Developing dynamic and fundable project proposals for the MSCA Postdoctoral Fellowship

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My experience of the MSCA IF (PF) application process

CAR panel – career restart

- Applied 3 times, third time lucky!
  - First – Archival project in France, Loire Valley – score **low 70s**
  - Second – Current project MusiConduits at UW – score ~ **84.5**
  - Third time – revised application – **94.2**
    - Results Jan/Feb 2020, postponed until Sept 2021, 60% FTE

**Great result! But how did I get to this point?**

- Focus on detail in the application – I knew what skills I had, but did they?
- Effectively communicate all the required information – use tables for detail, exploring different elements or facets of your proposal
- Tell a story that is exciting, intriguing or makes the reviewer want to know more!

Musical Materialities and Conduits of Culture: revealing the hidden histories of music during Poland's 'Golden Age' (c. 1475 – 1600) 'MusiConduits'

Exploring musical culture through the lens of objects:

~ archival documents ~ manuscripts or printed music ~ engravings and drawings ~ decorative arts

~ furniture ~ the built environment (churches, historic buildings) - architectural decorations
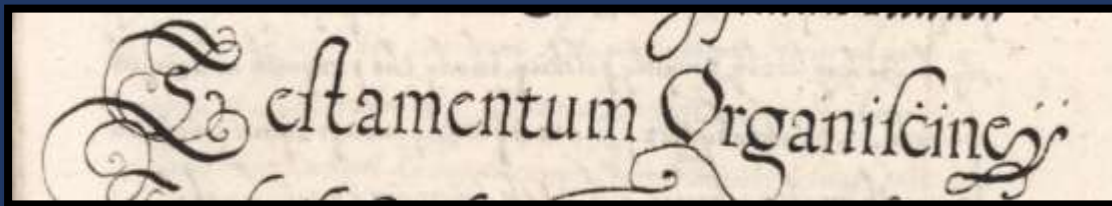
'Honest Anna, wife of the famous and honest Mr Jan …. Organist'
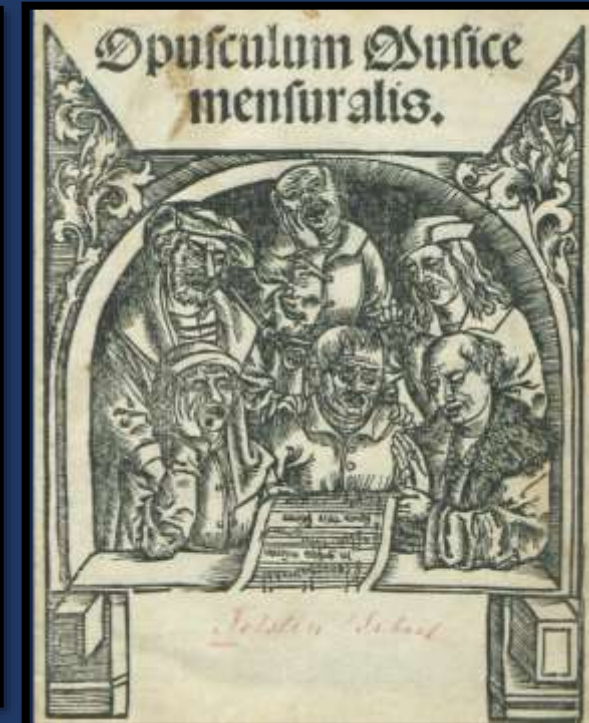AGAD, 1/97/0/-/11, fols. 37-37r.

Polychromatic ceiling painting, Boguszyce, church


Fiddle from Płock, 16th century

Stove tile, bagpipe player, 16th century

Sebastian of Felsztyn, *Opusculum Musice mensuralis.* Cracow, 1517.

