

What role for the artists in our society?

Keynote address given by Bernard Foccroulle at the 40th AEC Congress,
Palermo, 8th November 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Friends and Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be here in Palermo, the city of King Roger and of so many great artists, in Sicily, “la patria di tanti artisti”, a country of very ancient culture, where musical styles and forms from all origins have created such a wonderful cultural life and heritage.

It is also a great honour and a privilege to open this conference of the Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen. I have been spending a lot of time in European conservatoires myself, first as a organ student in Liège, then as a teacher of musical analysis in Liège, Brussels and Paris, and more recently as an organ professor at the Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles.

As general manager of the Aix-en-Provence Festival and the Académie européenne de Musique since 2007, I have been in touch with a lot of conservatoires, Musikhochschulen and Music Academies in all over Europe but also in the south and East of the Mediterranean area and in America. It is therefore a real pleasure to greet so many friends and colleagues this morning. So allow me today to speak as a member of your community.

I would like to question four main points: the need of **creation**, the question of **the public**, the role of **the artist**, the **intercultural dialogue**. But I would like to tell you first a very recent experience.

The Indian Queen in Madrid

A few days ago, I was in Madrid in order to attend at the Teatro Real the first night of “The Indian Queen”, by Henry Purcell, conducted by Theodor Currentzis and staged by Peter Sellars. This was quite a memorable evening in many aspects:

- The piece was not finished by Purcell, so Sellars and Currentzis decided to include other vocal pieces by Purcell, especially some religious music for choir that created an intense emotion and concentration;
- The music had been composed by Purcell as a part of a global show where spoken text would have been also important. Peter Sellars decided to integrate a beautiful text written 30 years ago by Rosario Aguilar, a distinguished female writer from Nicaragua. That text described the Conquest of America from the point of view of an Indian princess to be married to a Spanish Officer. The counterpoint between this text and Purcell’s music made a lot of sense and worked incredibly well;
- The orchestra was playing on period instruments; orchestra and choir were coming from Perm in Siberia. I must say that I never heard on a stage such an exquisite choir, singing and acting in a very expressive way;

- There was no one star on stage, but beautiful, talented and expressive singers.

What do I keep from this memorable evening?

- It was the first time I heard the music by Purcell performed so well by young Russian musicians and singers, with such a sense of style and a quality of sound and intonation that would make the best British choirs jealous...
- I wish the audience had been younger, less rich, more colorful and more participative: it would have increased the impact and the pleasure of the evening!
- This is a piece rarely performed, and probably underestimated by many. But the beauty and the emotion of the performance created a feeling of rediscovering a master piece and at the same time gave the sense of attending a kind of a contemporary creation;
- We clearly see here how much **heritage** and **creation** can be complementary to each other: we love our musical heritage, but we need also the force of the creation to give life to the heritage.

So as you see, there are many aspects in this experience I would like to discuss more in details with you: the necessity of creation, the nature of interpretation, the participation and the enlargement of the audience, the role of musicians in our society, and more in general, the function of art.

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Creation

It is rather clear that creation doesn't occupy anymore the place it had in the past. One example: at the end of the 20th century, for more than 20 years, the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the most prestigious opera-house in the world, presented no one creation, no one new opera in 20 years!

The 20th century saw a fundamental change in music education, a change already initiated during the 19th century: teaching and training performers became the very first priority, while composition and improvisation became more and more marginal. **Performing** classical music became THE priority of most of our Conservatoires. As their name clearly indicates, their first mission was the "conservation" of the past centuries' heritage.

What are the consequences?

- Living composers are far from being central in our Conservatoires, in the repertoire of young musicians, in the community life;
- The training of composers often starts rather late, if not too late;

- Most young musicians have little or no training in improvisation;
- The link with the still vivid musical oral traditions is most of the time missing.

The consequences of this evolution are even more negative because at the same time the world has entered the age of **consumerism**. The biggest danger now, not only for music Conservatoires but for our societies in general, might be to risk their being contaminated by new forms of *cultural consumerism*, a global disease that could very quickly destroy the best of yesterday's and today's authentic cultural forms.

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Let's look at museums, let's see these thousands of people walking, eager to photograph, to consume art, without really looking carefully at the paintings.

We see the same evolution in productions of popular opera presented in big arenas, dictated more by the laws of commerce and greed than by any genuine interest in artistic quality... Is this what we call democratization?

And more in general, let's see how the star-system is contaminating the opera life, encouraging institutions to pay very high fees to artists who are not necessarily the best ones anymore.

