

DIALOGUE AND STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE IN CONSERVATOIRES

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I was asked by the profession working group to reflect on the importance of conservatories engaging in active dialogue with its environment, and what excellence may mean in a conservatoire context. What I can offer is definitely not meant to cover all aspects of these two important areas of conservatoire life but may hopefully serve as a point of departure for further exploration and discussion.

Dialogue

Dialogue has become a popular word, and is in many contexts seen as the ultimate solution of 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 professional tasks are in music in a society?

In my view, it is partly the various sectors of the so-called music life, such as musical institutions and musical traditions and practices; partly the artist him/herself. That means that a musician's relationship to the professional environment on the one hand will – or can - be reactive, on the other hand proactive. Individual musicians will balance the reactive and proactive attitude differently.

I argue that conservatoires should have both a reactive and a proactive relationship with the professional environment. Conservatoires should respond to the needs as they are defined and expressed by representative actors in the field, and conservatories should be in the forefront on the musical scene, i.e. influence the development of the professional music scene.

In order to be in a position to seriously respond and influence effectively, a conservatoire must establish and indeed constantly enhance a relevant relationship to the professional environment. By relevant, I mean a relationship which, among other things

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

It is often argued from conservatoires that they are well informed about most aspects of the profession because their staff members are practicing musicians who stay in 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 can impossibly sustain continuous dialogue with every branch of it. When choosing dialogue partners a conservatoire should give priority to environments which are developing and growing, and to such institutions and organisations which are likely to be able to offer new experiences and evolving ideas. It goes without saying that such environments will often be in the position to voice the most critical views relative to establishment. Conservatoires should cherish critical viewpoints as long as they grow out of serious endeavours.

Relevant dialogue partners for conservatoires are

- alumni
- established music organisations/institutions (orchestras, opera etc.)
- individual musicians who have made specially interesting 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.

I've already touched upon the purpose of conservatoire dialogue with the musical environment. Let me add that such dialogue should

- create awareness among the dialogue partners for how the future music life of a society may be enhanced and what the future will bring in terms of new challenges (mutual study of the crystal ball and interpretation of what it reveals)
- help conservatoires set their agendas and form 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 give room for disagreement.

It is important that dialogue does not happen only between the conservatoire leadership and the outer world. The dialogue between a conservatoire and the external environment should be rooted in *and continue in* internal dialogue between leadership, staff and students. The internal educational environment should encourage and set the stage for intellectual discussion as well as courageous action to challenge established concepts, and test issues evolving from the external dialogue.

Standards 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 where 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 when it comes to performance and composition.

Standards of excellence are always undergoing change. Artistic endeavours create new expectations. Furthermore, development and change taking place within e.g. technological, communicative, 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 at meeting 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. Again, within a larger culture, there are a number of subcultures, each defining itself. It is of great importance that conservatories are aware of the diversity within the field of music and acknowledges and responds to the fact that each field has its own *standards of excellence*. I will argue that 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 educator.

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, is a fundamental prerequisite for a mutually beneficial relationship between conservatoires and the professional field.