

Nomadic musicianship

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ASK A RANDOM PASSER-BY to name someone they regard as important or influential in contemporary culture, and the chances are they will mention a vlogger, chef, actor, DJ or pop icon. The odd writer, painter, fashion designer or film director might also get a mention. But hardly anyone at all is likely to name a leading composer or classical musician. And that is not only true of living musicians, but also of the music heroes of the past. Today's younger generation barely recognises the names of composers from the classical music pantheon. Even people who listen to classical music stations associate the music they hear more with restful sounds¹ than original compositions or intriguing interpretations.

Classical music as sound therapy. Balsam for the soul in times of social disquiet and climate concern. Listening to symphonies because there was something important in them to discover seems a thing of the distant past. Music that does still cherish the ambition to sound out unexplored terrain has a marginal market share in the music landscape. The audience for today's contemporary compositions is largely comprised of people who are actively involved, closely or otherwise, with the production or performance of the music. 'The audience,' in the sense of

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1 • In the words of Chantal Pattyn, head of the Flemish classical music station Klara: 'Research has shown that classical music is not the primary reason why people listen to Klara. People listen for the peace and calm it brings. So it has more to do with the emotions than the intellect. That is why we have now adapted Klara's daily programming to biorhythms, with mainly quiet music in the mornings. After breakfast, we still don't ram a diet of symphony orchestras down the listeners' throats. Symphonies may be beautiful, but they can really upset your system if you have slept badly. In the afternoon we broadcast the best performances of classical repertoire. We make sure they don't cause any irritation either.' (Gyselinck & Hillewaert, 2016)

the anonymous consumer, has disappeared and made way for small, though often loyal and committed ‘communities’.²

Art music³ is relatively isolated, not only in the broader world of culture, but also within the professional arts field. Creators in neighbouring disciplines such as contemporary dance or theatre are still happy to work with composers or music ensembles, but the collaboration generally seems to be based mainly on opportunities and shared interests or visions rather than a deep familiarity with what is happening in the field of art music. Although this observation applies just as much in the opposite direction, it demonstrates the fact that art music is no longer a source of inspiration for the other arts.

Things have not always been this way. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the practice of music rose rapidly from a subordinate and decorative art form to become the most prominent in bourgeois culture. This ascending status was accompanied by a growing awareness that music can reveal a reality that is inaccessible to language, although not without effort from the listener. Partly under the influence of eighteenth-century idealism and the philosophical ideas of Immanuel Kant, in early-Romantic music, listening was discovered to be an activity, something that listeners had to do for themselves (Bonds, 2006). That insight gave listeners opportunities for personal development, but also entailed responsibilities. Listening was elevated to a task and an art, with the distinction between experts and amateurs gaining in importance. At the end of the nineteenth century, silent listening in concert halls became standard practice (Smithuijsen, 2001). Half a century later, the philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno devised a scale of listening typologies: right at the top was the expert listener who is capable of hearing structure and listening to music ‘with understanding’ (Adorno, 1941, 1976). These developments can each be placed in their own cultural

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 2 • Many festivals of new music have been able to sustain or even expand their audience in the last few decades. They serve as annual meetings for the new music community, which somewhat disguises the fact that contemporary art music is seldom included in concert programmes beyond the festival circuit.

3 • In the rest of this article I use the term ‘art music’ for classical music in the broad sense, including early or contemporary composed music, as well as improvised or jazz music that is not driven mainly by commercial motives, but as an expression of artistic practice.

and historical context, but first and foremost they are all expressions of a belief that music can provide a meaningful experience if the listener makes the effort to focus entirely on what is unfolding within the music itself. This 'Great Listening' (Schönberger, 2005) helped lay the basis for the emancipation of instrumental music in the early nineteenth century; it is no coincidence that this was the period when many European conservatories were founded. In a relatively short space of time, an independent art form developed with its own concert halls, commercial music publishers and increasingly professional music production apparatus and associated educational infrastructure. The growing autonomy of music was chiefly apparent in popular instrumental genres such as the symphony, string quartet and sonata, genres in which form and content merged entirely into one. This prompted the writer Walter Pater to make the oft-cited remark that all art constantly aspires to the condition of music.