We often hear that the public is not interested anymore in contemporary music, or that opera is now a dead art form... But how can we then explain the success of contemporary operas in the most daring and adventurous European opera houses and festivals? How can we explain that some recent operas by Rihm, Eötvös, Dusapin, Vacchi, Battistelli or Boesmans have been presented in several staged productions over a short period? How can we explain that "Written on skin", the latest opera by George Benjamin, created in Aix in July 2012, has been acclaimed since then in Amsterdam, Toulouse, London, Vienna, Munich, Tanglewood or Bonn?

It is the same with cultural institutions: look at the presence of Pierre Boulez at the Lucerne Festival. Look at orchestras or opera houses that have an associated composer: I can tell you my own experience at la Monnaie, the Brussels opera-house, where during 15 years, Philippe Boesmans has been an inspiring and generous composer, not only in composing some beautiful operas for us, but also pleading for more openness to other cultures.

Don't you think we should put creation, composition and improvisation more at the core of all kinds of musical studies? For young musicians and singers, the opportunity to study contemporary pieces, to work with living composers, to improvise, to search for new ways of expression is a wonderful experience that can change their perception of musical life. It also gives them a chance

to be more creative in their approach to scores, to interpret them with a powerful cocktail of respect and creativity.

As Luciano Berio did in his “Recital for Cathy”, creative artists such as composers, theatre directors, choreographers, video artists or even circus artists can contribute to generate new forms of concerts and recitals; by alternating pieces of yesterday and today, by mixing different disciplines, we can give a new impulse to the timeworn concept of concert.

I spent a very fruitful week-end last week in Aldeburgh, the festival founded by Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears. It was extremely interesting to see how this festival and its young artists program develop activities in many interesting directions around the concept of creation:

- After the death of Britten, the artistic direction has been mainly given to composers such as Olivier Knussen and Thomas Adès or to musicians expert in contemporary music such as Pierre-Laurent Aimard, the current artistic director;
 - They train and coach young composers from the age of 12;
 - They teach some of the best young musicians aged 8 to 18 years coming from the East of England and beyond and give wonderful opportunities to perform music in chamber orchestra;
 - Works composed by young composers are presented together with pieces by Britten or by major living composers.

Thanks to the vision of Britten and his successors, Aldeburgh is now a place where creation and creativity are at the centre of things, day after day, month after month, year after year. And what is more, they also strongly focus on audience development and participation. This is precisely my second point.

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The Public

What is our audience? What will it be in 10 years? How can we develop it? How can we make it more active, more colourful, more creative?

Don't we have to admit that the audience of classical concerts often gives the impression that classical music is an elitist affair? Where are the concert halls and opera-houses that really open their doors to people coming from communities, from other continents and cultures? Are we going to remain passive about it?

What can we do about it? Should we try to multiply the number of culture “consumers”, as if “consuming music” were anything positive? I personally hate that word and that concept, and I prefer to speak about accessibility and creative participation.

French writer Danielle Sallenave wrote in her beautiful book *Le don des morts* (‘the gift from the dead’): “Lire un livre, c’est achever de l’écrire”. “To read a book is to finish writing it”. Or for us, musicians: to listen to a piece is to finish writing it. It is a way to participate in its life and sense.

She also writes: «comprendre ne peut se passer de créer»: «to understand is impossible without creating». What a beautiful idea! What an enchanting perspective to think that listening to music implies taking part in its creation...

Taking all this into account, one might well say that performing a Bach Cantata or a Beethoven string quartet, or listening to them means taking part in the movement that has witnessed the birth of those works, that prolongs and renews their beauty and their meaning.

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The consequence of this is that the audience does not feel **excluded** from the work of art, but very much an **integrating part** of it. And it is the shared responsibility of all the cultural actors, it is **our** responsibility to do everything we can to stimulate the audience’s appropriation of the works we present. Rilke wrote a famous poem called ‘*Apollo’s Archaic Torso*’; he describes the beauty of an antique statue that could be found here in the Greek Sicily, a statue that has been mutilated by the course of the centuries, and in his last phrase, he addresses us, the reader-spectator: “Du muss dein Leben ändern” («you must change your life»). For such is the force and the demand of works of art, that they might, that they *have to* change our lives!

So, contrary to what one hears but all too often in Europe nowadays, the issue at stake is not to increase the number of culture ‘consumers’, but to found today’s culture on the **creative participation** of the greatest possible number, on exchange, on dialogue, on interactivity etc...

This is essential not only for the audience, it is also essential for us, artists! We very much need these exchanges and encounters that will prove equally rewarding for artists and audiences.

In Belgium, a survey made 20 years ago showed that people living in extreme poverty experience cultural exclusion to be as damaging as material poverty. But also, when they are given the chance, they experience a good concert or opera performance in such a profound way. I have had often the chance over the last 20 years to attend concerts with the participation of what we could call a “new audience”: it could be with kids, with teenagers, with old people, with prisoners, with

patients in a psychiatric hospital, almost without exception, the audience was more spontaneous, more generous, more actively involved than a “normal” audience.

