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WHAT IS EXCELLENCE
IN HIGHER MUSIC EDUCATION?
Presentation at the Seminar
“Trends in the Music Profession in Europe –
Life Long Learning & Employability”
Groningen, the Netherlands, 9-11 March, 2007

I tend to organise the world I live in. I believe most people do. Simple structures make it easier for us to place and orientate ourselves in complex contexts.

One type of structure which simplifies our lives is *hierarchies*. Systems which keep track of value systems for us. Let me give you an example. The generally accepted car hierarch – or value pyramid, if you wish – has the Rolls Royce at the top. My car - Swedish Saab – is, of course, far from the top, but, I’m glad to say, also far from the bottom. However, when I think about it, the car at the top of *the* car pyramid, the RR, wouldn’t fit in my garage, it would use all too much petrol and hence contribute more than I like to pollution, and I wouldn’t afford to repair it if anything went wrong. Why should it be on the top of the car pyramid in my mind? I am, in fact, happy to have my Saab at the top. It fits in my garage, it takes me from A to B at least as fast as I want to go, it is easy to park etc. etc. It suits *my* - and a number of other people’s - needs perfectly.

The music conservatoire was initially founded as a school with more or less *one* aim: to ensure recruitment of qualified players for the symphony (opera) orchestra. And all those involved in the conservatoire at that time – the leader and the teachers – knew very well what was expected of an orchestra player, and also how the necessary skills were best acquired. At least they thought they did!

Among the many orchestra students, there would always be a few who would have the ability to leave the orchestra body and stand out as soloists. Eventually, the soloist type of musician became the top of the conservatoire hierarchy or value pyramid. He (sic!) had some qualities that the rest didn’t have. But the big bulk of students would belong in the main – number two – category, the orchestra player. However, in this large category, sub-categories would eventually emerge, and these sub-categories would inevitably be placed by the institution (and the outer world as well) in hierarchies. Strings over woodwinds over brass. First chair players over tutti players. Violins over violas. Etc.

Today, a similar pyramid still exists. Strings over brass, violins over violas. But, as the scope of the conservatoire has widened, other hierarchies have developed: composers over performers, orchestra conductors over choral conductors, music teachers under performers, school music teachers under instrumental teachers etc.

What do these hierarchies indicate? What does *over* and *under* in fact imply?

In most cases, the traditional conservatoire hierarchies imply that those students (and teachers for that matter) of which there are only a few – orchestra

conductors, soloists and perhaps composers - are *better musicians* than those of which there are many, e.g. ensemble players, not to mention the class room music teachers. *Better musicians* meaning that they play the standard repertoire – the canon – better than the rest, or do something which, for the majority, seems very advanced like conducting or composing. In other words, those at the top have really succeeded as professionals. Those further down unfortunately – sorry for them! - didn't have the potential to succeed in the ultimate sense. He couldn't make it in the orchestra, therefore he took up teaching! Failures, second hands!

Obviously, from the individual student's point of view, there may be ladders or hierarchies or pyramids of success. The individual student may dream or aim at reaching a high level in a particular field and end up not making that dream come true. From that point he or she may choose to go in a different direction and end up very successfully in another field. In some cases, this will be experienced as a success, in other cases as a failure (because the initial dream will still be alive). A footnote in that context – and I believe it is a relevant footnote – is the following question: does the traditional conservatoire quality hierarchy in fact influence the environmental soil from which dreams and aims grow in many young musicians, to the extent that there is hardly room for other types of aims and dreams than those reaching for the top of the conservatoire pyramid. We know how important role models are for young performers!

