

# **‘Future musicianship and present educational practices’: Eight questions on the future of the conservatoire as an institution**

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**by Erlend Hovland**

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**Editorial**

Intuitively, the topic of future organization of higher music education (i.e. ‘conservatoire’) does not seem relevant for *Music & Practice* and its focus on practice, performance, and artistic research. New institutionalism, organizational studies, sociology, political administration, economy, education, etc. are academic subjects that seem more relevant for dealing with issues related to the institutional changes. And, of course, the most obvious way to change institutions is through political power and influence. So why should the present journal care?

In his book, *The Craftsman*, Richard Sennett warns that politically imposed reforms are likely to ignore the competence and knowledge that are invested in institutions. If we take this perspective into consideration, it becomes important to reflect and communicate the

nature of the practical knowledge on which institutions are built. To define institutional organization as a topic for practice studies is to accept the importance of articulating the values, insight, and competence as well as the potentiality, shortcomings and irrelevance of present institutional activities. In this manner faculty members can proactively seek better solutions to educational deficiencies and can better inform decision-makers on how to enhance present institutional practices.

And yet, many of the activities in the conservatoire appear to be based on 'black boxing' (cf. Bruno Latour's term 'black box'); things are done, activities are presented and learned, without any questioning. This 'taken-for-grantedness' is the enemy of reflection, and a danger to institutional progress. Reduced to 'unquestionable skills to be learned', institutional reforms may fail to challenge existing practices or simply dismiss them as being 'old-school', both with equally problematic consequences. In fact, we need to think 'inside the black box' in order to understand and evaluate why and how practices build institutions, identities, musicianship and knowledge.

In order to stimulate further reflections, we have formulated a set of what we hope are thought-provoking questions, on which we have asked a selected group of institutional representatives to reflect. The questions were as follows:

## **1) If higher music education is in crisis, how do we judge its seriousness and where do we seek the solution?**

There is no shortage of research documenting a serious conflict between the present educational practices in the conservatoire and the challenges that the student will encounter in professional life. Today, musicianship is to a large extent freelance activities, based on juggling different work opportunities, which may result in financial strain, with low income and high insecurity. Acknowledging the situation, many conservatoires are now trying to prepare their student for a demanding professional life, partly by offering various courses in 'self-management': entrepreneurship, financial planning, law, marketing etc. But will this help? Or are we facing a deeper discordance between educational practices and the realities of the music profession?

## **2) How conservative can the conservatoire be?**

Despite radical changes in society and in the mediation of music, the educational practices in institutionalized higher music education (i.e. the conservatoire) are surprisingly resilient to change. The institutional structure of the first music conservatoires around 1800 (cf. Paris, Vienna, Brussels) is still recognizable in most of our present-day schools. (The primary focus on weekly instrumental and vocal tuition, further classes in harmony, aural training, choir or orchestra). Undeniably, present educational practices are in many respects thriving. The general instrumental level of young musicians has never been as high as today. And yet, if there is a crisis, the solution cannot be to further excel in what the conservatoire already does well. Institutional changes in the conservatoire must reflect a new engagement for music as a societal activity outside the institution. The question of 'how conservative can a conservatoire be?' is a question that is likely to be posed when the 'taken-for-grantedness' of an age-old educational practice is not examined, when the institutional structure is hindering assessment of the relation between the institution, its students, the society, and music as a vital form of art.

## **3) Should the conservatoire accept that the prospects of the few should dictate its educational practices and its criteria of success?**

Undeniably, to be able to study music at a conservatoire, in all its splendid institutional isolation, is a privilege, something which can arouse a feeling of being part of a long tradition of musicians, and can offer the opportunity to lose oneself in a limited set of technical demands and interpretive problems. Still, few are likely to openly advocate this position as 'all there is'. One way or another, what is learned at the conservatoire is supposed to be highly relevant for the student's profession, or at least, for those who succeed in landing a position in a good professional orchestra, or even becoming soloists. But if this prospect provides the rationale - and the criteria of success - that define the educational practices at the conservatoire, most of the students will then have to follow a curriculum and be judged by a set of standards that may be less relevant for their future musicianship.

## **4) To what extent do the educational practices sustain**

## **a power structure where the student cannot claim ownership and agency?**

Every institution has its power structure, a fact that should lead to the question of who and what define the content and values in present higher music education. The musical world has a rigid hierarchical structure based on deified great ('classical') composers and a star culture of internationally acclaimed conductors, soloists and singers. The institutional organization of the conservatoire does little to challenge the hierarchy. On the contrary, we can suspect that the hierarchical structure, sustained by the inherent conservatism of the institutions (both the conservatoire and the orchestra) can be said to impose inhibitions and hostility to experimentation, individuality and transgression from a strict interpretive framework. Interestingly, far from being a provocative statement, this is one that has been articulated throughout the history of musical institutions, and further, that is well demonstrated by the fact that new musical ideas often come 'from outside' the institutions. So, if the power structure is as rigid that this critic would imply, the students will only 'borrow' a right to represent music, not daring to acclaim ownership or to demonstrate agency.