How credible does this statement sound today? And what are the implications for art music if its significance is no longer recognised by the outside world? In this article I explore these questions from the perspective of the heirs of the heyday of classical music: the conservatories and their students.

The ambivalent resilience of art music

We can think of various reasons why the names of the flagbearers of art music sound less familiar today. There are the sociological analyses that, building on Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of social classes (Bourdieu, 1979), emphasise the elitist nature of classical music and its lack of social representativeness. However, elitism does not have to impair visibility. On the contrary, since 1820 elitist and popular culture have gone hand in hand in music production, as two sides of the same market mechanism (Sabbe, 1996). Furthermore, the distinction between high and low culture lost much of its significance a long time ago. Intellectuals and politicians, but also artists, today identify all too eagerly with popular music culture.

Another often-cited explanation is that classical music's problem lies not in the music itself, but in the concert format. For example, according to the social scientist Hans Abbing, the classical concert with its silent audience and public codes of conduct has not adapted to the current

zeitgeist, which demands a more informal approach (Abbing, 2006). There is undoubtedly some truth in this analysis, but what it fails to fully appreciate is the fact that new generations of young, talented musicians keep appearing on the scene who strive, as passionately as ever, for a professional career in the field of early, classical or contemporary music.

This touches on an ambivalent aspect of the status of art music that has not been sufficiently explored. There is a striking discrepancy between the loss of visibility of art music in the public domain and its internal dynamic, which seems to be holding up reasonably well.⁴ Despite everything, classical music's survival skills seem to be surprisingly robust. It is 'the toughest zombie of all the dying art forms' (Gyselinck, 2017). Critics will argue that it is a system being kept alive with artificial respiration, with conservatories also playing an important role in that. Nevertheless, there is no sign yet of a sense of irrelevance on the supply side, among the young musicians themselves. Even the COVID-19 crisis, which temporarily brought all of the performing arts to a standstill and shrouded their future in doubt, did not stop a more or less stable number of talented young musicians from registering for the annual entrance exams at conservatories almost everywhere in Europe.⁵ For the time being, classical music has maintained its appeal as a professional practice, at least among those who came into contact with music education at an early age. That latter point is very significant in the Dutch context. The spending cuts on culture since 2011 have ravaged the music schools, and that is now also greatly affecting the Dutch conservatories: whereas in 2006 slightly more than half of the students admitted were of Dutch origin, in 2020 that figure had fallen to only a little over thirty percent (Zembla, 2021; fewer than twenty percent in The Hague).

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 4 • In an earlier publication, Abbing (2002) suggested that the contrast between the often weak economic position of artists and the appeal of the artist's profession is due to a mythology internalised by artists, who place art (in his view incorrectly) outside the economic sphere by attributing to it a sacred status. Abbing's perspective was based mainly on the situation in the visual arts at that time, but to my mind he also devoted too little attention to the role of the medium and the artistic experience itself for an understanding of the described discrepancy in art music.

5 • Based on an informal survey; application figures are often not available or sometimes difficult to verify.

This shows once again that classical music's life insurance lies not with an abstract audience that has to be enticed to the concert hall with creative communication strategies, but still primarily with its practitioners. Classical music is more than ever a 'Musica Practica' (Barthes, 1977), more for doers than devotees. Nevertheless, the contrast between the young tigers on the stage and the generally older audience in the hall creates a precarious situation that weighs on the future prospects of music students. And then there are the new perspectives in cultural criticism that focus on themes such as inclusion, gender and decolonisation. From those vantage points, the classical music culture is a target that can easily be 'framed' as white, male and colonial, which calls into question the choice to study classical music, and by extension early and contemporary music.

We hear an echo of this in some of the contributions by students in this publication, although here too the message is ambiguous, since the students themselves embody the great diversity that characterises the student populations of our conservatories. Despite the criticism that classical music culture sometimes faces today for its European history and identity, it still retains its appeal for talented musicians worldwide. But music students do appear to be very aware of being caught between the musical legacies of the past and today's moral and social imperatives. They are therefore searching for new ways of positioning themselves and more freedom of movement in their music practice. And it seems that they want to start by throwing off the chains that have condemned art music to its aforementioned isolation.

