

The Conservatoire and the Profession

The traditional image of European conservatoires as hallowed, elite institutions, far-removed from the realities of society and its trends, is slowly but surely changing. At the dawn of the 21st century, it is clear that conservatoires find themselves at the heart of questions which permeate the society and indeed the music profession as a whole, ranging from the development of multicultural societies in Europe to the impact of new technologies, from the changing nature of audiences and consumers to ever higher standards of excellence.

How, indeed, can conservatoires take a leadership role, becoming “innovatoires,” “exploratoires,” where risk-taking is embraced, where new social, political and economic realities are integrated into this ongoing dialogue, allowing institutions to forge new partnerships with the profession and the community at large? More concretely, how does the conservatoire embrace and integrate change into the overall vision of the musician’s training while also maintaining national traditions and the highest standards of artistic excellence?

Dialogue in Conservatoires

Dialogue has become a popular word, and is in many contexts seen as the ultimate solution to problems and conflicts. In itself, dialogue is not a solution to anything but can – under certain circumstances – be a vehicle for common understanding and, subsequently, common action.

A conservatoire’s main objective normally is to educate musicians, i.e. to prepare musicians for professional tasks.

Who decides what the music-related professional tasks are in a society? In part, this emerges from the various sectors of the music life, including musical institutions and musical traditions and practices; in part, this originates with the artist himself. This means that a musician’s relationship to the professional environment will – or can - be both reactive and proactive. Individual musicians will balance the reactive and proactive relationship to the profession differently.

Conservatoires should develop both a reactive and a proactive relationship with the professional environment by responding to needs as they are defined and expressed by representative actors in the field. Conservatoires need to take a leadership role by seeking to influence and enhance professional developments.

In order to be effective, a conservatoire must establish and indeed constantly enhance a relevant relationship to the professional environment.

Characteristically, this relationship

- is open and contributes to developing mutual trust and confidence
- ensures that the parties involved have comprehensive knowledge of each other’s aims and objectives, strategies and actions
- contributes to taking each other’s objectives into consideration when developing one’s own agenda
- establishes an arena for mutual initiatives and actions.

Conservatoires often argue that they are well informed about most aspects of the profession because their staff members are practicing musicians, thus maintaining close contact with various pockets of the profession. The staff’s contact with ‘real life’ is evidently very important. However, it cannot replace the need for dialogue with representatives of the profession who do not at the same time wear a conservatoire hat.

Obviously, the music profession is vast and encompasses numerous pockets. Every conservatoire cannot possibly sustain continuous dialogue with every branch of the professional field. When choosing partners for dialogue, a conservatoire should give priority

to those which represent developing sectors, and to institutions and organisations at the forefront of innovation, capable of offering new experiences. It goes without saying that such environments will often be in a position to voice the most critical views relative to “the establishment”. Conservatoires should cherish critical viewpoints as long as they are constructive and reflect a serious point of view.

Relevant dialogue partners for conservatoires include

- alumni
- established music organisations/institutions (orchestras, opera etc.)
- individual musicians who have made exemplary careers (not only alumni)
- the less organised music life (spokes-persons for special programmes and ground breaking initiatives, underground music etc.)
- associations representing genres, sectors and special interests.

In addition to the dialogue between the conservatoire and the musical profession at large, such dialogue should

- create awareness among partners as to how the future musical life of a society may be enhanced, as well as future challenges (a sort of mutual study of the “crystal ball” and interpretation of what this reveals);
- help conservatoires set their agendas and develop their educational programmes;
- help musical environments to see and take advantage of the full potential of conservatoire graduates;
- establish the basis for common initiatives, such as experimental projects and advocacy actions.

Dialogue should not avoid difficult issues but should provide room for disagreement.

It is important that dialogue not occur only between the conservatoire leadership and the outer world. The dialogue between a conservatoire and the external environment should be rooted in *and continue with* internal dialogue between leadership, staff and students. The internal educational environment should encourage intellectual discussion as well as the taking of courageous action to challenge established concepts, testing concepts that result from dialogue with external partners.

Models of excellence

Excellence is a high quality endeavour commonly appreciated within a cultural context. Excellence relates on the one hand to standards established within a culture, and on the other hand to expectations embedded in the same culture.

Excellence in an artistic and/or academic discipline is more than just high level. Excellence entails *originality* and *personal signature*, and establishes new positions from which others can work. Excellence is well rooted in existing knowledge and experience, but takes us a step beyond the well established.

The conservatoire has traditionally been part of the Western classical music culture. Within this culture, standards of excellence have been developed over several centuries, in particular in the areas of performance and composition.

Standards of excellence are constantly changing. Artistic endeavours create new expectations. Furthermore, development and change taking place within technological, communication, and educational areas will also influence the cultural context within which standards are set.

In addition to the changes that are continuously taking place relative to traditional standards of excellence, Western conservatoires are constantly widening their scope with regard to the professional areas whose needs they aim to meet through their educational programmes.

Within the field of music, each ‘sector’ or ‘area’ of activity has its own standards of excellence. There is no definite answer to the question of how the field of music can or should be divided into sectors or areas. Within a larger culture, there are a number of

subcultures, each defining itself. It is of great importance that conservatoires be aware of the diversity within the field of music and acknowledge and respond to the diverse *standards of excellence* within each field. Conservatoires – and perhaps the musical establishment in general - have had a tendency to lag behind in recognising other standards of excellence than those belonging to a fairly narrow – but indeed very important - classical musical culture where the maestro and the soloist are at the top of the pyramid, the first chairs in symphony orchestras a bit further down, chamber music performers and orchestra tutti-players below that, and way down in the hierarchy, the music educators.

