

Introduction to special issue on the reflective conservatoire

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We are experiencing a paradigm shift in specialist education in the performing arts: in what it takes to prepare students for professional life, and in the potential for this work to resonate beyond the immediate disciplines. The imperative to respond proactively to the pace of change in the creative industries, and in higher education more generally, needs little rehearsal. Since the rise of the portfolio career in the arts (Bennett and Hannan, 2008; Rogers, 2002) and the advent of the Bologna process bringing widespread awarding of degrees in these practice-based disciplines (EACEA, 2010; Gaunt and Papageorgi, 2010), artistic and pedagogical innovation through reflection, research, collaboration, interdisciplinarity and social engagement have gained momentum. Over the last 30 years significant renewal of our practices in specialist education has become a norm. However, this period has largely been characterised by adding to existing practices within curricula, and there is now a significant challenge to take stock and evaluate the achievements. To what extent have innovations delivered what is really needed? At what point do curricula become overloaded, thereby diluting quality? To my mind at least, there is a need now to revisit fundamental principles and values, to find ways to integrate traditional and newer areas of activity, and to clear out the clutter. Without this, it will become increasingly difficult to be sufficiently agile to respond effectively to the ever more rapid changes in cultural and educational landscapes.

Beyond the performing arts themselves, an even more powerful imperative towards a paradigm shift is also emerging. This concerns ways in which the performing arts connect within society as a whole, with how artistic and educational practitioners find ways to offer their expertise and experience. We know that music, theatre and dance are essential to our humanity in any society. They champion fundamental values and experience, human interdependence and interaction, individual and collective creativity, and the disciplined pursuit of a passion over a lifetime. They help us make sense of complex situations, and call us to recalibrate our own ethical compass and leadership, whatever our primary focus in life.

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In sum, they have enormous and multilayered value (Mowiah et al., 2014). Yet so often, not least in higher education contexts, performing arts practices remain cloistered, doing little to help the cause of connectedness.

Traditionally, practices of specialist education/training in the performing arts (and perhaps particularly in the focused environments of standalone conservatoires, drama and dance academies) have played out in relative isolation. Concentrating on the craft of an individual discipline, they have been less inclined to make connections across boundaries. In addition, those teaching have typically worked alone behind closed doors, often having inherited a powerful hierarchy underpinning the transmission of a craft from master to students. There have been relatively few opportunities for such teachers to engage in shared reflection and exchange. Fortunately, proximity to professional practice in making and performing has in many cases enabled change to find its way into the educational frame. Standards have consequently continued to evolve aligned to the professions, and in many contexts a focus on, for example, making new work sits alongside engagement with a canon of established repertoire.

Nevertheless, pedagogical renewal has tended to receive less institutional support and has been remarkable in some cases by its absence. Pedagogy has not kept pace with artistic, wider educational and societal developments, and has relied largely on a natural but gentle evolution of embedded traditions as they are passed from one generation to the next. This is problematic in many contemporary contexts where long-held assumptions about the purpose and value of the performing arts are being challenged. It is essential that pedagogy and curriculum development now catch up and indeed start to help to drive the evolution and sustainability of these arts forms in society. At the very least, each and every emerging practitioner in the performing arts must be enabled to establish genuine roots in their discipline, to articulate their vision and purpose and reappraise these continually, and to connect their artistry in society in different ways. At the same time, it is essential that the proverbial baby is not thrown out with the bath water. The mandate to lead change is considerable, but the challenges of realising it are indeed complex. Specialist education must continue to champion and embody the particular principles and highest quality of skills that are the hallmark of the performing arts. It is only too easy to dilute these and to abandon notions of excellence as horizons broaden and choices diversify. It is critical, therefore, to continue focusing on effective renewal within individual disciplines, as well as paying greater attention to the contribution that these disciplines can make to the humanities as a whole, and to society.