Participation in art can happen at a small, medium or very large scale. On the 22nd of this month, more than 100.000 children will sing melodies by Britten all over the world, starting in Australia and New Zealand, and finishing in California. What a great tribute to the centenary of Britten! What a great chance for these 100.000 children to sing these pieces and be part of this celebration!

Smaller scale projects, however, can be even more attractive and interactive. A good example of a small scale project could be “Boras”, a project we did in 2012 with 6 women of the Comorian community in Marseille, their children, a few teenagers, two LSO musicians and three young musicians from Provence. Thierry Thieu Niang, choreographer, and Mark Withers, from LSO Discovery, accompanied this group, listened to them and led them to sing and dance in a performance that at the end was so moving and beautiful that we decided to bring it to London in May this year. The word that could express the common feeling after the performances was “dignity”: dignity of these people, of their traditions, and the joy of being recognised in their own culture. These women come now to attend some opera performances at the festival with their children: of course, they feel much more at home because of the work they had produced themselves before.

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Benjamin Britten 1968

The role of the artist

My third point concerns the role of the artist today. Isn't so that the image of the artist is still the romantic one: isolated from the society, very individualistic, if not egotist, living in the seclusion of his ivory tower? So many young musicians come to our Conservatoires with the hope to become a soloist. But how many of them will really be soloists? And how many will be frustrated in their career, even if playing the most beautiful music in orchestras or singing in choir?

It is now time to change that image and that reality, radically! To be a soloist is fine, but playing chamber music, performing in an orchestra or singing in a choir can be equally exciting.

Already in 1968, Benjamin Britten said: “I believe that an artist should be part of his community, should work for it, with it and be used by it...” (Could you imagine Richard Wagner having said that... ???).

Benjamin Britten is not an exception anymore. More and more artists are engaged in educational or social projects, they want to share their artistic values with people coming from different horizons. A young musician in the 21st century not only needs a very good training in playing his

instrument, but also needs to be coached in his abilities of sharing and transmitting his artistic knowledge. Even with people coming from far away...

I like also the definition of the artist by Peter Sellars: “someone who gives a voice to those who are voiceless”.

At the Aix-en-Provence Festival, we have had the London Symphony Orchestra in residence for four years, from 2010 until 2013. It is remarkable to see how this orchestra, like so many British orchestras, has been able to integrate education programmes, community projects, collaboration with young artists and composers and interactive experiences, season after season, week after week.

I am deeply convinced that such a radical change in the work of an orchestra makes the life of the musicians much more exciting, and gives more sense to these big machines that are called symphonic orchestras.

At a smaller scale, I am impressed to see how many young string quartets are getting influenced by new art forms, by other musical traditions, by creative projects with amateurs, and so on. Of course, there is not ONE model, and it is preferable to let young musicians and singers find their own way, without the obligation of reproducing a unique model.

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Living in the global village

Our world has turned into a global village in no time. This change implies major challenges: pitfalls as well as unhoped-for opportunities, especially in the cultural domain.

Those of us who have listened to Gustavo Dudamel conducting his Simon Bolivar orchestra will remember for ever the force, the talent, the energy of these young musicians coming from the *favellas*. This has been possible because of the development of *El Sistema* in Venezuela since more than 30 years.

But there are many other examples: let’s look at the choral music in South Africa, or the high level of musical life and education in countries like Japan, Korea, or China.

Classical music is becoming global! And this is great!

What should be the specific contribution of Europe to this global evolution? Isn’t there a risk that creativity and innovation come more from abroad than from us? Should we just be happy that our culture is becoming universal? Shouldn’t we play a specific role as Europeans?

I personally think that one possible answer in this context of globalisation might be the *intercultural dialogue*.

Intercultural dialogue

We are here in Palermo, in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. What does this mean to us? What does that sea represent? Great history and beautiful heritage...? Never ending conflicts between countries and cultures? Hundreds and hundreds of migrants ready to risk their life in order to reach Europe? This sea can link people and nations; it can also separate them in the most cruel way.

Our legacy from the 19th and 20th century is a sort of supremacy of western culture over all others. In his essay on Orientalism Edward Saïd demonstrates to what extent this notion of Orientalism is a typically occidental projection, an extremely one-sided view on the cultures of the Orient. Today we pay very dearly the consequences of this post-colonial attitude.

This 21st century might, ought to be the century of dialogue between cultures, between peoples, between individuals, however different they may be.

