

‘Future musicianship and present educational practices’: a response to eight questions on the future of the conservatoire as an institution

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Survey

I was very interested to be asked to respond to the eight stimulating questions posed below. As a senior member of a higher music education institution for over a decade (Dean, Royal College of Music, London, 1998-2009) and, more recently, Chief Executive of the European association that works on behalf of higher music education institutions (Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen [AEC], 2011-2015), I have pondered issues such as these for a significant period of time and from a variety of perspectives. The questions are intentionally provocative, and many of them have no definitive answer, but it is vital that we continue to confront them if we are to maximize

the relevance and the sustainability of the education we provide in conservatoires. I shall offer a few thoughts in response to each question:

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

Is higher music education in crisis? My own view is that this is an over-pessimistic assessment; however, the pressures facing conservatoires – including the sharp recent rise in the USA and Europe of an aggressive brand of anti-elitist populism – could easily intensify into a crisis if broader and longer-term trends are not recognized and factored into the strategic planning and actions of institutions.

Conservatoires and the world of musical practice – predominantly professional, but also amateur – exist in a symbiotic and cyclical relationship. Young musicians need technically accomplished and musically inspiring teachers; conservatoires have a responsibility to ensure a continuing supply of these. Some of those young musicians will be drawn to choosing music as their area for higher study and, potentially, as a career; conservatoires must continue to provide inclusive access for those with talent and must monitor the changes in their needs and those of the profession into which they may graduate. To do so, they must nurture their contacts with the profession and ensure that the perceptions that each holds of the other are up-to-date and well-informed (see also the answer to Question 7).

And, finally, everyone involved in the cycle – students, institutions, professional organizations and individuals – must be mobilized and coordinated in their advocacy for the art form whose values may be especially important for them but apply to society as a whole. Without such advocacy, the risk that the cycle of musical renewal may run down, or grind to a halt altogether, could become a reality. That would indeed represent a situation of crisis.

2) How conservative can the conservatoire be?

Perhaps it is more helpful to reverse this question and to ask ‘how progressive can the conservatoire be?’. The structures of conservatoire teaching – master to apprentice(s) in studio conditions – are intrinsically conservative; the apprentice, once graduated to master, naturally replicates the training which he/she received, both in terms of its technical aspects and its content. Continuity is privileged over innovation.

The strength of this is the 'apostolic succession', whereby a tradition of practice that reaches back to artists and teachers contemporary with the repertoire that is predominantly taught and learnt gains a sense of authenticity through lineage. In some institutions, this phenomenon is being examined from a research perspective, yielding interesting data as to how 'schools' of teaching originate, diverge and often re-join down the generations.

The weakness is that the tradition risks atrophy and, worse still, erosion with each cycle - in that no student can absorb 100 per cent of what is offered by their teacher. Moreover, principles of student-centred learning teach us that the student brings their own contribution to the studio. Rather than empty vessels, students are unique individuals with their own attributes and experience; it is how these attributes and experience interact with the pedagogical tradition that should be our focus, with our goal being the creation of a new synthesis at each turn of the generations. In such a scenario, our students emerge as among the richest resources available to us, and the agency within our institutions that is most likely to make us progressive.

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

The assumption behind this question is that the primary intended destination of conservatoire graduates is the solo concert platform or the lifelong tenure of an orchestral desk. Clearly, only a small minority of the most talented and fortunate students move into these kinds of roles in the profession. Their appropriate training needs to be catered for, but the whole effort of the institution cannot be confined to this goal - otherwise, it will sacrifice the interests of the majority of its students on the altar of the few.

The challenge with this is that the majority of students still enter the conservatoire with the ambition to be one of the few who do progress to a concert career. Clearly this is mathematically impossible. The institution must balance 'treading softly on their dreams' with educating them to the realities of what is most likely to be their career profile - as well as showing that this profile has a range of merits of its own, rather than just being a 'second-best' option.

Musicians' careers are almost invariably multi-faceted, and often combine music-focused activities with others of a more general nature. The musician who does nothing but performing or composing is very much the exception. This is sometimes treated as a modern

phenomenon to which we must adapt, but the truth is that, in different ways, it has always been the case. Being a successful musician requires a range of attributes, many of which are essential ingredients for success in any sphere: teamworking, leadership, project planning and execution, maintaining professional standards of reliability, thinking creatively and with an entrepreneurial vision, and so forth.