# What is innovative in the MusiConduits project?

- Interdisciplinary, Cross-sectoral
- Material culture, object-focused approach
  - Objects can tell a different story, hopefully hidden stories
- Transkribus – 16th-century model
- Social Science and Collections Management software – Aquad, Tropy
- Exhibition(s) – aim of reaching wider public
  - Use of 3D technologies
- Parallel exploration of modern engagement with historic collections – Digital Humanities
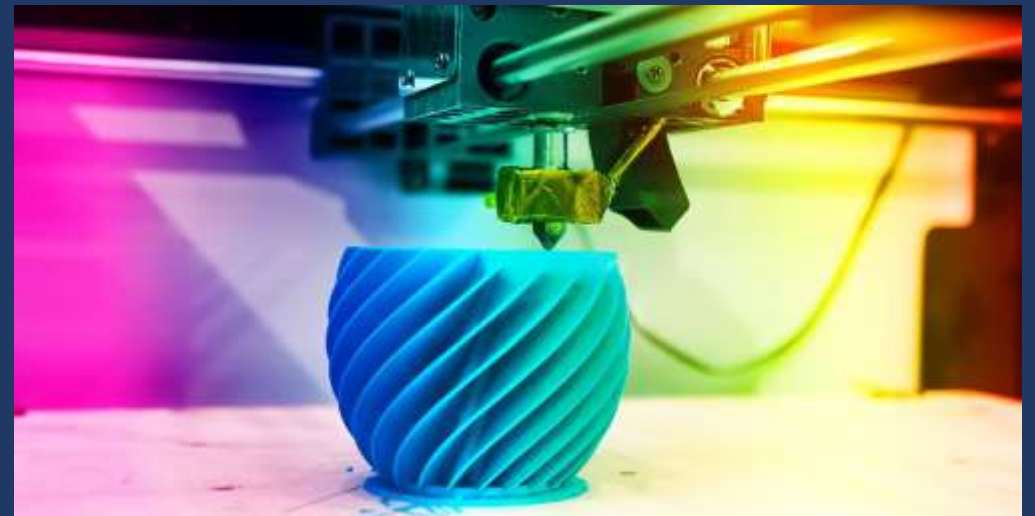
Brainstorming research project ideas...

Ask yourself a few questions:

- What is my passion?

- Where do I see myself in the next 5-10+ years
  - How will this project help me to realise these goals or move closer to them?

- Is there a burning question from your previous research that you didn't have the time or scope to examine at the time?

  - *! Don't just propose to continue your PhD/postdoc research in the next project or publish your thesis as a book !*

- Is there a 'step-change' you would like to take in your career?

  - How has my past experience prepared me for this change?
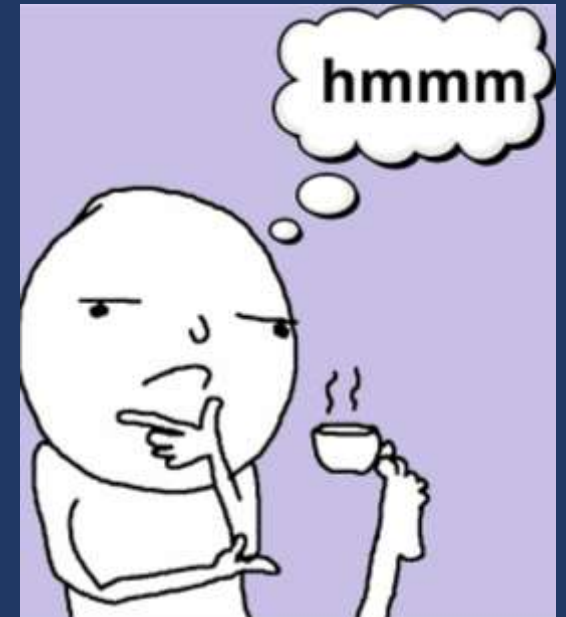
Consider the wider picture…

Ask yourself – Why you? Why this topic? Why now? Why at the host institution?

- How will this project enable you to move above and beyond 'filling gaps in knowledge' to explore/introduce new directions in your field or make new interdisciplinary connections
- Why is the host the best place to conduct the research?
  - Supervisor, research centres, location of resources

What is 'state-of-the art' in your project?

- Easier said than done to identify – especially in humanities
- State-of-the-art can be in many different forms:
  - Methods of analysis or data capture
  - New approaches, interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral
  - Outputs
  - Co-produced

What is that exciting spark that will make application reviewers take notice?

Career and skills development

What are the skills you plan to develop by conducting this project?

