

‘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

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

The underlying problem is the much larger one that underlies the whole practice of western classical music. One might sum it up as 'imagined faithfulness to the imagined composer's imagined wishes'. The delusions involved here are far-reaching, and a revolution in thought and practice will be required in order to remove them.

Classical music is taught as if to do music is to do history: one reperforms the past. For some this means recreating the sounds of the past, for others recreating the experiences, but all strive to recover meaning created by a composer and encoded in notation. Rational attention to early recordings shows why this is delusory. Performance style changes over time in ways that written evidence cannot show. What is considered 'musical' changes so much that in many respects current values are the opposite of those barely a century ago. Performances today are powerfully persuasive, just as very different performances were equally persuasive 100 years ago. These same scores can generate powerful experiences not just in ways that are taught, heard, recorded and approved now, but in imaginably and unimaginably different ways. So why are they not allowed to?

The composer's expectations, still less their wishes, can never be known before the late 19th century when recordings begin. Curiously, given the beliefs about composers' intentions, few musicians seem at all interested in those that are known from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And yet, the values of the profession and its multitudinous gatekeepers, from teachers through to managers, promoters and critics, all rest on the belief that the performer's job is to be faithful to tradition. Innovation is prevented whenever it becomes

audible.

What kind of musical creativity is possible in this environment? Why should audiences go to concerts whose content, in almost every detail, is known in advance? Why make another recording when so many are so similar? Why spend 10,000 hours learning to play professionally when one's role will always be confined to reproduction? No wonder if music education is in crisis. No solution is possible unless we first dismantle these fundamental delusions.

2) How conservative can the conservatoire be?

Conservatism is inevitable, given the nature of the ideology. On the one hand conservatoires claim (and increasingly strive) to equip students with musical creativity and imagination alongside the practical skills they need to make a career. On the other hand, their studio teachers, and the teachers who preceded them in students' lives, are focused on passing on an ideal set of techniques and solutions which they believe they have inherited from their predecessors. Thus in theory students, like all professional musicians, are encouraged to bring something unique to their performances: their job satisfaction depends to a large extent on believing that they are doing so. And yet, in practice they are required, if they want work, to subscribe to a constrained set of norms for the performance of their repertoire. The small amount of space between theory and practice, in which minute differences in performance are acceptable, is simply not wide enough to sustain an interesting or rewarding lifetime's artistic work. How can the conservatoire turn its beliefs and practices around? It cannot, on its own. Only when young musicians start to make music differently, and are successful enough doing so to be hired to teach, will conservatoires begin to become homes for artistic innovation. The challenge, then, is to make that creativity happen outside the conservatoire, despite much of what it has trained students to believe and to do.

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

Izabela Wagner's important book, *Producing Excellence: The Making of Virtuosos* (Rutgers University Press, 2015), is about the virtuoso class rather than the conservatoire, but it shows what goes wrong in the training of the few. It is only a rarified version of what happens to the many. Focusing the same attention on the many solves none of the

underlying problems.

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

Almost wholly. Musicians are at the mercy of an ever-present performance police, from their childhood music teacher, through conservatoire, exams, competitions, fixers, artist managers, concert promoters, A&R managers, producers, and critics. All share the same set of beliefs about the proper relationship between a performer and the profession, one in which obedience to the score and the composer's imagined intentions becomes bound up with obedience to themselves and to economic forces requiring minimal rehearsal for minimal cost. Thus, 1) performers are brought up to believe that, within narrow limits, there is a correct way for each score to sound. This is 2) operationalised as doing what is written on the page, which is supposed to be what the composer wants (note the fantasy present tense, so often used in teaching and rehearsal, as if the composer were not dead and past caring). 3) This allows there to be an agreed set of performance norms, which the 'police' exist to enforce through their sense of tradition and experience disguised as taste and judgement. Thus 4) obedience to the police becomes obedience to the composer, and disobedience becomes a crime, punishable by exclusion from work. 5) Norms, enforced and self-enforced in the belief that the composer is thereby honoured, work to the maximum economic benefit of the employer at the expense of the performer, who, since the need for rehearsal is minimised, does almost all the preparatory work at home, unpaid. Where in all of this can the performer have agency?

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

At present conservatoires educate craftspeople (brilliantly) to feel that they are artists. The most successful never have any reason to question that. But to succeed is to have become an outstandingly persuasive cheerleader for the prevailing ideology. There is artistry in promoting convention, no doubt, but it is art without originality. It reassures, it does not challenge. Is that what we want from art? Doesn't art involve offering new ways to see aspects of ourselves, not old ways of reassuring ourselves that all is well?

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

Let us think afresh about what we are doing when we make an artwork starting from a score. Scores contain far less information than we believe. Most of what makes a score music is supplied by the reader who imagines a performance according to the performance norms of their time (including what they imagine to be norms from the pre-recorded past). Early recordings show, alarmingly, how differently that has been imagined. But it follows that we have no relationship with the composer's performance aesthetic until recordings begin, and at that point, because the sounds are so strange, most of us prefer to look the other way. Only when we understand that we are beginning again each time we perform a score can we begin to think afresh about the potential of a score to generate persuasive performances.

It is useful, also, to ask who is harmed when we perform a score differently, given that the composer is usually dead and unconcerned. That ethical question matters, and should be discussed within music education. Once the ethical and recorded historical questions are out in the open, it becomes possible to think about and debate aesthetic questions in much more interesting ways. Performers have to take, and be trained to take responsibility for developing readings of scores, readings which have something to teach us by challenging our understandings of the scores and of ourselves. The aim must be to create performances of Beethoven's 5th (for example) that are as intriguing for potential audience members, and as thought-provoking in the theatre, as a new production of Hamlet. Then we can call ourselves artists.

7) Does the conservatoire need 'critical friends'?

Very much so, with respect. What they achieve is astonishing: can performance ever have been more technically brilliant and more perfectly controlled? But... when only the most brilliantly obedient can succeed we have a serious problem with underlying beliefs about what music should be and what conservatoires are there to do. It may not be realistic to imagine that that can be sufficiently addressed from inside the system. And yet it's also true that only superlatively persuasive new performances can lead conservatoires in fresh directions. So there has to be a collaboration between ideas, experimentation, debate, and performance, more performance, and more. Change will come when a new generation gets a variety of new approaches to work. That can happen in the teeth of opposition from the conservatoires (as it did for HIP in the 70s). But I think that we are in a much better position

now, with real commitment within important corners of several conservatoires, to foster change.

8) Are we educating too many musicians?

We are only educating too many if they are all performing scores in the same way, which, to all intents and purposes, they are. In that case, far too many. But if we were training them to see scores as a starting-point for creativity, then, who knows?, perhaps not enough. At any rate, it's reasonable to expect that if musical performances were more varied and thoughtful and revealing, new audiences would be found, the profession would expand, and more performers would find more rewarding work.