Recognition of a multitude of hierarchies of excellence, each with its own characteristics, recognition of diversity relative to individual profiles within such hierarchies, and recognition of the fact that there is no such thing as a constant standard of excellence, are fundamental prerequisites for a mutually beneficial relationship between conservatoires and the professional field.

Lifelong learning environments in conservatoires

It is important to create adaptive learning environments in which conservatoire students can be trained to function effectively within a continuously changing professional practice.

If the concept of Lifelong Learning is to permeate the Conservatoire successfully, it means that change is inevitable, is organically connected and interwoven, at all aggregate levels, and that it will touch in the following order: the (educational) organisation, curriculum, teachers and students.

Educational Organization

A dynamic synergy between the Conservatoire and the outside world is needed. Strategic alliances help reinforce the Conservatoire learning environment, and the Conservatoire needs to constantly fine tune its programmes and adjust to the needs of the profession. Competence-based learning has to be assessed, positioned and analysed within the context of a constantly changing workplace.

Conservatoires should provide learning environments where students like to be, where they experience self-worth, excitement and challenge. Research shows that in order to be motivated for lifelong learning, students must “learn to learn” under conditions in which they can manage and motivate themselves..

A challenging learning environment in the Conservatoire can be created by the establishment of cross-over between musical disciplines; it also entails informal learning in non-formal learning contexts. Thus a transition takes place in which the Conservatoire becomes a veritable artistic laboratory supporting a learning culture. The leadership provided by heads of departments in forging this learning environment is therefore crucial.

Curriculum

The curriculum that emerges from the Lifelong Learning conceptual framework is based on the acquisition of competencies, team-teaching, and a mechanism which encourages and receives feedback from external partners. It values both tradition and change, is reflective of the outside world, and re-evaluates existing knowledge.

Such a curriculum can be very individualized, providing a variety of learning paths, including the development of one’s portfolio, context related assessment and peer learning. Assessment and learning go hand in hand: what can be learned can be assessed, what can be assessed can be learned. Assessment in lifelong learning should give students the confidence, enthusiasm and commitment needed to face new challenges.

New forms of learning should be mirrored in examinations. An ability to reflect on the professional, cultural, and societal environment at large is important. This can be assisted by the use of ‘transformative skills’: an ability to dialogue with the world, a capacity to adapt, lead, listen, and take on challenges.

Lifelong learning implies flexible curricula, individualised learning paths, a continuous exploration of new technologies, study of unexplored areas and a re-appraisal of existing knowledge.

Teachers

If curricula and assessment are to be reshaped, the nature of teaching will necessarily change as well.

The most critical factor in quality teaching is quality learning. Teachers need to be lifelong learners in the first place.

A successful implementation of a Lifelong Learning Conceptual Framework in the Conservatoire is highly dependent on teachers' competencies. Teachers are powerful role models for students in Conservatoire environments; they model the musician's future career by demonstrating a capacity to adapt creatively to change and put this into practice both as a teacher and as a professional. Teachers can be pivotal in transformative processes. Without their example students, are unlikely to be motivated to become lifelong learners.

Balancing tradition and change in the curricula need not mean that the Conservatoire gets rid of master-apprentice schemes, but rather shifts emphasis to one in which the "master" invites, encouraging inquisitiveness, discovery, and the ability to question. Reflective practice and personal development for teachers is essential. Teachers are encouraged to become "enablers" rather than simply transmitters of knowledge.

Students

A personal development plan should be central for students, leading to a relevant development of their portfolio, guided by teachers whose role is that of a mentor.

Self management should be encouraged by asking basic questions such as 'what do I want to contribute as a musician to the society', 'where do my strengths lie', 'what drives me, what motivates me'; in short, *questions of identity* should be addressed. Students need to feel they are part of a learning culture from the very start.

New educational approaches and new learning environments in Conservatoires which integrate the lifelong learning concept will provide:

- A collaborative learning environment which is non-judgemental, with a strong commitment to quality;
- Enhanced cross-over between musical disciplines, fostering of a capacity to adapt and be flexible, and the development of new communication skills through interactions with different audiences, societal and cultural contexts;
- The possibility to explore and take risks in a safe environment, thereby leading to increased self-confidence;
- An artistic laboratory, whose challenging learning environment reflects the workplace, encompasses informal learning in non-formal learning contexts and connected to strategic partnerships. The Conservatoire can thus become a living, experimental and experiential experience for its students. Its ethos and culture are important contextual factors contributing to the motivation of students;
- A culture in which ideas can be transformed entrepreneurially and indeed where the concept of entrepreneurship is a valued one. This needs to be woven organically into the curriculum;
- Increased personal development emerging from an awareness of one's identity as a musician, fostered by self-exploration, reflection, and personal development;
- Curricula, teaching and learning, as well as partnerships which are effective, ambitious, and innovative and thus establish a strong intrinsic motivation for Lifelong Learning amongst students;
- Continuing Professional Development integrated into all aspects of Conservatoire life: through the implementation of a conceptual framework of Lifelong Learning in the Conservatoire. This in turn leads to the emergence of informed musicians who can interact in different professional contexts, whose attitudes are open minded and sensitive, who can listen and respond, who can be flexible and adapt, and for whom a culture of continuing professional development is a given.