- Skills to focus on should help you to achieve your 'Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years' brainstorming ideas
- How will conducting the research elements enable your development?
- Management skills development?
- Knowledge Exchange and Impact (KEI) experience?
- Networking experience?

Is it always worth planning a secondment?

- What will it add to your project? Resources, knowledge, people, experiences

Practical elements and detail: what, when, how, who, how much?

Focus on detail and narrative in the application

- Include all information required in detail
- Connect the dots for the evaluator – be specific!
  - You need to be able to answer those why questions (why you, why now, etc)
- Not: 'this research is important', but: 'this research is essential because will allow us to better understand x, y, z, which will enable a, b, c...'

Question – is it really necessary to plan and communicate the project in such detail? – Yes!

- Important to communicate a practical flow of project activities
  - What needs to come first? Second? Third? Simultaneously?
- Demonstrates strategic development and planning of the research project
- Demonstrates that you have enough experience to manage a project
- A detailed risk assessment can communicate that you have thought in depth about how important project aspects may change, and what you can do about it

Resources

If relevant, what is the body of information you will use?

- Does it exist? Where? Is it digitised?
  - Are there travel requirements?
- Will you create this collection of research data yourself?

Are there data management requirements for your research?

- How can these data plans be incorporated into the project plan from the beginning?

Title page, *De Republica emendanda libri quinque, recogniti & aucti*, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, 1559
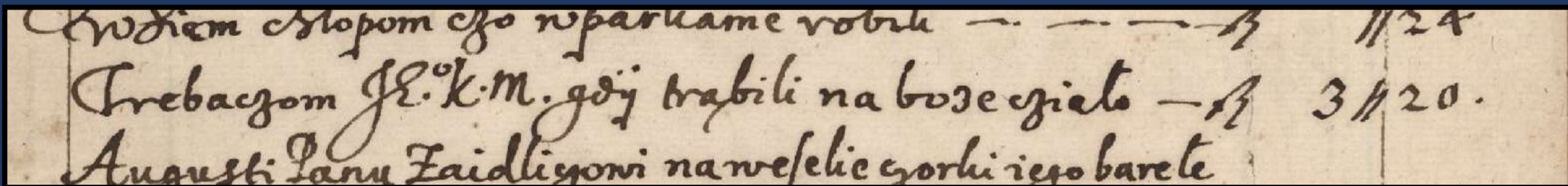
AGAD, 1/99/0/-/226, fol. 21v, 'Trumpeters of his majesty the King, who played for Corpus Christi'

Outputs and dissemination

During project planning phase, ask yourself:

What types of outputs and dissemination activities will you have?

- Are books and publications expected by the funder or your institution?

- If the planned project involves specific communities, how will they be involved in impact and dissemination activities that could also celebrate and amplify their voices and views?

How do you plan to engage the wider public?

- Is there scope for other types of events to reach different audiences?

- Are there partners (national institutions, non-governmental organisations, etc) that you could collaborate with for wider impact?

Timescale

- Think logically and practically about what needs to happen in your project – and when

- Gantt charts are very useful to visualise the project and its many aspects – helps to block out time and see where clashes may occur

- It's tempting to pack the schedule throughout the project timeframe
  - Is it achievable? May be too much
  - Doesn't leave room for new opportunities, reflection time, personal/family time, physical and mental health

Additional tips:
Sustainability – preparing for post-project

How can your research data, once the project ends, be put to the best use?

- Depositing project dataset in an open-access virtual repository

- Think about your proposed outputs – are they sustainable?

  - Example – proposed online resource that has no future plans or funding

  - Example – resource that is replicating other existing resources

  - Example – resource that will need periodic updates (app) but does not have relevant/ongoing IT funding

Databases, software – is it necessary to reinvent the wheel or…

- Is it better to collaborate with existing projects?

