

Conservatoires in Society

Executive summary report of the first international meeting of a group of ten Conservatoire directors or their nominees held in at Skinners Hall in the City of London, on 24 May, 2013.

At the *Reflective Conservatoire* conference held in London in March 2012, John Sloboda challenged leading members of music conservatoires to consider their institutions' wider role in society and to look not just beyond their most obvious job of training young expert musicians, but also beyond their relatively standardised 'public engagement' missions, and to 'ask ourselves whether conservatoires have any contribution to make to addressing the increasing polarization of modern society, increasing environmental and economic threats, the breakdown of popular trust in the ability of politicians and corporations to work in our interests?'

Ten international conservatoires sent delegates (in person or via skype) to the first meeting of a year-long process of reviewing a wide range of relevant issues, in the context of a lightly-structured, but open agenda [list of delegates and institutions at the end]. The intention is to formulate a vision for the future of conservatoires as active participants in an urgent redefinition of the role of the arts and arts education in building a better society, backed up by proposals for a range of practical steps that conservatoires could take, either individually or collaboratively, to embody this vision.

Meeting on 24 May 2013: Discussions were focused around a series of themes; this is a brief summary of them.

1. Priority issues for conservatoires

a. The nature of the change we are intending to bring about in our students

Students often express aspirations that go well beyond defining their success in terms of measurable technical advancement as musicians, to embrace deeply-felt desires to 'make the world a better place'. We need to articulate how a conservatoire can help them to realise such ambitions. This may well involve some fundamental rebalancing of what we do: questions of values, relationships, self-image and institutional self-confidence, are central to achieving this.

b. The changing nature of the professional world of classical music

The words 'employability' and 'transferable skills' are common in higher education these days, but often used without deeply understanding or analysing their meaning, or the wider political and cultural agendas they serve. In terms of the prevalent but outmoded terms of equating success with becoming a famous virtuoso performer, most of our students are, in reality destined for professional 'failure'. Conservatoires often contribute to the sustenance of this through a traditional culture of fetishisation of the 'perfect performance'; a more holistic understanding of musicianship could help restore and foreground the human and creative elements of music making. We need to redefine success in broader and more realistic ways and reflect these in our practices.

c. The perspectives that governments and other major funders take on our work, and our response to them

Higher education in general is increasingly required to address a 'third mission': the responsibilities that come with funding from the public purse. In addition to learning, teaching and research, institutions must demonstrate and justify their relevance to wider society, and show that they

prepare their students to become well-rounded, useful citizens. Conservatoires need to understand, respond to, and benefit from these challenges.

d. Conservatoires as meaningful communities

The average conservatoire is small in HEI terms – around 800 students, which ought to enable development of shared identity and values among its staff and students that large institutions struggle to achieve. But the majority of conservatoire teachers are part-time, often employed for only a few hours a week. We need to draw them into the process of transforming our institutions, rather than making them often unwilling ‘victims’ of organisational change. How do we create genuine consistency between what we tell the outside world about ourselves, our students and our staff, and how we actually live as institutions?

e. Transforming competition between conservatoires into co-operation

Competition between institutions to attract ‘the best bassoon player’ by offering financial incentives, and even among teachers within a single institution who jealously guard ‘their’ best students, easily spills over into a much deeper fragmentation of the sector. Its members could, and ought to be collaborating at many levels to project both a more coherent identity and exercise greater collective influence in the world.

f. The role of Community Music

Conservatoires can and often do enrich their wider communities, and with music this is much easier to do than for many other academic disciplines. But engagement needs to be a two-way process. Communities are not just there to ‘receive our product’, but also to interact with us, and conservatoires have, on the whole, not always been successful at relating their work to the culture that many local communities are familiar with. Likewise, many students would rather become community musicians than classroom or private instrumental teachers when they graduate; shouldn’t we be making sure that they all learn how to do this as part of their core education?

g. Intellectual resources and models from outside our discipline

What legitimizes particular types of knowledge is language – political ‘winners’ are those who craft the dominant language about such things as education. How do we contribute to this ‘language game’, challenge and change it? Jürgen Habermas’s ideas about the distinction between two forces, or levels in society – a systems level governed by money and power, which persistently tries to infiltrate and dominate the life-level governed by civil society – are widely influential in the discourse of government, and the contemporary cultural sphere. If conservatoires want to resist the apparently inexorable drive to a monetarised model of education and the increasing commodification of the cultural economy, they need to understand and engage their potential to reverse the equation, acting as examples of the ‘life level’ vigorously pushing back against the ‘systems level’.

