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Artistic Practice as Research in the Conservatorium Context

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In the academic environment, a Conservatorium is often considered somewhat of an eccentric presence, with its insistence on artistic rather than academic excellence. The main point of reference for this view seems to be a narrow, modernist approach to academia. Contemporary thinking on research creates room to redefine the academic relevance of the Conservatorium in terms of creative research.

From this perspective, the musician is a researcher. In preparing for a performance or a class, he or she consults a vast database of information, partly internalised by many years of practice and experience, partly external in scores, books, colleagues, and other sources. The outcome of this research determines the choices the musician finally makes. The performance in fact represents the conclusions of this process. This extends to all processes involved in the transmission, reproduction and interpretation of existing works, to improvisation as an important aspect of many genres of music at different times, and to the creation of new works, either within a particular genre or tradition, or as an innovation fed by technological progress or new impulses and insights.

The choices described above are often not defined or expressed explicitly. Huib Schippers sketches new directions in research that aim to represent an important step in mapping out these choices and the processes underlying them, with the teachers at QCGU as the primary target group, and RHD students as research assistants, supervised by the Research Centre. Issues that will be addressed include not only obvious factors such as technical skills, repertoire, arrangements, and instrumentation, but also less tangible aspects such as expression, creativity, and quality.

*The odd notion that an artist does not think
and a scientific enquirer does nothing else
is the result of converting a difference of
tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind
(John Dewey, 1934)¹*

At first appearance, learning music and institutions for higher education seem to embody an unbridgeable gap. The relationship bears a striking resemblance to an old-fashioned, arranged marriage. A Conservatoire and a University: one is artistic, elegant, well-thought of by society, but without means; the other can offer structure, a stable income, and a home. It would be naive to ignore that across the world, many conservatoires feel misunderstood by the higher education context in which they have to operate, with its insistence on logical organisation and measurable outcomes. Institutions for higher education, from their perspective, sometimes seem to despair of the demands being made by a relatively small segment of their organisation for more funding per student, exceptions to rules, and unconventional formats for research outcomes.

This little marital problem cannot be entirely resolved. While the higher education context is probably the best environment in which professional music education and training can find itself, it is not ideal. The wife simply lives in a different world from the husband, and the differences are at the heart of what defines each of the partners. A conservatoire aims at the ethereal qualities of artists. An institution for higher education relies heavily on academic rigour, accountability and structure. It receives money from authorities to educate or train people to specific qualifications, and needs to be able to demonstrate *that* it is done and *how* it is done, in the most economically efficient manner possible.

Some part of the training of musicians, whether they become performers or teachers, can in fact be defined in these terms. Courses in musical history, theory, analysis, ear-training, pedagogy; each of these can be taught to groups in well-defined modules with clear competencies as course outcomes. But the core of conservatoire training is related to artistic performance, expression and creation. The decisive aspects of quality lie in what I would like to call '*intangibles*'. For music performance, these include subtleties in intonation, in timbre, in timing, in phrasing. Such characteristics are hard to

¹ Dewey, 1934, 15

measure, impossible to standardise, and consequently very difficult to teach or assess systematically. And the balance between these subjects or factors is becoming increasingly complex in the musically diverse environments of the 21st century.

If we consider the radical changes in the musical environment over the past 50 years, it is unlikely that the marginal evolution within most conservatoires reflect these sufficiently. In fact, many have remained textbook examples of a modernist learning environment in a postmodern world, which Elliott characterises as “based on modernity’s scientific-industrial concepts, including standardized curricula, standardized achievement tests, teacher-centred methods, restricted instructional time, and age segregated and ability segregated classes.”² Contemporary performance practices, relevance to the labour market, and particularly processes of musical transmission and learning form surprisingly underexposed subjects of research at conservatoires. It is difficult to understand that conservatoires have questioned themselves so little as learning environments, and that actual musical practice –from local to international- seems to only marginally inform planning, content, form and assessment of the learning process.

The ivory tower position is becoming untenable. This insight is even beginning to enter into former conservative strongholds such as the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC). In the introduction to their first ever study on professional integration of musicians, Ian Horsbrugh, the president of AEC states: “The ever-changing nature of the professional world itself is, of course, highly significant and all of us involved in preparing musicians must keep in touch with it.”³ Although we can still detect some reluctance in the wording, the message is clear. Other studies by the AEC into jazz and pop music provisions⁴ and cultural diversity⁵ also illustrate a growing awareness of the need to at least define a position towards major new artistic, social and commercial realities.

