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Strengthening Music in Society: The way forward for UK Conservatoires

A conference bringing together key voices and perspectives from across the classical music sector to collectively address the challenges and opportunities currently facing UK conservatoires and the classical music system of which they are a part. Supported by and hosted in association with Conservatoires UK (CUK), the Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC) and SEMPRE.

Hosted by the Institute for Social Impact Research in the Performing Arts at Guildhall School of Music & Drama, the conference will take as its starting point an AEC-commissioned review article ***Musicians as “Makers in Society”: A Conceptual Foundation for Contemporary Professional Higher Music Education*** written by Professor Helena Gaunt, Principal of the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama with an international team, which highlights the main themes that have emerged from the international four-year AEC project ‘Strengthening Music in Society’. Helena’s opening keynote will draw out implications of these themes for the UK in particular, to which six invited respondents from across the sector will provide critical perspectives, followed by a Q&A session. The day will be chaired and facilitated by **Jess Gillam MBE**, award-winning saxophonist, broadcaster and Guildhall School alumna.

Musicians as “Makers in Society”: A Conceptual Foundation for Contemporary Professional Higher Music Education

The below is a brief overview and summary of the paper.

There has never been a more important time for us to recognise the value of music-making for our wellbeing and cultural health. The pandemic showed us just how important music is, as well as how we could engage with it in different ways, including digitally.

But the pandemic also put enormous pressure on professional musicians and arts organisations and there continue to be big questions about the sustainability, particularly in classical music, of current models, expectations and ways of working.

While the UK’s music conservatoires, as institutions that educate professional musicians at degree level and beyond, are grappling with the implications, some of them seismic, current challenges do

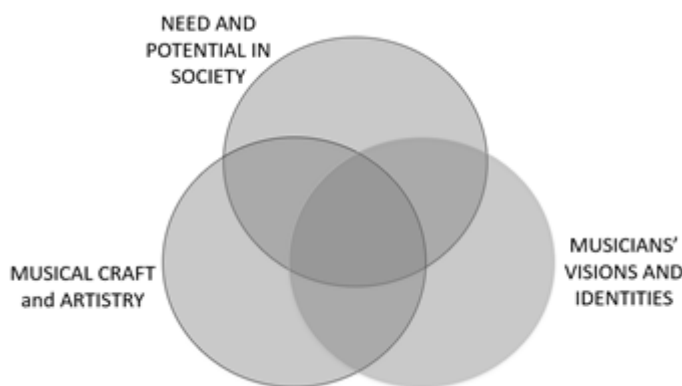
not simply reflect immediate past events. They also connect to longstanding issues and questions that the conservatoire sector has been working at for well over 30 years:

- How should conservatoires respond to the fact that successful musicians are likely to need a broader range of skills and experiences than previously - deep craft skills are essential, but students also need both to discover their own creative voice, *and* to connect in society.
- How can institutions and the education they offer remove barriers to access and widen participation, overcoming perceptions of elitism, or of music-making being a marginal, luxury interest?
- How can conservatoires be part of renewing the extraordinary potential of music-making in our societies, and the place of professional musicians?

Our article (co-authored by an international team led by Helena Gaunt), analyzing/reflecting on the findings of the European Association of Conservatoires' project 'Strengthening Music in Society' argues that in order to make progress in addressing these issues now, we need to change the lens through which we look at what an artist is and does, and at what specialist higher music education institutions are and do. We need to rethink our approach to the very foundations of specialist higher music education.

This innovative change of direction means connecting values and priorities which have often previously been seen as conflicting: artistic autonomy and craft expertise versus social and societal aspects of music-making (which could include connecting with a broader range of audiences, addressing inequalities in access, through to exploring challenges of migration, climate change, conflict and violence, loneliness and isolation...)

The interdependence of these different priorities is essential. Music-making in higher music professional education can and should be fully engaged with both artistic concerns *and* societal issues, embracing the creative tensions between them. The recommended new model therefore fundamentally bridges artistic and social elements and is titled 'the **musician as a maker in society**'. Three elements are central to this (see diagram below): musicians' visions and identities; musical craft and artistry; and need and potential in society. Our article explores this in detail.



The Musician as Maker in Society

A key aim of the conference on 16 December is a collective call for professional higher music education institutions to take ownership of the 'musician as maker in society' in order to support artists of the future and to renew the place of these institutions in society. As partners, we know just how ready students are to engage in this, and that ensuring we develop sustainable professional trajectories for their future careers is vital.

'Making' involves creative work and prioritises active interpretation and organisation of performance. It opens up diverse ways of programming or for example of incorporating

improvisatory aspects of performance alongside composed music. Equally it opens up different ways of engaging with audiences and participants, of collaborating or co-creating with them, as well as with other artists. The musician as a maker in society always creates afresh, **and** for a specific situation and context. This also means that it embraces the political and moral implications of being a professional musician. The next steps to progress this will be for further discussion at the conference and to find a way to collaboratively move forward and start to achieve these ambitions.