The educational practices of conservatoires and their criteria for success should acknowledge this. We should be asking ourselves how versatile, resourceful, critically aware and, above all, creative our graduates are; and we should ensure that our educational practices address these competences explicitly, rather than trusting to their being developed implicitly, and almost accidentally. We should also emphasize that a career path for a music graduate that sees them combining in an effective way musical and non-musical activities - or even applying the competences learnt through a musical training to another sphere of activity altogether - is a success-story, not evidence of failure.

4) To what extent do the educational practices sustain a power structure where the student cannot claim ownership and agency?

The master-apprentice teaching paradigm does indeed sustain such a power structure. The question is therefore the extent to which modern practices in conservatoires adapt, supplement and interrogate this paradigm to give greater ownership and agency to students. Often, the teaching outside the instrumental or vocal studio - for example, classes in music history - has moved further in its practices towards student-centredness. This is positive, but without the more progressive practices being proactively encouraged in the studio itself, it will always remain peripheral.

There are initiatives that seek to reconfigure the instrumental/vocal teaching studio itself. These include ventures such as the Innovative Conservatoire (ICON) seminars.¹⁾ AEC ran a project on instrumental and vocal teaching (INVITE)²⁾ between 2007 and 2010 and is in the process of reviving meetings that focus on this core activity of the conservatoire, alongside its platforms that address special interests such as early music, pop and jazz and artistic research. Co-operation and the sharing of good practice will be an essential element of effecting a transformation of the studio teaching paradigm in ways that preserve its strengths but give students in this environment a role they have not held previously. This, in turn, will require giving attention in our curricula to the development in students of the competences they need in order to take fuller ownership of their learning.

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

The short answer is 'both'. Without mastery of their craft, graduate musicians will be hampered in realizing their artistry; however, without artistic vision and motivation, technically flawless musicians will be uninspiring to others in their performances and are likely to fall prey to disillusionment in their own practice as it atrophies into 'going through the motions'.

Because of the demands involved in developing technical mastery, there is a danger that this aspect can dominate the educational priorities of conservatoires. Their young recruits generally enter with enthusiasm and artistic drive; it is easy to assume that these properties are secure and self-regenerating. In practice, the inner light of this kind of drive can be diminished by the conservatoire experience. Years of painstaking working at one's craft, in an environment where one is surrounded by almost ubiquitously high levels of execution, can be seriously demoralizing. The 'how' of music can drive out the 'why'.

Conservatoires must make the 'why' question patent in their curricula. Moreover, they must seek to pitch the level of discourse concerning this question at a relatively advanced and sophisticated level. It is important that students' self-examination of their motives, aspirations and artistic objectives be expressed in more than facile solipsism. This is a challenge; it may call for different skills in teachers from those traditionally sought. Of course, teachers, too, need to be encouraged to regard themselves as still engaged in artistic development despite the repetitive, cyclical aspects of their teaching practice. Staff development is therefore a key component of working towards a student-development model that balances craft and art in a holistic manner.

6) How can we enhance the aesthetic reflection both inside and outside our institutions?

Some of the comments immediately above are also relevant here. However, perhaps the word 'aesthetic' needs to be interrogated. We need our students to think more about music as art, but that thinking needs to be embedded in practice, not carried out as an exercise in disengaged reflection. Reflective practice is increasingly being talked about in conservatoire circles and there are lessons that we can learn from other disciplines, for example medicine and its allied skills, in making this central to our education.

One of the instruments through which reflection is being brought more to the foreground in conservatoires is the expanded role being given to research. Research demands more than reflection, but it certainly requires it. Thinking about the kinds of research that are relevant to conservatoires is itself a valuable reflective exercise. Among other things, it makes us more aware of the speculative, exploratory dimension of composing a musical work or developing an interpretation. We become conscious of the range of possibilities at the outset of either kind of musical enterprise, and of the processes of subjective and objective decision-making by which we narrow these down to the final finished article (and, of course, reflection helps us to recognize more fully that no musical work or performance is ever truly 'finished').

It is for these reasons that research as a force in the culture of conservatoires is relevant to more than those who are going to make careers as researchers. The AEC Handbook 'Perspectives on 2nd Cycle Programmes in higher music education' (AEC 2015)³⁾ addresses this issue at length, identifying above all the Masters level as one where encouraging students to think and reflect 'like researchers' is of value to them whether they go on to doctoral study or emerge directly into the profession at the end of their Second Cycle studies.