Form, content and engagement

To better understand this urge for freedom among the young generation of music students, it is useful to place the familiar socio-cultural explanations temporarily between brackets and return our attention to one of the most characteristic properties of art music. In the earlier quotation from Walter Pater, music was described as an art form in which form and matter converge:

All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other works of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form,

and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it [...]. Art, then, is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception, to get rid of its responsibilities to its subject or material [...]. It is the art music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of form and matter, this strange chemistry [...]. (Pater, 1877)

In this quote, Pater was clearly thinking mainly of ‘absolute’ music, music that is not at the service of a story or an extra-musical programme, but seems to find its form and *raison d’être* entirely within itself. Briefly, we could define this autonomy as the meaning we take from music through the relationships that unfold between notes, sounds and silences within the time of the sounding music. These ‘formal relationships’ are heard and experienced⁶ most unambiguously in instrumental music, although they are equally present in vocal music.⁷

That Pater, at the end of the nineteenth century, could understand the coincidence of form and matter as a worthy ideal reminds us how much the view of the arts and music is determined by the *zeitgeist*. Today, it appears to be precisely its non-referential character, its ‘autonomy’, that works against music. If the autonomy of art music is not already being unmasked as a culturally situated expression or the manifestation of purported ‘power relationships’, the current *zeitgeist* demands that the arts – especially in a context of support and subsidies – be ‘about something’. This suggests that music must be able to secure external validation of its social relevance, by virtue of a function or role that it plays in the world, or by explicitly showing how it can provide an arena for the contemporary themes and problems referred to above.⁸ In this respect, qualities of music that have traditionally been associated with a relative abstraction or autonomy, such as composing relationships

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6 • Formality does not have to be seen as exclusively comprehensible by means of the intellect. It is primarily concerned with the ability to perceive the sound relationships literally ‘formed’ by the music, which could possibly be termed ‘primary formalism’ (Roes, 2021).

7 • Richard Barrett points out that vocal music has been audibly influenced by instrumental developments since the Baroque period (see p. 68).

8 • See also article pp. 105-115.

between tones (aptly encapsulated in the Dutch word *toonkunst*, ‘the art of tones’, a term that has fallen into disuse) seem to work against it.

Is it a coincidence that instrumental music has also faded into the background in commercial music culture? Music that does not use the human voice, which has no function on the dance floor or as a soundtrack for a film, seems to have disappeared entirely from the charts. Possible exceptions are phenomena such as ‘neo-classical’ piano music, of which, not coincidentally, it is also often argued that it has therapeutic benefits.⁹ The music culture of young people today is expressed mainly in ‘spoken word’, beats and sound idioms that express collectivity, engagement and personal identity. Pop music has for some time been a practice ground for creating an identity, where verbal language and body language play a crucial role alongside music, music videos and fashion. It is also noticeable in art music that genres that convincingly combine music and visual language, such as music theatre, contemporary opera or installation art, can count on a more diverse audience (at least in terms of age) than the audience for symphonies, chamber music or early music, genres whose audiences have been growing older for decades.

However, it would be a mistake to seek solutions for the isolation of art music exclusively in a marriage with visual culture. The twentieth-century multimedia culture has been transformed into a culture of technologically-mediated interaction and immersion. An example of this can be found in the growing interest in the integration of aspects of social media and gaming culture into new composed music (Ciciliani, 2021). This reflects the search for new ways of generating engagement, even in classical music. The programme notes for *Listening Mutant 2021* (*Luistermutant 2021*), a ‘serious game’ by composer Micha Hamel which, among other things, requires listeners to interact with the music of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, express the hope that game-driven engagement can partially compensate for the engagement that was lost with the loss of musical literacy and the dilution of the bourgeois ideal of *Bildung*.