2. Applying societal issues to specific activity areas within conservatoires

Participants explored the implications of some of these wider issues for various core activities in a conservatoire, which are the primary means they possess of exerting societal influence. Areas of activity where these issues could have impact include:

- The core teaching function (1-to-1 instrumental/vocal lessons)
- Our teaching of broader musicianship and professional skills (including music pedagogy)
- Relationships to external individuals (alumni and attenders of our events)
- Relationships to other organisations and institutions
- Staffing and institutional strategies

Discussions were focussed around three main themes:

a. The nature of human transactions and the 'gift' nature of the arts

Gift-giving relies on, and sustains, an economic model based on fundamentally different principles to those which now dominate most societies. Art (including music) is a strong example of gift-giving – the true value of cultural work does not rest in the fees paid to its creators, the price of a ticket, the fame of the teacher. Music institutions are potentially powerfully transformational because they can be incubators of a culture that celebrates values different to those usually imposed, intentionally or not, on young musicians and – it has to be said – on their teachers. This does not mean abrogating the need to help students to be effective entrepreneurs, nor to suggest that the world somehow owes them a living, but rather to help them to confront, consciously and explicitly, the tension between the values of commodification and gift-giving in all music-based transactions.

b. The 'life and death' issues that the arts and music can address

The arts have historically been an essential way of grappling with life and death issues. But our tendency, particularly in much contemporary art music, is to dress up the 'art', often losing the power of the disorder of existence behind a glamorous surface. Art music could benefit from the examples of other newer genres such as the growing trend for immersive site-specific participatory theatre, or installation art, in dealing with major issues. Conservatoire students need to be encouraged to connect their experiences in the contemporary world – however 'messy' – to their lives as highly-skilled musicians.

c. The role that arts organisations can play as societal actors

Conservatoires and the high art organisations that they have traditionally serviced need to go beyond the comfort of an 'elite' role or a historically justified sense of entitlement and be prepared to make interventions in the 'life and death' issues around us. But how? In an atmosphere of disillusionment with the power of traditional structures to deal with the big problems like environmental change and the increasing gap between rich and poor, examples of new means of engagement and action are springing up everywhere. There is every reason for student musicians to be empowered to engage directly in these debates and actions through their art. If conservatoires are truly effective in their surrounding communities, they have ready-made opportunities to play a leading role in the process of forming a better society, rather than simply playing a reflective one.

3. Other areas of the cultural sector (or in society more broadly) which could inform the conservatoire world

Participants in our meeting agreed that we should look far and wide at institutions and initiatives elsewhere for inspiration, ideas, advice, and potential new alliances and collaborations aimed at realising our eventual vision. A variety of examples were presented, including:

- *Museums and art galleries*, which have been radically transformed in recent years (particularly in the UK) from being essentially 'repositories of artefacts to be passively consumed by suitably reverent audiences' (the connections with the concert hall here are intentional!) into arenas for controversy, interaction and dialogue. A good example is the ominously-named *Imperial War Museum* in London. Until recently its focus has been on a celebration of the technology and organisation of war. Lately there has been a radical shift of focus, to concentrate more on documenting the appalling human consequences of war. And this shift has taken place using government funding at a time when our government has seemed rather keen on committing itself to war.
- *Government*. The Norwegian Parliament commissioned a major report on the lessons to be drawn from the 2011 Utoya massacre. This stimulated a wide debate in society, including the way in which education has been taken over by a business model of thinking, focussed

solely on quantifiable outcomes. Unlikely interlocutors, including the military and police, complained that this is part of the problem, and not helpful to a healthy society. The Norwegian Parliament has adopted this report, and has said that Norway's public sector cannot continue to work from a business model. Conservatoires can contribute more directly to such debates.

- *Orchestras* are major organisations which shape the opportunities for musicians to engage with the wider world, and set the frame for determining who in the world engages with classical music, and on what basis. Many symphony orchestras began their life as amateur organisations; as they became professional, their early history has often been forgotten and they tend to behave as if they don't need to connect to their communities. Many are now actively rising to new challenges. For instance, some orchestras pay musicians the same for outreach work as for concerts and recordings: in that way, outreach is not projected as an inferior aspect of the job. Others now have a selection process that involves applicants not only auditioning on their instrument, but also being asked why they want to be a member, and what they can contribute beyond their playing. Conservatoires, extraordinarily, are not necessarily keeping pace, even with one of the key employment sectors for their own graduates.

4. Where next?

The group will meet again on January 13-14, 2014, in Antwerp. We hope to be joined by representatives from organisations outside music conservatoires who would be able to share their own experiences; engage with the ideas we are pursuing; and offer input and perhaps advice.

The end point of this one year project will, we hope, be some form of public statement or declaration, which we would work on between January and May 2014. Its proposed title or framing concept: *Changing the Language of Conservatoires*.

Participants on 24 May, 2013

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Richard Wistreich	Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester
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Tuomas Auvinen	Sibelius Academy, Helsinki
Helena Tulve	Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, Tallinn
Huib Schippers	Queensland Conservatorium, Brisbane

A full report of the meeting, including references and web links is at www.consanfron.com