Fortunately the greatest artists of our time seem to have been aware of this necessity, and have explored new avenues of interculturality and transculturality. From the 20th century on, composers like Igor Stravinsky or Luciano Berio have composed works that open up particularly exciting new possibilities for cultures to meet each other. The same is happening in opera: directors such as Robert Wilson, Peter Sellars or Robert Lepage take their inspiration from the cultures of other continents.

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But is this enough?

I would like to share with you my own reflections about the evolution of the Aix-en-Provence Festival. For over sixty years now, the Festival has extended its partnerships towards the north, but very little towards the south. Is it not high time for the festival to invite more artists from around the Mediterranean? Isn't it urgent to acknowledge the value of Mediterranean cultures, to partake of what they offer, and in doing so to contribute to the dialogue between cultures? This is why we have been so happy to collaborate these four last years with the Orchestre des Jeunes de la Méditerranée which invites musicians from more than Mediterranean countries to play together each summer.

But we could deserve much more attention to the artists living on the South and the East of the Mediterranean Sea. How inspiring can their artistic vision be for us? What kind of new forms could

emerge from intercultural creations? Let's see how performance of mediaeval and Renaissance music has been inspired and transformed by the contact with oral musical traditions...

What can our Conservatoires do in order to promote this intercultural dialogue? How can we contribute to make music a living art form that binds people together, that overcomes the differences of language, religion and culture?

Artists IN the world

In the last years, we have been hearing the word "crisis" so often. But is it really a crisis we are going through? Or is it a more fundamental change of society that we need? Should we try to come out of the crisis to start again living as we were before? Or shouldn't we try to find new ways, new kinds of human, social, economical, ecological and cultural development?

Is that not the message we hear by so many artists, in the Arab countries especially, but also everywhere in the world?

Let us never forget the impact, the power of art and artists.

Let us remember all those artists from the Middle Ages, painters, writers, musicians, who have brought to the fore the notion of *the individual* by means of a new awareness, which has led the West towards the Renaissance and Humanism.

Let us remember artists from the Age of Enlightenment such as Gluck and Mozart who paved the way for a new world based on equality instead of inequality by birth.

Let us remember all those artists who, throughout the 20th century who have fought, in their life as in their work, against barbarism, Nazism, Stalinism, racism, dictatorship. One cannot but think of those who, today, fight for freedom of expression in their country.

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We do not know what the future will be. We are of course extremely preoccupied with the climate change, with our planet, with ethnic and religious conflicts, the tenacity of inequality, with all that threatens mankind. We cannot expect artists to work miracles, but we have to listen to them to try and understand the world we live in, and to find the necessary energy, creativity, vision and imagination for taking up our responsibilities, individually *and* especially together.

If we, directors of Music Conservatoires, teachers and young artists, can contribute to this, we will have played our role: resisting to violence, creating beauty, providing vision, making the world more beautiful and more human.

Bernard Foccroulle

Bernard Foccroulle was born in Liège (Belgium) in 1953. He began his international career as an organist in the mid-70s, playing a wide range of repertoire from Renaissance to contemporary music. He has performed several dozen world premieres and at the same time recorded masterworks of the organ repertoire, among them the complete organ works by Johann Sebastian Bach on historic organs. His discography as soloist includes more than forty CDs. In November 2006, his recording of the Dietrich Buxtehude's complete organ works was released and won the Diapason d'Or and the Grand Prix de l'Académie Charles Cros among other prizes in 2007. Since 2010, he has been professor of Organ at Conservatoire Royal de Musique in Brussels.



While continuing his career as organist, Bernard Foccroulle became director of the Brussels opera La Monnaie in 1992, holding this position until 2007. At La Monnaie, his programming covered a wide range of repertoire from Monteverdi to the present time, with a focus on new works both in the areas of opera and dance. In 1993, he founded the association Culture and Democracy, which campaigns for widespread participation in cultural life. He was nominated director of the Festival Aix-en-Provence in April 2006.

As composer, Bernard Foccroulle has written several works for organ and chamber music. He is also the author of *La naissance de l'individu dans l'art* (Grasset, 2003), which was written in collaboration with Roger Legros and Tzvetan Todorov. In June 2007, a cycle of Lieder (after Rilke) for soprano, choir and orchestra *Am Rande der Nacht* was premiered at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels.

In addition to solo organ recitals, chamber music and compositional projects, an important aspect of Bernard Foccroulle's work is the combination of music with other art forms, such as his collaboration with choreographer and dancer Salva Sanchis (performed last season at the Philharmonie in Cologne), a programme with the cornetto virtuoso Jean Tubéry and concerts with singer and oud player Moneim Adwan. One of his most outstanding current projects is *Light and Darkness*, a collaboration with Australian Video Artist Lynette Wallworth.