around the world. But we had never met on the continent of Africa. To make a statement about how to usher in the next 100 years, we've got to go to Africa. It turned out that a member of the board of directors of New Music South Africa, who was living in South Africa a good part of the year at that time, was Lukas Ligeti, the son of György Ligeti whose career was started by ISCM in

1960. This is a true story. He was a completely unknown composer and he submitted an orchestral piece called *Apparitions* as an independent submitter to the ISCM festival; it was selected and received its world premiere at the festival and was a huge success. There are many stories like this in ISCM's history. Anyway, I had a phone conversation with Lukas in 2018 about ISCM and how an ISCM Festival could happen in South Africa and he was intrigued. Unfortunately he could not attend the next general assembly, in Tallinn, Estonia, in 2019, but he wrote a letter expressing interest which I read to all the delegates during one of the meetings. There were a lot of positive conversations about it. And that's what convinced me to run for vice president because I had to be a part of the group of people who would work toward helping to make this happen. This is something that had to happen. And it happened! In 2023, a hundred years after the first ISCM festival, the ISCM had a festival in Africa!

My goal as vice president was to help make this thing happen. Obviously this was a group effort. But I felt that I had to be part of the group that could make this happen. And my goal now is that I want to be part of a group that finally gets us to the last humanly inhabited continent, South America. It's crazy that we've never had a festival there. Alberto Ginastera, one of the greatest composers of Argentina, was on our executive committee back in the 1950s. We had really important performances in the history of ISCM, of Villa-Lobos from Brazil, Gustavo Becerra-Schmidt from Chile, also Leni Alexander, a fantastic female composer from Chile who's largely forgotten internationally. It might not happen until 2032 because there are lots of logistical challenges. So that would be a reason for me to stick around because I really want to see this happen.

- **A.A.:** ISCM has had presidents from Europe, and even from Australia and New Zealand, but never from the Americas. How does it feel to be the first president from the USA?

F.J.O.: This is an important thing. You might think this is a very weird time for somebody from the USA to be the president of an international organization because internally in the USA right now, the focus has been very inward instead of thinking globally. And it's a problem. I don't share that view. I have a very internationalist view, and I made it a point to say that during our general assembly in Portugal. I don't represent the current American political climate. I really believe in partnerships and fostering international relationships, and we're all in this together and we have to be. I think it's important for me to say that as an American on an international stage, people internationally need to know that there are many people in the United States

who don't have that inwardly focused view. And there are a lot of people everywhere who don't have that view. The situation happening with us in the USA is not unique to us. It's happening in many, many countries. This sort of nationalist, inward-looking idea. It comes from fear. It comes from a lack of understanding of the outside world, which is yet another reason why we have to exist as a network.

➤ **A.A.:** What is the mission, the goals of the ISCM?

F.J.O.: The ISCM was founded just a few years after World War I. I wasn't there, obviously. But I can imagine the conversations that were happening. Maybe, just maybe, if we all sit here together and listen to each other's music, the world will never erupt in a world war again. That was the idea. It was very altruistic. It's very profound and also sad in a way, because people were hurt after the war and they latched onto any hope they could find. I like to think, because I'm an optimist and maybe I'm a little naive too, that if we can sit together and listen to music, world wars won't happen again. Unfortunately less than 20 years later, Nazi Germany was starting to invade every country surrounding it and we wound up in another world war which was even worse than the first one. So these ISCM festivals weren't able to stop it. The Nazis came to power in 1933, which was only 10 years after the first ISCM festival. One of the first things they did was to forbid their composers from participating in the ISCM. Twenty years later, in 1943, there was no ISCM festival because World War II made traveling to an international festival impossible. The festival did not resume until 1946, but that healing event proved that a peaceful coming together to share music could once again be possible, a confirmation of the ISCM's original mission. Now, 80 years later, the mission of ISCM in the 21st century actually remains the same. Obviously the goal is sharing music across borders: national borders, continental borders, cultural borders. But it's also about nurturing repertoire. So many pieces were premiered at ISCM or had an early significant performance. George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, which to this day remains a very famous piece of music, wasn't premiered at ISCM, but its first significant European performance was at an ISCM festival. There were arguments in the early years of ISCM between people who thought that the ISCM should only be promoting what they called progressive music, but there isn't one path, there has never been one path! Another goal of the ISCM is to showcase the variety of contemporary music: the diversity of styles, the diversity of generations creating it. Young people make great music, and very old people make great music, too. Men make great music, women make great music. People who are non-binary, who are beyond

the gender divide, also make great music. There are really, really interesting composers on all six humanly inhabitable continents.