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 9 • The story of the Dutch pianist Joep Beving illustrates this. Playing the piano not only helped this marketer to recover from a burn-out, but also set him on the path to a successful music career in the neo-classical genre: <https://www.tijd.be/cultuur/muziek/joep-beving-een-burn-out-een-piano-en-spotify/10115143.html>

When you're gaming, you need to engage with the game and are automatically connected with the game's subject. If you're an active participant in the production yourself, it really comes to life in a different way. Consequently, you're only allowed to attend our show if you'll participate, not if you just want to be a spectator. (Holland Festival, 2021)

The condition formulated above mirrors a general characteristic of computer games. The virtual environment of a game offers resistance and a challenge, and forces players to take responsibility for their own survival within that environment (Leino, 2021).¹⁰ If you don't do your best, you will drop out of the game. But technologically-mediated game environments can also provide data feedback that can provide insight into how players interact with the game's environment. Besides enabling the game to adapt to the player's skills, over a longer timespan the data gives designers and creators input for the development of more complex games that respond steadily better and more intimately to the players' behaviour, interests and opportunities to interact. Thus it is the game, rather than the autonomous instrumental music in the quote from Pater, that seems to constitute a new ideal today towards which the arts, or some of them, could aspire.

To sum up, it is precisely those qualities that helped to facilitate the emancipation and expansion of nineteenth-century music are now contributing to its disconnection from other cultural and social fields, and above all from the listener. Although this analysis also applies in part to other artistic disciplines, music faces a problem that is specific to the medium. The intrinsic power of music to invoke a non-referential,¹¹ self-fulfilling world seems also to be its weakness in the current *zeitgeist*, which attaches great importance to connectivity,

10 • It is, however, also worth considering developments in the margins of so-called 'non-games' or 'boring games,' whose object is not to accomplish anything or to reach a specific goal. By removing the competitive element, such non-games can be an instrument for meditation, exploration and self-expression (Leino, 2021).

11 • The referential is understood here in the direct, semantic sense. This does not alter the fact that every musical expression is culturally situated and can be interpreted as such. In music, we often find intentional references to other music or to the world, for example in musical citations or in the use of samples in pop and electronic music. However, recognising these references is not usually a prerequisite for a meaningful musical experience.

data feedback and cultural symbolism. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the autonomy of music represented its creative freedom, today its isolation.

Nomadic musicianship

The call for new connections resounds loud and clear in the ambitions of students at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. An analysis of 124 project proposals by master's students for their research or 'professional integration activities' (2020-21)¹² showed that slightly more than half of them focus at least partly on themes or subjects outside their main study discipline.¹³ This could involve experimenting with musical cross-overs, but equally integrating other artistic disciplines such as dance, theatre; forms of expression that use language, such as poetry or 'storytelling' were surprisingly popular.¹⁴ This latter point once again suggests a need among young musicians to make a more explicit connection between their music practice and specific themes and subjects. These themes sometimes also constituted a more activist motivation, such as the trumpet player researching the gender gap in professional orchestras or the black¹⁵ singer focusing on Afro-American female composers in her research and practice and literally giving a voice to the African diaspora.¹⁶ In general, it is noteworthy that more students are taking advantage of the freedom of choice in the curriculum (and particularly in research) to seek connection with their own cultural identity.

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12 • At the beginning of the second semester, first-year master's students are expected to submit a 'Master Project Proposal' in which they set out a theme connecting their main subject with a research theme of their own choice and professional integration activities. For the survey, 124 of these proposals were analysed and coded on the basis of specified key terms and themes.

13 • The tendency seems to be less strong among bachelor's students. See also article pp. 105-115.

14 • See also Ilona Sie Dhian Ho, Vivian de Graaff, Ilja Venema, Camilla Genee (2022). 'Classic Express Research project', *Research Catalogue*. <https://www.research-catalogue.net/view/1095438/1118852/0/0>. Accessed on 21 January 2022.

15 • Some authors in this book prefer to write 'Black' with a capital letter, following recent tendencies fed by the Black Lives Matter movement. Since there is no general agreement on a uniform spelling at the time of this writing, we consider the choice of whether or not to use a capital letter to be each author's personal choice.

16 • See the contribution by Shanice Skinner (p. 99).