Fulfilling the potential of the paradigm shift now upon us means that institutions and all those working within them need an adaptive approach and dynamic skills (Helfat and Peteraf, 2009; Helfat and Winter, 2011). Both students and staff must find ways to work imaginatively, collaboratively and reflectively as “innovative knowledge communities” (Hakkarainen, 2013). It is vital that we further champion the interface between education and professional worlds, increasing two-way influence and exchange, challenging rigid conceptions of transmission/apprenticeship

or one-way traffic from professional to student, and making way for co-created laboratory spaces focused on experiment, collaborative enquiry and risk-taking, supported by rigorous feedback and reflection. It is only this that will fully enable us to embrace the current renaissance that can reconnect the arts within the heart of society, helping new and innovative interdisciplinary work to flourish, and fuelling co-creative relationships between artists and “audiences.” It is only this that will enable us to embrace the global context of the performing arts and the potential of practitioners who move around the world, empowered to respond creatively to unfamiliar experiences and to produce work that crosses cultures and dismantles traditional boundaries, blurring the edges of long-established disciplines and developing new arenas of excellence.

The Reflective Conservatoire Conference has been grappling with these issues since 2006, bringing research and practice together to stimulate and support change within the sector, enabling experiment and reflection, professional exchange, artistic and educational innovation including interdisciplinary work at personal, curriculum and institutional levels. The sense of urgency around this agenda is gathering momentum, and in 2015 particularly addressed some interwoven challenges:

- The place of the performing arts in society and their relevance across different sectors. Our disciplines risk losing their way and centrality to the fabric of society. Professional work is faced with public funding cuts that are crippling abilities to maintain artistic standards and to take risks and innovate. Perceptions abound in some quarters that the performing arts have lost touch with what people want and need in order to be able to express a voice; they have become a ghetto of an elite, usually the white upper middle classes consuming the arts as entertainment; diversity is not being embraced sufficiently, and inclusive approaches to performance, appropriate to the 21st century, are lacking. New visions are required.
- In preparing the next generations of professional artists, “excellence” continues to be a key mantra. However, as contexts for the arts diversify and relevance to context is increasingly understood to make a vital contribution to excellence, the concept itself is becoming more fluid. It is therefore essential to extend and enrich traditional understanding of excellence and to embrace the reality of multiple excellences (Lerman, 2012; Renshaw, 2010).
- Within curriculum change and enhancement of learning and teaching, ownership of the learning process for emerging artists is essential to empowering them to meet unknown future challenges. This includes championing the potential of peer and informal learning, and the richness of engaging in communities of practice, alongside the process of accessing specific expertise of individual master teachers.

This special edition draws on a range of material from the 2015 Reflective Conservatoire Conference. It seeks to catalyze visions for specialist education/

training in the performing arts in 2020 and beyond, to consider current developmental initiatives, and to reflect on the contribution these can make to the fields of research and professional practice in the arts and humanities more widely.

The first two papers address overarching issues of purpose: for practitioners in the performing arts, for specialist higher education institutions in these disciplines and for the curricula they offer. Tregear et al. consider the fundamental purpose of conservatoires, articulate questions to underpin development in this area, and make suggestions for the kinds of work that may help to develop such specialist institutions and departments into overtly public entities with clear agency in their societies. Underlying this paper are fundamental questions about the value and purpose of the performing arts, why society should care, and in what ways an institution focused on specialist education may be of value beyond the interests of specialist practitioners themselves. These issues are not new, but the contemporary zeitgeist makes a compelling case to revisit the purpose of the arts and associated specialist education, and to reimagine and reinvigorate their life in society. In this context, the paper draws attention to a core issue of “listening,” the part that it plays in our capacities to attend to things and to one another. Through the lens of listening, questions about the quality of human attention and its impact in society come centre stage and are connected with the profound nature of “listening” that may be embedded within performing arts practices.

Myers reports on intensive collaborative dialogue, undertaken by a Task Force in the USA, towards renewal in music curricula in Higher Education. He cogently argues for basic assumptions about what constitutes excellence, together with compartmentalization of performing, composing and improvising to be challenged. He then sets a radical agenda for curriculum development, acknowledging the need and challenge of organizational change that accompanies such artistic and educational transformation. Dimensions referenced include, perhaps not surprisingly, a range of approaches to improvised music, many of which are now rapidly growing in degree programmes, where for much of the last century they tended to be overlooked. The relationships between improvisation and an underlying mindset of playfulness on the one hand, and creativity and artistic identity on the other hand are clearly critical to explore as these developments expand.