- **A.A.:** What does ISCM offer today when everything, almost everything is already available on digital and online platforms?

F.J.O.: Human interaction. One of my great colleagues, Irina Hasnaș, who is from Romania and served on the ISCM ExCom for four years from Romania, had this idea when we were in the ExCom meetings during the pandemic. We can't have an ISCM World New Music Days festival. But we could have something she called The ISCM Virtual Collaborative Series. Every week or so we'd post a piece of music online that was sent to us from one of the member sections. She would send emails to the different sections of ISCM and ask them for selections and get photos of the composers, recordings they had rights clearance to send us or a YouTube link that was cleared that we could embed, composer biographies and short program notes about the selected piece. We got a second wind when the invasion of Ukraine happened. We decided to do a whole focus on Ukrainian composers. And so every other composer when we did it, because we wanted to pay attention to the rest of the world too, every other one was a Ukrainian. But the problem with being online is an attention span thing. You'll listen to maybe a few minutes or something, then you're on to the next thing. In a concert hall, you're not going to pick up your phone and start talking in the middle of the concert, so nothing distracts you. You're not going to go somewhere else. For that amount of time, you're together in that room hearing the music. It's just you and that music and the audience. And you have this connection to other people when you listen to music together. You may not be talking to those people. You may not know who they are personally, but you have this bond. You have this thing that you share. Whereas online, okay, a couple hundred people were logging in. Who are they? Everything's online. Sure, it's online, but how do you know it's there? How do you make people know it's there?

This year in Bucharest there was a great production of an opera by Adrian Iorgulescu at the Opera House. There was also a party for everybody who was there afterwards, delegates and others. That was very nice. It's important to create celebratory events like that, and for there to be opportunities to talk to each other and to network. A lot of people bring CDs, scores, and books about music from their countries to our meetings so that's also a platform for sharing music.

- **A.A.:** There are also national music centers all over the world that facilitate these interactions. I know you were part of one too, weren't you?

F.J.O.: When I first went to my ISCM meeting, in Zagreb, 15 years ago, I was already part of another international network. I used to work for this organization that's now called New Music USA. Before that it was called the American Music Center and then it merged with another new music focused organization here called Meet the Composer. When I worked there I also created and edited an online magazine called NewMusicBox, which I did for almost 25 years. The American Music Center was part of a very valuable international network called the International Association of Music Information Centers, IAMIC. Now it is just the International Association of Music Centres, but it is still IAMIC. I know you also have in Romania a music information center that Diana Rotaru coordinates. But ISCM is a larger network that has members from many more parts of the world and it has a platform which offers opportunities to composers from all these places.

➤ **A.A.:** How do you find new compositional voices? How do you promote them?

F.J.O.: While we are primarily focused on the new, because of our long history we are also a platform for music which is now over 100 years old. But ironically it's not actually old; it's still "modern" music.

Another thing that each year's festival can do besides exposing audiences to the brand new recent music of the last 5 to 10 years from all over the world, is to provide an opportunity to discover music from that particular place going back even further.

Some festival hosts have taken an even broader view. So in Portugal last year, and in South Africa a few years before, they had this idea that a lot of the famous pieces of contemporary music that were done at ISCM festivals in decades past were never done in their part of the world. It's important for a local audience to hear them. So in Lisbon, they did music of Claude Vivier, who's a Canadian composer who died in 1983. From our vantage point, we might consider that old music, right? But to the ears of audiences there, it was new and actually, to a lot of ISCM delegates, it was new as well. Many of them had never heard that composer before. Vivier was from Francophone Canada so he had a connection to France. Vivier has become famous after his death in the United States, but during his lifetime, even though Canada is next door, his music was not really done in the USA at all.