Students also increasingly display an awareness that valuable knowledge and expertise that will help them in their future musical practice is also to be found outside the domain of music. Musicians in training who struggle with stage fright or performing under pressure resort to psychology, the neurosciences or sport sciences to learn more about the interaction between physical and mental processes when playing music. This provides more scientific underpinning for their music practice. Equally, however, the sciences can form a source of inspiration for artistic adventures. Take the guitarist who uses research into cross-modal perception phenomena as a starting point for creations combining musical and culinary sensations (Auesirinuroch, 2021), or the jazz pianist who takes the study of human speech as inspiration for humorously critical performances in which he gets the piano to ‘speak’ in the tones of well-known voices (Blanes, 2019).

Of course, the appeal of the multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary is nothing new in art music. In the last century it assumed various guises, from Dada to Fluxus and from the instrumental theatre and music films of Mauricio Kagel to the multimedia musical theatre of Heiner Goebbels. In general, we have seen a renewed interest in the theatrical and choreographic dimensions inherent to the performance of music in composed music since the turn of the millennium (Craenen, 2014; Hübner, 2014). In addition, digitisation has provided an important impulse for working with and combining different media. What is new, however, is that cross-disciplinary interests are to be found just as much today among students from the performing arts departments. Students increasingly turn to other disciplines in search of extra-musical inspiration or perspectives for the development of their practice. In the process, some pin their hopes on new technologies such as ‘machine learning’, artificial intelligence or virtual reality.¹⁷ Once again, the fascination with these technologies seems to lie mainly in the fact that they allow for more direct connections with the audience, the environment and other disciplines.

The hunger for new connectivity leads to musical nomadism rather than the specialisations or in-depth research into materials and sources that drove innovations in much twentieth-century music. Although the

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 17 • See also the contributions by Celia Swart (p. 85), Petra Ruth Alexandry (p. 139) and Noppakorn Auesirinuroch (p. 81).

situation differs depending on the musical discipline, we can generally speak of a more nomadic approach to the practice of music. The nomadic musician is driven by a combination of curiosity, scarcity of resources and a hunger for inspiring contacts, but above all by a desire to make a meaningful contribution to the world we live in.

The instrument and the curriculum

Is there something that holds this nomadic tribe together? Does it disperse in groups, each of which grows into a community with its own culture and specialisation, or does it retain a core that can be described as ‘distinctly musical’? At first glance, the new connections being tested out by musicians today often seem to be temporary in nature. From the perspective of musical education and training, this raises the question of what the core expertise and artistry is that the nomadic musician must be able to fall back on. The answer to this question will vary according to the musical discipline, but the role of the musical instrument will undoubtedly have to be considered. Artistic identity in the world of professional music still relies to a large extent on the stable identity of musical instruments which have barely changed for at least a century, especially in the classical and performing disciplines (which still deliver the largest number of students at conservatories like The Hague). Most students who enrol at a conservatory have already been learning their craft intensively for years. In the process, they have moulded their minds and muscles to the shape, possibilities and culture of their instrument. This instrumental culture, with its repertoire and inspiring role models, sometimes offers a compelling frame of reference¹⁸ for excellence and competition, but also a vista of stimulating possibilities for the music student.

The importance of this traditional core is seldom questioned when thinking about curriculum reform. The emphasis is on the development of meta-competences that can give new relevance to traditional craftsmanship (see further). There is also considerably more attention to improvisation (in practically every genre, see also article pp. 67-80).

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18 • See the contribution by Laura von der Goltz (p. 41).

The latter indicates the need to make traditional craftsmanship more flexible. Nevertheless, as pressure on the curriculum increases under the influence of cultural and social developments, the position, nature and space for instrumental training in music education are likely to be increasingly questioned. Students say this themselves when describing their motivation. They observe it is no longer enough to be the best performer on their instrument. They are seeking personal development in a broader sense.¹⁹

We also see the emerging tension around instrumental craftsmanship elsewhere in this publication, particularly where the focus is not solely on the artist's perspective, as in relation to education. How well should a music teacher be able to play an instrument? Programmes make different choices in that respect, but changing requirements and expectations in education and society are obviously forcing them to adapt to the social context in which music teachers operate (see article pp. 125-36). This pressure from society also applies to other music programmes. When the professional field of the performing musician moves outside the concert hall, the classical concert audience cannot continue to be the only frame of reference. Benchmarks in a music programme that are regarded as unwavering could then begin to shift. The same applies when music creation becomes less dependent on a recognisable instrumental identity. Composer and guitarist Aart Strootman argues that a more fluid instrumental design could also lead to more democratic interactions between composer, instrument builder and performer (see article pp. 89-98), and consequently to a different assignment of roles in the music landscape. How will conservatories deal with these changing possibilities and orientations?