## **5) Shall the conservatoire educate craft-persons or artists?**

This question addresses the *idea* and *identity* of what is a musician, in particular in relation to creativity and individuality, and thus, the ability to develop the individual artistic project (which must be regarded as one intrinsic quality of an artist). If this auto-restriction is the outcome of present educational practice, then we need to rethink this, but we must also accept that the conservatoire must embrace other functions than simply providing a setting that can perfect the instrumental abilities of the student. In other words, the conservatoire cannot be satisfied with the efficiency of its own ability to teach a limited set of skills, it must also accept its inevitable role as a definer of the musical life and musician's identity outside the institution. Must not the future musician embrace a wider role as a mediator (or advocate) of art and culture? Ultimately, this question has to do with what kind of identity the student is 'permitted' to develop as musician.

## **6) How can we enhance the aesthetic reflection both**

## **inside and outside our institutions?**

A clearly voiced and well-articulated defence of art music, of its aesthetic value, is hard to find. And the general mumble-jumble of 'expressing oneself', often part of musician's jargon, can neither do the trick of explaining the importance of a genre, nor inform any potential listener of the qualities of the music. The genres that are constitutive for the conservatoire (classical music and jazz) are gradually losing their audience. As Tröndle has shown, there is a generational loss that is not any longer compensated by a renewed interest of the 'next generation'. Bob Dylan's first fans are still listening to Dylan, and not necessarily turning to Beethoven, as time goes by.

Attracting new groups of audiences and advocating and curating music appear to be a question of necessity, but not only that; it is also a privilege to be capable of representing this important part of the world's cultural heritage. This, however, cannot be achieved without educating future musicians who can represent music as art, musicians who experience ownership of music and agency.

So, shall teaching institutions also consider aesthetic reflection, the cultivation of an informed discourse on music, as a necessary element in their training of young musicians? The question is even more relevant as the term 'musicologist' no longer necessarily means 'scholars working and writing on the historical, aesthetical issues of music as a form of art'. Further, the role of music criticism in traditional medias (newspapers, radio and television) is also dwindling. Undoubtedly, defending and explaining the value of music as art has lost many of its former associates.

## **7) Does the conservatoire need 'critical friends'?**

How can the conservatoire find useful 'critical friends', that is, trusted persons who ask provocative questions? As Harald Jørgensen has shown in his extensive survey of the literature written on higher musical education, there is a lack of critical studies. Despite a vast number of books and articles, it is the self-jubilatory tone that often excels. The aim of the authors is not necessarily to question established institutional and educational practices, but to voice the many benefits and personal achievements of its leading instrumental and vocal teachers. Yet, if we accept that music institutions need to address new issues regarding their relation to society and future musicians, who can play the role of 'critical friends'? Or maybe more importantly, how can the utility of having critical friends be conveyed to the institutional decision-makers? And yet, criticism comes often too easily, and if acted upon, it can lead to misjudgement of important knowledge and competence already

implemented in the institutions. The 'friendliness' and the competence invested in the critic are crucial factors. Changes in the institutional structure of the conservatoire will benefit from a better knowledge of the practical knowledge already invested in its activities.

## **8) Are we educating too many musicians?**

The question is of course the elephant in the room. And the simplistic and nonsensical answer is of course 'yes'. But if 'yes' is the right answer, we may be asking the wrong question, as it reflects an idea of education as something that necessarily leads to a profession. Has not the 'professionalization' itself to some extent become a major problem to music as a vivid form of art? Surely, for musically talented people the extensive professionalization opens the doors to a professional career, but at the same time, it can also close the doors to competent amateurism. The decline of audience and amateur musicianship is probably the greatest threat to future musicianship. At the same time, professional careers have become more versatile and the conventional workplace and employment are changing, not least due to technological development. Could not all this be greeted as a new opportunity to the conservatoire; instead of only focussing on educating professionals, it could also provide for students in other subjects who want to develop their musicality without necessarily seeking music as profession?

We were pleased to gather responses from scholars, practitioners and institutional representatives around Europe, and we appreciate their time and effort to weigh in on this important topic. The debate is one which neither begins nor ends with Music & Practice.