  - Great networking and opportunity to highlight the project

  - Provide better value for money for funders

Ensure data management plan (or application) includes sustainability
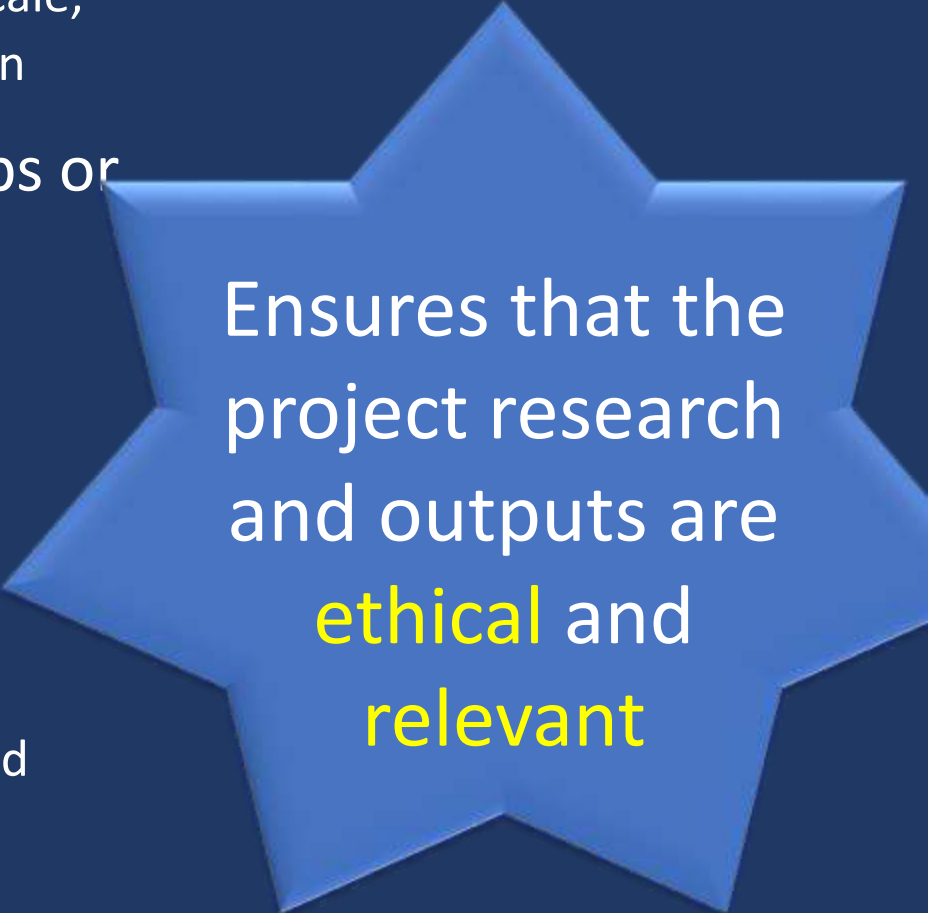
Additional tips:
Ethical considerations and best practice - Be SMART-ER!

Are there ethical considerations for your project?

- Will you be conducting interviews or activities with people?

- Worth thinking about early on: ethics can inform/affect project timescale, required permissions by funder and institution, data management plan

Do you plan to engage with specific communities, groups or individuals in your research?

- How will this contribute to the project aims?

- Are there any ethical considerations in their participation?

  - GDPR and personal data

- When will key stakeholders be involved?

  - Ideally from planning phase!

  - Can stakeholders be involved or lead decisions on outputs and dissemination?

Ensures that the project research and outputs are ethical and relevant

Additional tips:
Planning and writing the MSCA PF application

Focus on detail and narrative in the application
- Include all information required in detail
- Connect the dots for the evaluator – be specific
- Not: 'this research is important', but: 'this research is essential because will allow us to better understand x, y, z, which will enable a, b, c…'
- Use tables where you can expand on project details
- Use proactive verbs such as 'will' instead of 'could': 'this project will enable…'

Highlight what is state-of-the-art, what is your unique experience?
- Not just filling a gap in knowledge, the project will go above and beyond, new directions
- Combining my academic research with cultural heritage aspect – unique and winning combination

It's a training fellowship!
- Designing the project to prepare for your next career step
- Consider creating a Work Package just for management and skills development
- Really think about TOK (transfer of knowledge) – both ways

Pay close attention to guidance

- Understand the aims and objectives of the MSCA postdoctoral fellowship programme and wider European Commission
- Read guidance for evaluators
  - Remember they may not be specialists in your field
  - Use engaging but accessible language, spell out acronyms

Make use of the support around you

- Supervisor, Net4Mobility resources, research officers at host university/centre, NCP, colleagues with grant experience
  - But give them enough time to read and comment!