Project-driven reorientation

I currently see three general, often complementary features of a reorientation of the curriculum policy in conservatories. The first is today's emphasis on the aforementioned meta-competences. These can range from problem-solving, reflective, communicative or collaborative

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 19 • 'Nowadays, surviving on the music scene requires more skills than just playing a musical instrument well' (anonymous master's student, guitar, 2020)

skills (Rumiantsev et al., 2020) to a more ‘world-oriented’ citizenship and social engagement. There is an emerging tendency to reconcile public and social relevance conceptually with the familiar artistic craftsmanship (Gaunt et al., 2021). Gaunt proposes the term ‘partnering values’ for this concept, whereby the value of the canon and the creation of new work do not have to be in conflict and artistry, citizenship, artistic imagination and cultural or social entrepreneurship can go hand in hand.

Such proposals testify to a sense of urgency to make music programmes more responsive to the cultural reality and the moral and social concerns of our time. Nevertheless, it is also clear that new orientations cannot simply be an aggregation or combination of traditional values, skills and new competences. The pressure on the curriculum has reached its limits, as Marlon Titre puts it in ‘Shock Therapy’. From a professional perspective, choices have to be made that could lead to the existence of new, context-related clusters of expertise, and perhaps ultimately also to new professional profiles and specialisations that could complement (or compete with) the existing ones. An example of this is the role that musicians could perform in the context of health care, performing at the bedside of patients or for people with dementia. The vulnerability and intimacy of making music in this context calls for an understanding of the situation and the needs of patients as well as the musical versatility and ability to improvise that is needed to engage in a dialogue with them through the music. The nineteenth-century ideal of musical autonomy can obviously no longer apply here. But a more personal manner of playing music and improvising does offer possibilities, as defined in the concept of ‘person-centred improvisation’ (Smilde, 2019). Here we see an example of interaction between general musical and social competences and context-specific skills that could lead to a new, specialised professional profile.

A second feature of the reorientation we are discussing is to be found in the greater responsibility being given to students to map out their own learning process. This suggests that the curriculum in higher music education can no longer prepare students for all the requirements of their future professional career. The integration of research into the curriculum is one way in which students at conservatories have already been partly the ‘architect’ of their own education for some time now.

After all, research is the ideal instrument for students to deepen their knowledge in an area of interest they have chosen themselves. A further step in this process is the trend of linking research more closely to artistic development in a personally defined development path. This also brings entrepreneurial or curatorial competences into play. Under the title ‘professional integration,’ master’s students in The Hague are expected to design activities through which they can explore and test the professional potential of their development process.²⁰ To that end, students undertake projects outside the Conservatoire, in neighbourhoods, hospitals and schools, on stage or in public spaces. The curriculum also includes participation in a ‘boot camp,’ during which the students spend a short period gaining practical experience by interacting with a specific environment as a musician.

In this project-driven approach, we find a third form of reorientation. ‘Project-driven’ alludes to the nomadic and temporary. However, if the educational programme itself becomes a nomadic project, how can it be representative of a later professional career? That brings us back to the question of what type of expertise music education programmes are supposed to guarantee. Where does the student’s responsibility end and the institute’s begin? What is needed besides the aforementioned meta-competences and improvisational skills that are intended to increase the student’s musical versatility?

Obviously, in answering this question, the first aspect to be considered will be the main subject, and particularly its focus on craftsmanship. Few conservatories will be willing to dilute standards of professional excellence in order to permit a deepening of skills in other areas. As mentioned earlier, proponents of curriculum reform generally also see no conflict between the professional requirements of the traditional discipline and the integration of more worldly competences. Nevertheless, the increasingly project-driven nature of music programmes suggests a latent tension between elements that can be framed in disciplinary terms and others that can only be explored through project work. An important challenge in future curriculum innovation will therefore be

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 20 • Since the 2019-2020 academic year, the various elements of the master’s programme at the Royal Conservatoire The Hague have been combined in a ‘Master Project’. See Amaral (2021) for a detailed discussion.

to refine the conceptualisation and delineation of the professional skills and insights that can be acquired through project-driven learning. These will have to be elements that are more concrete than the aforementioned meta-competences, but at the same time not so specific that they are only applicable to a local or particular situation.