Clearly we want to shine a light on brand new work. And you asked how we promote it. There's no giant mechanism for ISCM to promote things. Seven people serve on the ExCom, eight, if we include our legal counsel who loves music, but is a legal expert but not a music expert. Except for our Secretary General, who is only paid to work part-time although she works

much more than that, the rest of us are volunteers. I try to promote ISCM wherever possible, but it's not like I have a platform to say, okay, we're gonna get these mailing lists and turn people on to all this music. A composer from Greece, Myrtó Nizami, just won our Young Composer Award. Everybody in the world should know her music now, right? We don't have the mechanisms to do anything beyond an article with her photo in our email newsletter, our website and our Facebook page. Our primary platform is the annual festival. The other thing that we do, though it's largely a ceremonial thing and I hope it can grow into something more than that, is that we have honorary members. These are mostly members of the older generation. Honorees are proposed from different countries, backed up by other countries. This year we elected Jane O'Leary, who's going to be 80 this year and is the very first honorary member from Ireland, and Doina Rotaru, who is our first-ever Romanian honorary member. We've had Honorary Members since 1923 and it's quite an illustrious list, but no woman was ever given this honor until Sofia Gubaidulina in 2011 which was only 15 years ago. That's shocking. Now we have 13 living honorary members, the oldest is György Kurtág who turned 100 this year. The other 12 are six men and six women; so we've come a long way. But we have much further to go to make this title more meaningful.

- **A.A.:** How do you promote the ISCM festivals? How important do you think it is for other people to know about this new music?

F.J.O.: Promotion is very important. I was so thrilled that the Romanian hosts of this year's festival organized that press conference at the very beginning of the festival which is actually very unusual. Having an event like this helps make the greater community aware that this is happening, and that it's not some esoteric, erudite, secret club. I used to write a massive essay for NewMusicBox about each year's festival before I was elected to the ExCom. The very last one that I wrote was for the one in Tongyeong. I felt like that was the last one I could write about objectively. In that essay, I compared the ISCM to the Harry Potter books. It was a cautionary tale. Our contemporary music community runs the risk of being like those wizards who exist in this secret society, which the rest of the world doesn't know about. Everybody else is a muggle. We need to change this paradigm. We need to be open; this music belongs to everybody. It's only going to have a life if it belongs to everybody. You can get somebody to love any kind of music. I don't care if it's minimalism, serialism, indeterminate music, neo-romantic, microtonal, jazz-influenced, improvisation-based, electronic. Some people are still horrified by rock and roll. There are no horrors. This is part of our world. It's all music. Even hip hop

and American country music, all of it. It's all one world. And I find things that are fascinating in all of this stuff. And I want ISCM to be a platform for everything. Obviously, our major focus is notation-based music. And the reason why is that it can travel more easily. Your music represents you and you are there. These ISCM festivals should be streamed. They should be online. People should hear them online, be able to access them. Is it the same experience as being there? No, but it'll give you a taste and make you whet your appetite, and maybe you'll want to go in a future year. If you can't go for whatever reason, maybe you can't afford to travel, maybe you're somewhere in the world, traveling is very difficult, or maybe you're physically unable to travel, you're ill, you need to be homebound. We can reach more people this way. It is so important that we find a way to reach more people.

- **A.A.:** Some pieces of music are meant to be experienced only live, aren't they?

F.J.O.: Some things are really meant to be live experiences and they're really hard to recreate any other way. I'll tell you one thing that I absolutely adored at the festival this year: Irinel Anghel's audio-video piece in which she was there in costume performing live along with the fixed media component. She added a human element. And that was amazing. It blew everybody's minds. It was wacko. It was great! At the 2014 festival in Wrocław, Poland, there was a crazy piece for 200 motorcycles in this open park with everybody revving their engines with cues from a conductor; it was crazy! I love recordings. I've got 30.000 of them here in my apartment. I listen to music all day long. But it's not the same, and this idea of being with other people and sharing music with them, you can't replicate that online.

I get into debates with people about these terrible times with our environment, carbon footprints when traveling around the world... but sitting under a rock in the corner of your room? That's how wars happen, because we don't understand other people, because we don't travel, because we're not aware of people in other societies, their needs, their lives. There's a basic human need to be connected in other places.