The remaining papers in this volume tackle focused issues and dilemmas within the paradigm shift where professional practices and higher education environments are seeking to realize visions such as those offered in these first two papers. Three areas of enquiry are reflected. First, notions of the performing artist as “maker” in the contemporary world come to the fore: devising work (often interdisciplinary), building communities through artistic engagement, innovating performance contexts/developing immersive experiences, where traditional relationships with audiences are transformed into co-created production, curating venues, community partnerships or festivals.

Three papers highlight the importance of creative exploration and music making together with reinvigoration of interpretation. Smilde considers the place of improvisation in forming and evolving musical identities. She demonstrates ways in

which new emerging musical practices with particular societal groups (in this case those experiencing dementia) are enriching concepts of identities in music, and the vital and pervasive role that improvisation may play in surfacing and expressing these identities, and in connecting people through them. This paper then comes to set out a new framework for understanding improvisation and identity in music, out of which come significant implications for improvisation within Higher Education curricula. Leech-Wilkinson takes a provocative stance, challenging contemporary assumptions underlying performance practices in western classical music, and going on to shine a spotlight on the role that specialist education may play in these. Hubrich offers a practical example of enquiry into extended, interdisciplinary modes of performance of classical music, drawing in particular on the physical and dramaturgical potential of musical scores and performance situations.

Second, aspects of critical reflection and research, which previously have often been considered marginal activity, possibly even a risk to the creative process, are gaining recognition. Many of the best artists are highly reflective, and growing evidence suggests that these practices are central to sustained career development, with potential both to deepen engagement with tradition and to stimulate innovation. Guillaumier offers a fascinating exposition of the relationship in an embodied artistic practice between creativity and reflection, mirrored by pedagogical development processes that challenge old dichotomies between practical doing and written reflecting. The rise of practice-based research and research through practice is steadily addressing this disjunction, and consequently championing the possibilities of reflection, exchange and deeper enquiry within embodied practices, as Hubrich's paper earlier in this collection shows.

Building on theories of the social construction of learning and processes of collaborative development underpinning high-level performance, expertise and innovation, Hanken shows some of the ways in which pedagogies in music are increasingly developing a focus on peer learning, communities of practice and nurturing of innovative knowledge communities, both amongst students and amongst teaching staff. Finally, Duffy engages with a multilayered and radical reflective framework within the Innovative Conservatoire (ICON), an international partnership between conservatoires designed to stimulate professional development amongst teaching staff in these fields. Reflection here encompasses improvisation, artistic experimentation and dialogic conversation, as well as critical thinking in relation to written texts and documented research. Duffy considers what is still a relatively young initiative and indicates that the impact of such work needs further investigation at personal, pedagogical, curricular and institutional levels. Nevertheless, she illuminates promising signs of its relevance and value. Taken together, Guillaumier, Hanken and Duffy highlight the embodied and multilayered potential of reflection integrated within creative practice at all levels. There are powerful hints here of the transformative significance of these practices for individual learners in higher education, for curricula and developing teaching, and for the evolution of professional artistic practices themselves.

Third, artists increasingly experience multiple professional transitions and/or find themselves working in diverse contexts at one time. As they do so, they uncover interesting opportunities to develop new kinds of influential voices in society. The significance of this goes well beyond the idea of a portfolio artist, taking on multiple roles and cobbling together work in order to survive. Creative entrepreneurs, for example, are focusing on new audiences and developing initiatives that find a sweet spot between the needs, interests and capacities of their audiences, and their own artistic and professional passions. Employability and creative transitions are tackled in a forum of shorter papers from Bennett, Beeching, Triantafyllaki and Canham, reflecting examples of the latest work in this field from across the world. Each addresses different questions of evolving practices within the creative industries, professional transitions, and the increasing significance of multiple professional identities underpinned by creativity and reflexivity in navigating them.

To conclude, the papers in this journal edition focus on music, but the issues addressed are common across the performing arts, all of which are integral to the paradigm shift outlined in the introduction. There has never been a more important time for us to realise the potential of higher education contexts to show leadership within the professional cultural landscape, and to contribute to a significant renaissance. It seems clear, too, that many of the key ideas debated here are by no means exclusive to the performing arts, but resonate in diverse ways through the arts and humanities. It seems increasingly important, therefore, to seek for ways in which dialogue can extend across these fields, and in ways that help to build momentum for each discipline in meeting the multiple challenges now faced in higher education.

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