The question also asks how we might enhance reflection *outside* our institutions. This is equally important and, in part, relates back to the need for coordinated advocacy identified in the answer to Question 1. Those who have not experienced conservatoire education from the inside often have a surprisingly partial and confused view of what goes on. They see it as giving licence to students to 'play' (the dual sense of the word is significant) for years on end while their peers in other disciplines are engaging with serious matters that will make them socially useful graduates. Of course, this flows partly from the relationship that most members of the public have with music - as a recreational tool, a filler of otherwise disturbingly empty silence and an atmospherically enhancing backdrop to social interaction. Those of us for whom music is so much more (and, in certain respects, so much less!) than these things unquestionably have a duty to try to explain why, not just for us but for everyone, it is something that our society needs, and without which it would be impoverished.

7) Does the conservatoire need 'critical friends'?

In the light of the foregoing, yes, the conservatoire does indeed need critical friends. We need to engage in a series of concentric coalitions: with our professional colleagues in our own discipline; with colleagues concerned with both education and professional practice in

the other arts; with opinion-formers and politicians who show themselves to be open to ideas of the value of the arts in society; with audiences, both actual and potential. In the process of these engagements, we need to be open to criticism, as well as ready to counter ill-informed or outdated opinions with solid evidence.

One of the problems that beset the conservatoire–profession interface is that we superficially know a great deal about one another but, in reality, rely on knowledge that can be dangerously out of date. Professionals carry a vision of the kind of institution where they themselves may have studied; conservatoire teachers and leaders often base their view of the profession on their most intensive experience of it in the years relatively soon after graduating, before they became more immersed in their educational environments. This problem, which I have called the ‘professional parallax’,⁴⁾ is one that requires a more concerted effort to strengthen current links between the two entities if it is to be addressed. Only if we truly know one another, can we hope to give and receive critical advice that is of genuine value.

8) Are we educating too many musicians?

It is commonly suggested that this is the case. The basis of such arguments is twofold: the sense of decline in regular employment opportunities as a musician (e.g. in an orchestra) and the number of music graduates who end up in careers other than music. Taking the second of these first, and as already stated in the answer to Question 3, it should not necessarily be assumed that music graduates who find themselves able to apply the competences gained through their musical training to other areas of activity are ‘failures’ of the conservatoire system. Some musicians do, of course, turn to other professions when their path forward in music feels blocked, but many make a positive choice to earn their livelihoods elsewhere and continue to be fulfilled as musicians either partly or wholly in an amateur context.

As to the question of there being a limited and diminishing number of ‘jobs’ in music, this may be true, but it is not the whole story. As stated earlier, professional music activity today – and probably always, to a large extent – is a diverse and predominantly freelance activity at which many musicians excel. They combine performing, teaching and non-musical activities flexibly, and generally carry through such a ‘portfolio’ of work a clear and undented perception of themselves as musicians first-and-foremost. Longitudinal studies of the graduate work profiles of musicians that recognize this ‘portfolio’ dimension yield statistics that often surprise even the institutions that commission them. It is not uncommon to find that, after five years, graduates are still engaged in a pattern of work within which music

features for anything between two thirds and 90 per cent of the total, whether in terms of the proportion of time spent or income generated.⁵⁾

Of course, we need to publicize these kinds of findings, as well as carrying out more of them and doing so more consistently across institutions and countries. We also need to emphasize the transferrable and interdisciplinary aspects of an education in music. As the 2008 UK Subject Benchmark for Music puts it (and as an appropriate note on which to end):

Students of music, in whatever context, are required to engage with their own experience of musical materials and objects, and to develop their own understanding of how theory and practice come together, while also opening themselves up to the full range of critical opinion. Yet it is precisely because music is a highly-developed system of non-verbal, physical, intellectual and emotional communication that it holds its extraordinary position as a crossroads discipline, connecting powerfully with social and cultural life and, through the creative industries, contributing to the UK economy.⁶⁾

Footnotes

References

1. ↑ See www.innovativeconservatoire.com/
2. ↑ See the handbook produced from this project at www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/en3b-aec-handbook-instrumental-vocal-teacher-education-european-perspectives.pdf.
3. ↑ www.aec-music.eu/userfiles/File/Polifonia/V150424%20Online%20EN%20WG2.pdf.
4. ↑ In a presentation to PHEExcel conference, 'Striving for Excellence in Higher Education: Bringing Education and the World of Work Together', London, November 2015. See EURASHE website at www.eurashe.eu/.
5. ↑ See, for example, Janet Mills, 'Working in Music: The Violinist', *Music Performance Research* 1/1 (2007), 76–89. Available at <http://mpr-online.net/Issues/Volume%201%20%5B2007%5D/Mills.pdf>.
6. ↑ Quoted from *Music 2008*, published by The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008, p. 6. ISBN 978 1 84482 827 2.