- **A.A.:** How much did you know about Romanian music before this year's edition of the festival?

F.J.O.: I knew a bunch of names, but I didn't have any feelings about it because I didn't have this direct connection to it. That only happened from being at that festival.

- **A.A.:** What would you say sets this edition apart from the other editions of the festival you have attended?

F.J.O.: I think that there was such a sheer love for this music! Love and respect! The level of performance was also very high. I was really impressed with the choral group, just an impeccable sound. Also, the variety of music that was done and the way they aced every single thing that they did. Extraordinary! I was floored by the orchestras! You know, with orchestras, you're lucky when any new music gets played, but oftentimes the performances sound like the music was sight-read or only had one rehearsal. These pieces sounded like they were being interpreted! And that makes a world of difference.

- **A.A.:** So you had a few highlights to remember.

F.J.O.: A bunch, actually, but I'm isolating a few of the incredible... the concert with violin and piano, the solo clarinet concert. I am not the biggest fan of solo instrumental music and I kind of went to that concert slightly dragging my feet. There were a couple of pieces with piano, but the rest were just clarinet alone. I thought, OK, this is going to be hard. This is going to be rough. But it was amazing. It was so good. And part of it was the repertoire, you know, this Tiberiu Olah piece for solo clarinet, which I'd never heard before. It's like 60 years old, it's an old piece. I thought it was an incredible piece of music. And it was also the player, wow! There was also this Chilean piece for contrabass clarinet on the program. Some people thought it was gimmicky, a bunch of low sounds and some unexpected high sounds. He made it totally musical. He totally made it work. That was a highlight for me as well. I sincerely try to love everything and I'm going to go to everything and I'm going to support it no matter what. Inevitably there will be things that I love more than others, but this concert defied my expectations. The player, Emil Vişenescu, made me love solo instrumental music. Doina Rotaru's *Himere*, an incredible violin concerto, was another highlight of the festival for me. It has very advanced harmonies, but it is still approachable. There's a real human element to it, you can feel the passion in it, it is not cold and calculating. It is not systems music. And I say this as somebody who loves systems, who goes crazy on math.

- **A.A.:** Are there any pieces that you really wanted to listen to again after leaving Bucharest?

F.J.O.: Yes! Ștefan Niculescu's *Undecimum* blew my mind during the festival. I also brought home a bunch of CDs that I was given, and I was overjoyed to discover that there were two different recordings of the piece in

my haul! That's another important way for a piece of music to have a life. It's all well and good to play a piece of music once, right? And then it never gets played again. That's horrible. We need to encourage multiple performances. The reason everybody loves Brahms and Tchaikovsky—well, not everybody does, there are people who hate them—but the reason so many people love their music is because it's done all the time. You can listen to a hundred different versions of a Brahms symphony. We need to make sure these pieces of music have a life beyond the premiere.

- **A.A.:** Can you tell me some of the challenges that ISCM is facing right now?

F.J.O.: Well, I'll give you a very direct example, economics. The financial challenges are huge. The main thing that we do is this festival every year and somebody hosts it. It's a huge effort. Right now, we are hopeful that we will have a 2027 festival in Lithuania, but it has not been 100% confirmed because they're waiting on budget stuff. What would happen if we didn't have a festival? This is something that often keeps me awake at night. How do we get these festivals to happen? Romania came together rather quickly. We didn't have a festival lined up for 2026 but the Romanian delegation put this thing together in only 14 months. So it can be done rather quickly. In the old days, these things used to be proposed and organized years in advance, although not always.

There are challenges that are beyond the control of our little tiny network that runs on love and mostly volunteerism. Our resources are membership dues, which to people in some parts of the world seem very high, which is also a challenge. We need to find alternative ways to bring in more members from South America. Also, the South African section, which hosted the festival only a few years ago, is now struggling. The economic situation there is very complicated. But they need to be at the table with us. And if they can't pay the dues, and they can't afford to travel to wherever the festival takes place, they can't be at the table. But that's not fair. So we need to find ways to make sure they're at the table. But that means we need to find the money somewhere else. We have a funding committee. We met over Zoom just yesterday. We're trying to apply for grants. For many decades, this organization survived without having a legal location, but in this last decade we are licensed in Austria. That means we can finally apply for funding from different organizations. Last year, we received funding from the Siemens Foundation for our Young Composer Awards, so we were able to increase the commission fee for the two composers whose music was done in Bucharest. We wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise.