Do it Yourself / Do it Together

Curriculum reforms at conservatories that devote themselves to more student-centric and project-driven learning are still too much in the experimental phase to properly evaluate their impact on professional music practice. But it is worth distinguishing two characteristic aspects of project-driven learning in higher music education. We could describe the first as a DIY or autodidactic perspective. Many music makers today operate in multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary domains. In creating music they are not only the composer, but also the designer, mediator, text writer, director or instrument builder. In that respect, autodidacticism often plays an important role. That choice can be pragmatic and/or aesthetic. Making personal choices and accepting risk is sometimes the quickest way of creating something without having to make too many artistic compromises. It can accelerate, deepen and radicalise the creative process. Judging by the earnestness with which some music makers integrate new technologies and applications, an autodidactic approach does not necessarily lead to non-committal amateurism. Even in the past, important musical innovations were often brought about by musicians who circumvented the norms of their discipline and discovered new musical insights and new ways of playing music by trial and error. A good example of this is to be found in the instrumental research by the pioneers of the Early Music movement half a century ago, as described by Johannes Boer in 'The Promise of Authenticity'.

Curriculum reforms targeted mainly at the student's sense of ownership and responsibility indirectly encourage an autodidactic mentality. In time, that could strengthen the 'undisciplining' that we see signs of everywhere today, which are leading to a music landscape where it is increasingly difficult to discern general trends. Autodidacts are perhaps slightly more likely to be found among creative artists than performers. From the perspective of curriculum design, the downside of the

autodidactic process is that a lot of time can be lost to difficult learning processes in which students have to discover for themselves what does or does not work.

However, project-driven approaches to the curriculum are also ideal for collaborative learning. Joint learning processes are a relatively new phenomenon in music programmes, which have historically been based mainly on the transfer of knowledge from master to apprentice. Nevertheless, we see a growing interest at institutes of higher music education in learning with and from one another, both among students themselves and more generally across the various music disciplines. At present this trend often takes the form of experimental ‘pilots’,²¹ but it is also increasingly assuming a more structural form.²² Cooperation with other artistic or academic disciplines is still in the experimental phase, although that is also starting to change in music programmes. Growing collaboration with universities and cultural partners on specific themes is leading to new ‘communities of practice’. I gave the example earlier of a musician who works in a healthcare context. Other new clusters of expertise are to be found in contexts such as performing music in public spaces, in culturally diverse neighbourhoods and districts, and working with very young children or in digital and virtual environments. Emerging practices of this type can often build on many years of experiment and research and are quietly coming to occupy a place in conservatories as electives, specialisations or even specific programmes.²³

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21 • See also Susan Williams, Felix Schlarmann (2022). ‘Learning Pods’, *Research Catalogue* <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1162648/1162649/0/0>. Accessed on 21 January 2022.

22 • For example, the ‘Sonology Electroacoustic Ensemble’ at the Royal Conservatoire is open to musicians from every department, and in the 2019-20 academic year a new course entitled ‘Collaborative Music Making’ was launched with a focus on various forms of improvisation and which is also open to musicians from every department.

23 • The European master’s programme ‘New Audiences and Innovative Practice’ (NAIP), offered by the conservatories in The Hague, Groningen and Reykjavik, is designed for musicians who are primarily interested in reaching new audiences beyond the traditional contexts.

New settlements

How do the nomadic musicians of the twenty-first century plot their itineraries? Is the hybrid and mobile nature of their practice – today encapsulated in the term ‘portfolio career’ – a lasting transformation, or should we rather expect musicians to form new musical settlements? And what role do music programmes play in this?