Attention to feedback for resubmission

- Address all issues in detail
- If not successful, consider if lower scores were down to project design, project plan or communication in the application
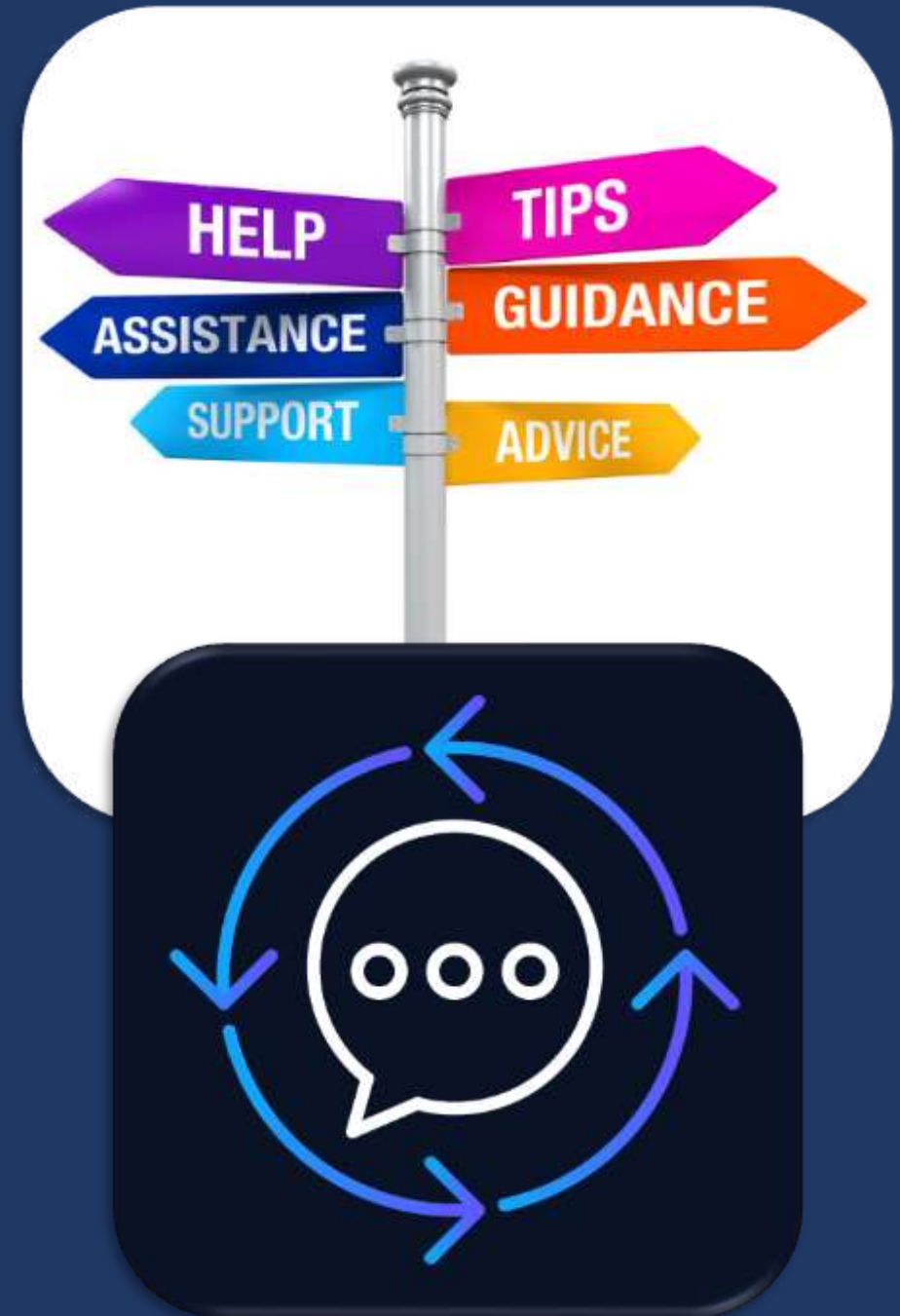
Questions?

Thank you and good luck!

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