

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

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Music + Practice, Volume 3, 2017

Survey

The editors of Music & Practice ask us to consider ‘eight questions on the future of the

conservatoire as institution' - no small task! The questions posed are thoughtful, challenging and timely.

Any response must necessarily be personal and partial - certainly, I write this as an individual, rather than offering an institutional view from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Nonetheless, as I approach the job of setting down the thoughts that these searching questions provoke in me, I suspect that many of the themes I will touch on will be shared by others, despite our very different starting points.

Rather than address each question in turn, I propose to consider the overarching question on 'the future of the conservatoire as institution' but, in so doing, I will inevitably touch on the individual questions posed by the editors.

For myself, the future of the conservatoire will involve recognising and responding to certain tensions that seem to me inherent and inescapable for conservatoires everywhere. Some of these tensions take the form of dialectical opposites which may be amenable to resolution - others are perhaps strictly paradoxes, seeming oppositions that in fact indicate an underlying truth. Finally, some may be examples of Derrida's notion of *aporia* - contradictions that we may wish (or need) to hold unresolved. I will leave the reader to decide which category is appropriate in each case!

The material of our work - the music - presents a clear tension: notwithstanding the importance of new music, improvisation, and the growing significance in the conservatoires of 'living' genres such as traditional or pop music, there is no denying the centrality of *the music of the past* in what we do. Why do we perform the music of the past? Because it exists, and speaks afresh, *as music* in the present. Dahlhaus's well-worn dialectic of 'music as work' and 'music as event', a basic concept of historical musicology, is effortlessly collapsed every day in the work of conservatoires.

In my view, however, this doesn't obviate the need to consider how we deal with, on the one hand, classics of the musical repertoire (in the broadest possible sense) and the issue of contemporary relevance. We might think that it is in the nature of a 'classic' (perhaps, the very definition of a 'classic') that it speaks anew to each generation - but this may be cold comfort if the constituency to whom it speaks shrivels to a tiny band of specialists. Effective custody of the 'classics' of music (of which, more later) requires both the deepest immersion in that music (as music), and a thoroughly penetrating engagement with the contemporary context. One without the other will not do: how to resolve this tension in our approach to our students?

One solution might be to consider a second tension – that between the conservatoire as a source of professional training for a fast-evolving industry, and as a laboratory for the artistic-intellectual work of our disciplines.

My own view of this artistic-intellectual work is that it is a continuum of activity that pushes forward our disciplines: at one end lies purely creative practice, underpinned by research-like processes, but pursued for no purpose other than pure creative experiment; at the other lies practice-based research, underpinned by artistic processes, but undertaken in direct pursuit of clear questions. This continuum of work is, in my view, absolutely central to the conservatoire as a living artistic and intellectual community.

I believe that the development of effective critical skills in our students and staff – a critical musicianship, if you like – is key to both these facets of the contemporary conservatoire. It is such skills that will allow our graduates to work flexibly, and with resilience, in a professional context that is changing at dizzying speed, while also laying the foundations for cutting edge artistic work and practice-based research.

Perhaps more importantly, a critical musicianship will also be essential if our graduates, the musicians of the future, are to situate the ‘classics’ of music in new and as yet unknown contexts.

To do this, we may need to recognise a third tension, between the elite disciplinary or craft skills that are the first premise of a career as a musician, and the mental skills and attitudes that are the second premise (and without two premises, can we have an argument?). Critical musicianship, and the agency that flows from a critical attitude, are certainly part of this ‘second premise’, but so are collaborative skills that will permit our musicians to make new forms of work, and the skills of effective self-management will enable them to ensure their own continued health and wellbeing.

Does our usual approach to teaching enable this? Attitudes to 1-2-1 teaching are interesting in that they encompass such a range of views. For some, 1-2-1 teaching is a basic article of faith (for how could it be otherwise?) while for others, it is a source of suspicion: problems, dangers even, and at the very least profligacy, lurk whenever learning is entrusted to an individual teacher.

Considering the vast range of practices that it encompasses – and admitting both the sensational success and the clear failures that do sometimes occur – it seems to me that 1-2-1 teaching is not a pedagogy but a context for learning. And so a key ambition of the conservatoire as an institution must be to take active steps to ensure that the learning and

teaching that goes on in the 1-2-1 context is as effective as possible, both as a means of developing the craft skills but also in terms of the vital 'second premise' capacities of critical musicianship, collaborative skills and effective self-management. This, of course, is no small task - but it is essential if we are to resolve the tension between elite disciplinary skills and the mental skills and attitude that our graduates will need.

One great strength of the 1-2-1 approach is that a teacher can be matched to the particular needs of a given student: each teacher, like each student, is different. There is scope, therefore, to sustain a wide variety of specialisms, orientations and attitudes among conservatoire staff, within an overall framework that ensures some kind of parity in the student experience: a balance between individual tailoring and the meeting of certain shared expectations.

In my view, institutions might think more about this balance at the institutional level, and here I perceive a further tension that warrants consideration: do we understand with sufficient clarity the relationship between our broad expectations for a conservatoire (the qualities that make it 'a conservatoire'), and a sense of the particular specialisms, orientations and attitudes (if it's possible to speak of such a thing) of a particular institution? As a sector, how do we negotiate a way between a putatively universal approach and the fragmentation of disparate ateliers, promoting a 'house style'? The question seems especially urgent to me in those contexts where there is apparent duplication (cities with multiple conservatoires, for example), but it is nonetheless important for those institutions, like my own, that have a unique place in their national context.

A final tension that I perceive - and perhaps the greatest challenge to conservatoires generally - is the tension between our responsibility to nurture our artforms, both in remaking the past for the present (and the future) and acting as a laboratory to catalyse new directions for those artforms, and the responsibility to be accountable, at some basic level, to wider society. This is perhaps the institutional counterpart to the first of the tensions I identified above.

I would contend that this dual obligation demands a comprehensive consideration of the relevance of what we do to the widest possible range of communities - but it also highlights our need to be highly effective advocates for our artforms: it is not self-evident that governments or donors should sustain their funding, nor is what we do going to become any cheaper over time. It is no coincidence that Baumol's Cost Disease (Baumol and Bowen, 1966), which predicts that certain activities are condemned to become ever more costly, was first explored with respect to the performing arts. In my view, we should be candid about this with our funders and our students, however difficult that conversation may be.

The future of the conservatoire? Difficult, uncertain, but worth the struggle.