Conservatories, generally housed in grand buildings that exude institutional stability, are being transformed on the inside into semi-residential campsites where new groups of migrating musicians arrive every year. They pitch their tents there for several years, which gives them time to build up their strength, learn new skills for the road, stock up on supplies and gather the equipment they need for the next stage of their journey. Most of them come from valleys with rich musical traditions and are already advanced musicians. They have arrived at the conservatory along a clearly signposted path of music education, music competitions and programmes for talented musicians. It is to be expected, and perhaps hoped, that more travellers from other regions will join them at the conservatories: travellers who have arrived by different routes and probably also have different destinations in mind.

In recent years, governing bodies and coordinators have devoted considerable attention to the internal reorganisation of the campsite. There is greater mobility on the site and new, shared playing fields and practice grounds have been created. Camp fires have been lit around which students and teachers gather regularly to share experiences, reflect and explore, and plan their journeys together.²⁴ It seems the time has now come to turn our attention to the equipment the students take with them when they leave the campsite. This equipment must be robust, but must not hamper their mobility. Nor should their rucksacks be too full. Attention has shifted from the comprehensiveness of the equipment to the attitudes and techniques that enable nomadic musicians to survive in a wide variety of environments with a minimum of tools. At the same time, the growing importance of inclusivity means that travel packs

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 24 • The conservatoire in The Hague has adopted the concept of ‘master circles,’ where students meet every month to discuss progress on their Master Project with each other, guided by a ‘master circle leader’. See Amaral (2021) for more details.

must be designed to meet the needs of every individual traveller and their possible destinations.

Diversification has practical limits, however. Designers of innovative curricula should therefore commit to new travel equipment that takes account of diversity, but can also be widely enough used. And that calls for confidence in the musical material. Despite the isolated position of art music today, the contributions in this book reflect a belief that music cannot be imprisoned within a particular discipline or pinned down by its cultural and historical origins. They resound with a confidence that something in music has both a nomadic capacity and a potential to adapt to new locations and their inhabitants in such a way that new musical biotopes can emerge.

Behind that mutability and shareability lies a promising challenge for today's professional musician. At the beginning of this article, I cited the autonomous character of art music as one of the reasons for its current cultural isolation. However, in the autonomy of music lie both its formal abstraction and its directness. Music needs little mediation to captivate listeners and makers. That is because it is primarily a sensory and physical experience ('a matter of pure perception' in Pater's words) that stimulates the individual's imagination. Music may not be a universal language, but in its physical directness we recognise human receptiveness to resonance and interaction through sound. Clearly, training and familiarity with certain characteristics of music can lead to significant personal and cultural differences in the way people listen. Nonetheless, there are examples – rare, but always a source of inspiration – where music 'bursts in' unexpectedly like an uninvited guest, even among those who are unfamiliar with it. In these ideal cases, music outpaces language and makes its impact felt before any explanation can be given. Paradoxically, these 'overwhelming' experiences are precisely what may prompt discussion of music (Craenen, 2021) or even motivate a life-changing decision to pursue a career in music.²⁵

Characteristics of music that refer to a directly communicative or resonating experience,²⁶ linked to relative abstraction and autonomy, are

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25 • Also read the testimonial by Julia Pallanch (p. 15).

26 • It would take us too far here to address the question of whether, how and why certain types of music possess a greater or more general potential to resonate than

not necessarily a hindrance in today's world. On the contrary: they offer a potential for connectivity where other cultural expressions come up against the barbed wire of identity, heritage and ownership. The musical past, and not least that of jazz and so-called 'world music', teaches us that musical resonances refuse to be held back by such obstacles. Whereas a Romantic and idealistic vision holds that music cannot be captured in language, an updated interpretation might be that music can be shared, but never be definitively appropriated or explained away. In its indeterminacy and directness lies an opening, an invitation to engage in shared listening and an ongoing process of new creation. We hear an awareness from teachers and students that this invitation to shared listening and creation is precisely what is at stake in art music today. To whom is this invitation addressed? How is it formulated and where does it meet with a response? How does it express the urgencies of our time? To what mutations in music practice might it lead and what are the implications for higher music education? It is up to the conservatories and music institutions to help create the environments that can dream up resonant answers to these questions.

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 others, as today's beat-based forms of music appear to suggest. What we mainly wish to stress here are the openings that music in all its guises offers for various forms of personal or collective interaction.

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