Strikingly, it is in these new areas that most interesting innovative concepts evolve: pop and rock music, world music, electronic music, and composition often find new and inspiring ways of organising the learning process if they are sufficiently supported from within the conservatoire. These emerging forces also redefine a number of research areas. For the conservatoire in the 21st century, the content of research should not exclude, but certainly not limit itself to traditional music research, which has focused heavily on musical structure and historical practice and context.⁶ I would argue that we can expand existing subjects to arrive at greater relevance for the contemporary musician, for example in the five more inclusive clusters below, which are directly related to the essence of a conservatoire firmly rooted in contemporary practice:

- *Performance & Creation*

This refers to all processes involved in the reproduction and interpretation of existing works, to improvisation as an important aspect of many genres of music at different times, and to the creation of new works, either within a particular genre or tradition, or as an innovation fed by technological progress or new impulses and insights. It also includes subtle aspects of music making, such as the *intangibles* I referred to earlier in this essay.

- *Musical Theory*

In this cluster, I include both explicit theories (such as those of western classical music) and implicit theories (such as those of grunge or African percussion).

- *History & the Dynamics of Context*

This area deals with the social and/or historical context of particular genres or works, not as a static force, but rather as part of the dynamics of change in music, from the recontextualisation of existing styles across periods and cultures to the present day world of new performance practices. This cluster also includes the aesthetic beliefs that dictate choices in music.

² Elliott, 2002, 86

³ European Association of Conservatoires, 2001, 5.

⁴ Posthuma, 2002

⁵ Prchal & Shrewsbury (eds), 2001

⁶ “In many European countries, there is still a rigid division between vocational and academic training, based on ideas formulated in 1810 by Wilhelm van Humboldt. This means music was either studied practically at a conservatoire, or theoretically at a university.” (Kors, Saraber & Schippers, 2003, 79)

- *Musical Transmission & Learning*

Modes of musical transmission and learning carry threefold importance for a conservatoire: in relation to the education of professional musicians, to the training of future music teachers, and to making visible implicit patterns of skills, values and thoughts that are crucial to musical practice.

- *Professional Preparation & Well-being*

Gradually, conservatoires are beginning to recognise the importance of training business and survival skills, understanding job markets and the industry, and developing appropriate approaches to the communities the conservatoire can serve. Physical and emotional well-being for artists are also becoming an issue.

Some of the areas above have been well researched; others are just beginning or even waiting to be explored. However, if research in a conservatoire is to make optimal use of its resources, I am arguing for addressing some of the more challenging paths, with an open mind and without fear. This does not mean making concessions to academic rigour and excellence in research. But it does require careful (and sometimes adventurous) choices of appropriate methodology and reporting formats, in relation to context and with fitness for purpose.⁷

Beyond exploring a broader range of subject matter, there is the even greater challenge of positioning research in the conservatoire at large. From the points I have tried to make above it should be clear that I am not in favour of professors isolated in their personal library, far removed from the creative processes, coming out twice a week to lecture on early polyphony. With the situation within conservatoires being what it is, I would plead that quite the contrary is called for, with strategic implications for the entire organisation and its surroundings. In defining this, we can be quite concise.

Research in a conservatoire lives up to its potential if it used as an instrument to:

- constantly monitor curriculum structure, content, and delivery
- help develop a dynamic, attractive, flexible learning environment at large
- interact passionately with students of all levels, stimulating academic development
- facilitate life-long learning for staff towards greater pedagogical, academic and artistic excellence
- liaise actively and exchange expertise with other departments and faculties in the University
- translate artistic realities into workable academic terms and concepts
- position the institution in the (inter)national academic and professional world
- initiate, develop and monitor music activities in the communities around the conservatoire
- establish links and mutually beneficial partnerships with the professional world
- contribute to policies and innovation by identifying new developments and possibilities
- generate prestige, establish relevance and secure additional funding for the institute

It may sound ambitious, but it can be done. It is quite feasible to devise a programme of research and action research projects that involve undergraduate students, graduate students, research students, management and teaching staff, as well as representatives from other disciplines, faculties and institutions, with outcomes that have relevance and effect both inside and outside the conservatoire. This also leads to new possibilities for funding. The more relevant projects are perceived to be, the more likely they are to be funded externally. This does not mean selling out: there are numerous ways to associate with the commercial world without losing academic and artistic integrity.

