

There has never been a more important time to recognise the value of music-making for wellbeing and cultural health, and the significance of the UK music industry as a national asset. Professional futures for musicians are, however, increasingly unpredictable and insecure. Professor Helena Gaunt, Principal at Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama and Professor John Sloboda, Research Professor at Guildhall School of Music & Drama report on a recent conference exploring this idea.

What did the Conference aim to achieve?

[Strengthening Music in Society: The way forward for UK Conservatoires](#): brought together key voices and perspectives from across the western classical music sector to think through the challenges and opportunities currently facing UK conservatoires and the classical music system.

Chaired and facilitated by Jess Gillam MBE, the conference took as its starting point an Association of European Conservatoires ([AEC-commissioned article](#)) to highlight the main themes emerging from the international four-year AEC project *Strengthening Music in Society*. It set out a contemporary foundation for conservatoires in the idea of ‘Musicians as Makers in Society’.

In the light of Brexit, COVID-19, and global social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, we saw this as a timely opportunity: to return to fundamental questions about the purpose and identity of conservatoires; to consider new ways of curating and creating music and of engaging young and emerging professional musicians in big societal issues; and to set progressive, inclusive directions to support both performance excellence and the impact of this sector in the 21st century.

What does ‘Musician as Maker in Society’ mean?

‘Musicians as Makers in Society’ offers a way of bridging artistic and social elements in music making, bringing artistry into dialogue with musicians’ wider motivations as human beings and their responsibilities to broader society. We suggest it is a partnership of values rather than an oppositional either-or. It calls for a wider understanding of excellence and how it is measured and assessed. Alongside musical dimensions such as sound quality, technical skill and imagination, it includes aspects of social awareness and interaction, for example relating to the ethics of care, tolerance, generosity and empathy.

‘Musicians as Makers in Society’ is a rethink, rebalancing perceived competing priorities between:

- canonic repertoires and making new work
- music making face to face and digital interactions
- artistic imagination and social imagination
- individual and ensemble craft
- craft apprenticeship and self-directed and collaborative learning

The conference called for professional higher music education institutions to take ownership of 'Musicians as Makers in Society' in practice, as a way of supporting artists of the future and renewing the place of these institutions in society.

We discussed diverse programming and audiences and decolonising the curriculum. The conversations noted the centrality of the classical canon and how it is taught in traditional conservatoire curricula. We looked towards realignments where existing repertoires and approaches are enriched by a much wider variety of music and teaching style. Delegates felt a real need for more training and support for teaching staff in their shifting role as guiding, facilitating, and enabling their students' learning and development as highly-skilled professional musicians with agency, autonomy, and authority.

A role for industry in the journey

We agreed that breaking away from a limiting position of 'musicians as product' to a more autonomous 'musician as producer/creator/facilitator' was helpful. The classical music industry is supported by major venues where the international market in concert promotion operates. Conservatoires have tended to focus their training on equipping musicians to compete within this market. However, a sometimes forgotten strand is a strong UK tradition of community engagement going back to Holst, Vaughan Williams, Britten and others where amateurs have worked alongside professionals, not only in big cities but in rural areas.

This was matched by a strong state-supported access to training for young people from working-class backgrounds. In aiming to rebuild some of these important ideals, professional orchestras are increasingly relocating their operations away from city centres and into local communities. Partnership working in these contexts offers real scope for conservatoires, and for their collaboration with industry to support the wider ecology of music-making overall.

There is excellent practice emerging in the professional sector, showing that musicians can be makers in society in rich and multi-layered ways without abandoning their core artistry. Manchester Collective, for example, is an award-winning flexible ensemble of brilliant musicians with diverse backgrounds and influences, committed to immersion within communities. Rather than pursuing their music and then working out who the audience is, they ask first where they can make a difference and then work artistically from their core values, repertoires and skills. Cleverly combining social and artistic purpose, they have developed numerous innovative projects through lockdown that have captured hearts and minds. Several conservatoires are working with them.

At the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, the new [music undergraduate offer](#) is reframing any notion of rarefied exclusivity. It focuses explicitly on developing musicians as 'makers' in society: being immersed in communities through a network of partnership residencies (with industry, education and community organisations), creative collaboration and entrepreneurship as integral parts of artistic development. Guildhall School is leveraging its national and international partnerships, both in Higher Education and Performing Arts, in order to train Artistic Citizens; next generation artists who bring not only their craft, but who

are equipped and willing to i) intelligently engage with essential dialogues around ethics, social justice, the environment and well-being, and ii) define themselves as 21st Century Artists in Society.

Some employers are moving away from traditional 'fixed ensemble' structures, to a more fluid workforce where diversity of ideas and experience contributes more to the creative process than polished, perfectly executed reproductions of standard repertoire. Continuing development opportunities for mid-career musicians are increasingly important - and can help them to move forwards in a climate where there is still an unspoken belief that a multi-faceted career counts for less than a 'straight-ahead' classical musician. Standard auditions are also being supplemented by statements about musicians' artistic ideas, influences, and aspirations, and a strong desire to employ musicians able to work in an open, explorative way. There are exciting opportunities in all of this for industry and conservatoires to collaborate.

People agreed that creating a single collaborative space for people to engage at partnership level would help: between conservatoires and umbrella organisations including the Incorporated Society of Musicians, Help Musicians, Musicians Union, Conservatoires UK, Association of British Orchestras, Sound Connections, and so on, to help overcome the complexity and to empower the creative diversity of the industry.

How research plays its part

Research is clearly needed, to systematically document what is already happening in conservatoires, and help to identify misperceptions and barriers to necessary change among both students and staff. Collaborative research also has potential to help balance the more competitive approaches that funding systems often reward.

Within such research, reflecting the voices of local partners, and especially participants from less affluent or marginalised communities, will be vital in developing conservatoires as spaces 'for them'. Similarly research has an important part to play in building sustainability and longevity into partnerships and becoming less reliant on staff on precarious short-term contracts, while also valuing the agility and creativity that a younger workforce can bring to the table.

What next for this concept

Strengthening Music in Society offered a provocation and gathering point towards action. The 'Musicians as Makers in Society' concept emerged from conservatoires working collaboratively through a European project, and innovation is already happening in UK institutions.

As the conference highlighted, there is a lot still to do, both within conservatoires themselves, and across the classical music ecosystem. Music provision for under-18s is key to this ecosystem and to improving access and inclusion. It should be front and centre of conserva-

toire strategy and partnership working. To fulfil conservatoires' growing potential in community, partnership and co-creation, we must find better ways of celebrating existing knowledge exchange, innovation and public engagement.

The conservatoire as a place of conservation is outdated. More aligned with serving contemporary contexts and the future of music-making, delegates proposed their enormous potential as 'innovatories' for the industry and classical music ecology.

Our conference aimed to start an inclusive discussion across the creative ecosystem, and we will need ongoing engagement and widespread support to make the concept a reality.