How do we make festivals continue to happen? How do we increase our membership? Not only because we need membership fees to keep going as a network, but, even more importantly, because we need those people to be at the table for the music from their countries and their composers need this network so their music can be heard. So that's a challenge that is partially financial. It's financial in terms of how can we get a delegate from Uruguay, let's say, to travel to Romania. It's very far away.

I realize as a music organization, we can't change the world. We can't change people's minds, but I like to think that when we did all this stuff on Ukrainian composers we made more people in the music community at least aware of Ukraine. And so, music can do that. It can create an awareness and empathy. What else can we do? How can we use that for other flashpoints in the world?

- **A.A.:** In organizing these festivals, the host country always curates the programming. How do you feel about the selection for the Romanian edition?

F.J.O.: I love how this music means so much. You know, we were having breakfast at our hotel one morning and the festival was on TV. They were talking about the ISCM festival; it was incredible! I have to be honest with you, if this festival were to happen in New York City, it probably wouldn't be on TV, which is too bad, it should be, right? But how do you make that happen? How do you crack that? I feel like culture still means something in a very big way in Romania. And I think there's a lesson in here for people who come from countries where culture is more marginalized.

- **A.A.:** You said the Romanians organized the festival in 14 months. Is this a short period of time or a long one?

F.J.O.: It is very short! It is one of the strengths of this edition that it came together so quickly. You know, sometimes people are planning for years. The fact that they got together to organize this thing was very impressive. Also, some other strengths of the Romanian festival were the incredible variety of music, the mix of brand new pieces and older pieces, the open-mindedness. I loved the way that older music was integrated with newer music, both Romanian and international. I loved the lengths of the concerts, I thought they were just the right length and the days weren't too overloaded. There were three concerts a day. Sometimes during festivals in other years, concerts went way over time. You rush to get to the next concert, which is far away, and you miss the first piece. The locations were great here. You could walk to most places which was really good. There was also time to do other things. I was

very happy I got to see the Romanian Art Museum that was around the corner from the hotel where the ExCom was staying. I really want to express my appreciation about the team of the festival, they are amazing people and also fabulous composers. I am really happy that Diana Rotaru is now the delegate from Romania. She received the ISCM Young Composer Award years ago, before my time in the festival. Also, Dan Dediu and Valentina Sandu-Dediu are truly wonderful people and a power couple, a composer and a pianist/musicologist. These people are huge advocates for other people. That's what I have been aspiring to do in my own professional life. It's really important that you do your own music thing. Because we're all creators, we all have this ability, we all need to nurture that self-expression. But you need to be mindful that listening is the most important thing that you can do. Because from listening, that's how you get outside of yourself and understand other people. And I think if we could listen to each other, the world would be a better place.

- **A.A.:** Did you have any connections with Romania before this festival?

F.J.O.: No, the only connection was with Irina Hasnaş from her being on the ExCom. This was my first visit to Romania but my wife and I are still studying Romanian and our minds are already focused on coming back.

- **A.A.:** Do you feel like Romanian music has some distinctive aesthetic traits apart from music from other countries?

F.J.O.: I was amazed by your music. I was amazed at how many large-scale pieces there are. I now love Octavian Nemescu and Ștefan Niculescu, also Anatol Vieru's music. It shares some aspects of minimalism because there are these big block chords that are very static, but they're also quite chromatically complex. Also, the ways that folk music elements combine with more modernistic structural elements is fascinating. I think Romanian music has a recognizable sound. Before, I only knew about George Enescu and Dinu Lipatti, and a few scores I found online by Mihail Jora, but there is so much more there. I also feel the need to spend more time with Romanian literature. I made a list of things because my other love after music is language and literature. That's one of the other things that all humanity shares: language. But of course, language needs to be translated. Music doesn't need to be translated, which is why it can reach anyone who hears it anywhere in the world, although it does need to be performed.