Let us take a realistic example to illustrate the point I am trying to make here. In music teacher training courses, it is of increasing importance that future professionals in school music are aware of the 'musical luggage' children bring to the classroom, and where this fits into their cultural development over their entire life. In a research project, students can be asked to document the musical environment of children and adults of various ages, from two months before birth to the point they leave this earth.

This would start with soft musical sounds accompanied by the internal organs of the mother, to hospital music, baby music, songs sung by visitors, children's songs, maybe classical, folk or forms of world

⁷ The range of relevant approaches to –particularly qualitative– music research has expanded dramatically over the past decades. See, for instance, Miles & Huberman (1994), and Colwell & Richardson (2002)

music, certainly a great deal of pop music coming from radios, televisions, cars, heard in shopping malls, personal choices in music, music lessons, music at parties and from friends, on to more mature choices in musical preferences, and towards age losing high frequencies, just to mention a number of sources and settings.

Although absolute representativity is almost impossible to reach in this setting, it would paint fascinating and highly instructional pictures of contemporary soundscapes. In order to create a project that would communicate well, the data would entail not only describing, but also recording sound examples. These examples are then used to create a 'sound tunnel,' an eighty metre long pipe of three metres diameter, with music from all the different stages in life audible as one walks through it. This would help to inform all music teachers about the complexities, opportunities and challenges of their environment, as well as the general public, for whom the tunnel will be informative and fun. Presenting the project at an exhibition or festival would even get music education the media exposure it so rarely gets.

Staying closer to the conservatoire, the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre is initiating a project that aims to explore the new territories that Richard Vella also referred to in his keynote address *Artistic Practice as Research*. Choosing middle ground between research *into* performance as a reasonably clear-cut area of academic endeavour on one hand, and performance *as* research as a challenging and contentious area on the other, Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre will focus its attention on Research *in* Artistic Practice. This implies making explicit the artistic process from within, by mapping out the explicit and implicit choices the musician makes as a researcher while preparing for a performance or a class. From the moment that a concept or idea presents itself, the musician consults a vast database of information, which may be partly tangible and external in scores, books, the consultation of colleagues, and other sources.

However, a large –and probably decisive- area of reference will be internal, fed by many years of practice and experience. Every musician has as vast aural library that serves as a background for artistic decisions. The outcome of research in this area determines the choices the musician finally makes. The performance or lesson in fact represents the conclusions of this process. This process can be identified in all phases of transmission, reproduction and interpretation of existing works, in improvisation as an important aspect of many genres of music at different times, and in the creation of new works, either within a particular genre or tradition, or as an innovation fed by technological progress or new impulses and insights.

In a project that will span three years, Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre will attempt to map out categories and specific examples of these choices and the processes underlying them, with the teachers at QCGU as the primary target group, and RHD students as research assistants, supervised by members of the Research Centre. Issues that will be addressed include not only obvious factors such as technical skills, repertoire, arrangements, and instrumentation, but also less tangible aspects such as expression, creativity, and quality, which are decisive factors for musical pleasure and excellence. In this way, it can feed both the quality of music transmission and learning in the entire institute, and the artistic and pedagogical development and awareness of individual staff and students.

Projects such as the ones described above hope to contribute to the awareness that a broad range of music research (and music) can validly have a place within the conservatoire of the 21st century. By making strategic choices of subjects for research at various levels, it is possible to set up a research programme that is not at the margin, but at the core of the activities of a conservatoire in an academic context, with pro-active links to students, staff, management, other faculties and the outside world through curriculum development, creative practice, community projects, publications, etc. By building on the strengths already present in the conservatoire, it highlights and develops qualities already present, supports weaker areas, and creates a basis for further development.

A conservatoire is one of the greatest resources for research in music. Musicians in the process of learning, teaching, performing and creating music form a unique opportunity to study the essence of the art. That which flashes before our ears in performance as the end-result of complex physiological, technical, conceptual, aesthetic and social processes is laid out in all of its component parts during the process of learning, as creativity in slow-motion.

About the author:

Huib Schippers, the incoming Associate Professor of Music Studies & Research at Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University, has a long and varied history of experience in music and arts education. He has worked as a performing musician, a teacher, a concert promoter, a journalist, and in the record industry. Over the past ten years, he has run major projects in arts and arts education, and has served in a variety of capacities on numerous forums, boards and commissions, including the Netherlands National Arts Council and the International Society for Music Education. As of October 1st, 2003, he is directing the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre at the Griffith University South Bank Campus.

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