As I said already, the first conservatoire was established to cater to the need of a specific musical institution. In today's society the music conservatoire is expected to cater to the needs of a many-faceted music life, i.e. of a wide, wide range of musical activities. If we take more than only a fast look but bother to study carefully *all* the corners of the musical environment in which we live, it will become clear to us that we will not even come close to all these needs if we continue to divide the student population into three or four or five general categories, such as conductors, composers, performers and music educators. The various situations in which musicians of today work – and I mean work seriously as musical artists, not only make a living doing something with music – require a range of different combinations of qualifications: in performance, in creation of music, in arranging music, in improvisation, in establishing the interest for music among various audiences, in transmitting knowledge of music, in understanding people's response to music, in involving people in music (and people may be little children, or youngsters or elderly people etc.), in speaking about music, in instructing people in music making, in recording, in creating or manipulating music electronically, in running a music business, in working as a freelance artist, in relating to the commercial music industry, in initiating projects, in working with artists from other fields of art, etc. etc. etc.

Many conservatoires around Europe, and in the rest of the world of Western culture for that matter, have realised that the musical environment *is* many-faceted, and have gradually established courses which will prepare their students for a variety of tasks and situation. I believe there is a long way to go, though, before the pallet offered by most conservatoires is the result of thorough studies of the "real life" out there, and the result of deliberate prioritising related to "real life". However, my main point here is that even if there is an acceptance of the change that is happening in the musical world, and even if new courses or study programmes are being offered to meet some of the new needs, we have

only covered a small portion of the distance *as long as we are stuck with the traditional model of excellence*; the model which places the conductor and the soloist at the top and the community music worker at the bottom.

What is excellence? (I'm finally getting there!)

Excellence expresses something about quality. To *excel* is to master a given task or situation in a superior way. Consequently, excellence is a relative thing, relative to defined and indeed different tasks and situations.

I will argue that excellence in our context is dependent on three categories of quality in the individual musician:

- artistic qualities
- professional qualities
- personal qualities.

Allow me a few words about each of these qualities.

Artistic qualities: Every musician must have artistic skills, must have something to tell others through music, must have the ability to convince a listener, musically. There are many ways in which a performer of an instrument for instance, can show artistic skills, and we should appreciate artistic diversity. But we should not accept artistic shortcuts or impressive instrumental or vocal surfaces without anything beneath. Artistic skills in the real sense are reflected through such characteristics as musical refinement, originality and reflection.

Professional qualities: In order to excel in a particular type of job or situation, a musician needs to master the tricks of that particular trade. No, that is not the right way to say it. Let me try again. In order to excel in a particular type of job or situation, a musician needs to have knowledge, insight and understanding, techniques and tools relevant to that job and its context, thorough enough that he or she can stand out as a leader for those whom he or she will influence through the execution of the job. This is a crucial point. *The reservoir of knowledge, insight, understanding etc. needed in various situations differs immensely.*

Personal qualities: I realise that personal qualities hardly can be separated completely from artistic or professional qualities. But they can be recognised as personal characteristics. We know, and indeed we experience every day, that each individual has special abilities, e.g. in the way they communicate, co-operate, solve problems, and cope with success and failures. And so on!

The point I'm trying to make is that a conservatoire which aims at serving today's and tomorrow's society, and indeed being an active agent in forming tomorrow's musical life, needs to get away from the one-pyramid excellence model where everything is more or less excellent relative to *one* standard, set by the soloist type of performer (or any other one type of musician for that matter). A conservatoire which wants to be a proactive agent in the cultural environment of which it is a part, needs to develop a model which consists of a number of equally important excellencies. *Many pyramids instead of one!* Such a model – the many pyramids of excellence model – represents an acknowledgment and appreciation of a variety of ways of showing artistic qualities. It takes seriously

the great variety of special professional qualities required in the vivid musical life we are surrounded by. And it values individual differences and capacities.

Obviously, it is much easier to relate to one or a few pyramids of excellence. A simple model pays back in terms of collegial consensus and the satisfaction of being convinced that students are assessed and evaluated according to a solid, accepted and well known standard. But a simple model will act as a wall between the conservatoire and large parts of the music life, or maybe rather as a narrow gate between the two. A complex model – a model consisting of a variety of equally important qualities and standards – makes life much more difficult. However, it will help us obtain a *transparent* wall between the inner and the outer musical life and thus making the traffic between the two sides of the wall easy. The complex model may also, a way down the road, establish an environment from which a variety of dreams and aims may grow in the minds of young musicians. What more could we wish for?