- **A.A.:** Do you notice any significant changes in the musical languages of the new generation of composers? Are there any trends that you consider defining for the present?

F.J.O.: What I am noticing is the willingness not to be siloed, not to be in one camp, to be a hybrid, to be bi-musical or tri-musical. Is this generation the first generation to be that way? Certainly not. In the 1960s, Terry Riley, one of the founders of minimalist music, played jazz piano. He still plays jazz piano. He's an incredible jazz pianist. He also played with rock musicians. He did a record with John Cale, who also had a classical background. They did an album together that was released in 1971. So this is not a new thing. There's this idea of having your feet in multiple kinds of music, to not be locked into one genre. Although, you know, the corporate entities are trying to clamp down on that. They want to create AI models. If you like this, you'll like that. They want to sell you the same thing that you've already heard. I want to listen to something that's different than what I heard before. Don't recommend the thing that's the same. Recommend something that's totally different, but they don't think that way, right? Businesses are trying to clamp us down and put us back into silos. But I think a lot of creative minds nowadays don't want to be in those silos; they want to exist beyond them. They're the people we need to reach. They're the people to whom we need to say: Hey, ISCM is the network for you. We exist beyond genre. You may think we're contemporary classical music; oh, that's so scary. We've been around since 1922. Oh, that's such a long time. That's old. Back in the day. But we are open to all styles, to everybody, and to all people of the earth. The fiefdoms have now broken down, in part because we can now connect to each other online. We can't make the same connections we make in person, but we can make connections.

- **A.A.:** Do you think AI is the next link in the chain of musical evolution? Do you think this will change the role of composers and institutions dedicated to contemporary music?

F.J.O.: AI is a very dangerous thing. If you listen very carefully, I don't know, maybe I'm just being a humanist, once again this is not a new thing. Lejaren Hiller, who was a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1950s, worked on a program for writing music called Illiac. And he got the Illiac program to write a string quartet for him, the Illiac Quartet. It is an AI-created piece from the 1950s. And if you listen to it, you'll probably think it's kind of awful. The first movement sounds sort of like early music, then later on it sounds like modernist music. It's an interesting idea, but the result is quite boring. Decades later, David Cope, an electronic music composer who at some point got writer's block and couldn't write music,

designed a program to write music for him and he called that program Emily Howell; he gave it a female name. You can buy CDs of Emily Howell's music. She's not a real person. She's a computer program, programmed by this guy. The music is not terribly interesting. I know, the machines keep getting better. Computers can now beat anyone at chess. Garry Kasparov, who once was the greatest living chess player, lost to Big Blue.

I love chess, but I like to think that music does something more than chess. It hits the emotions. The computer can't hit the emotions because it doesn't have them, they're not there. So you could do all you want. You can have commercial music, library music, the stock music and AI has taken over a lot of that.

John Cage liked to say that he was creating his music totally by chance and that it was not his personality at all. Yet I can recognize a Cage piece. He's in there whether he wanted to be or not. You know, that's the thing. You can't escape the human element if you are a human creating something. And that's what AI cannot do, it doesn't have the emotion, the intuition, the gut, that's all humanity. I sincerely doubt we will have ISCM festivals devoted to AI-composed music at least as long as I'm president. Maybe in the future. Maybe there'll even be an AI president of ISCM one day. But I certainly hope not.

SUMMARY

Andra Apostu

**A dialogue with Frank J. Oteri,
president of the International Society for Contemporary Music**

Composer Frank J. Oteri has been president of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) since 2025. Founded in 1922, this international network dedicated to new music from around the world has grown steadily and today includes more than 60 organizations in over 50 countries. The annual festival organized by the ISCM under the name *World New Music Days* was hosted in Bucharest from May 23–31, 2026, by the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania, together with its partners. Under the symbol of Constantin Brâncuși's *Endless Column*, the Romanian team told a fascinating story of new music. Our conversation with Frank J. Oteri, conducted for our magazine, reflects the success of the 24 events included in the 2026 program, while also offering interesting insights into the mission of the International Society for Contemporary Music and the challenges it faces in today's society.