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Nomadic musicians

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NOMADIC MUSICIANS**

ABSTRACT: This paper explores the evolving landscape of higher music education through the lens of curriculum reforms over the past two decades. It identifies three waves of reforms that have shaped the curricula in Dutch conservatories: the integration of research, the promotion of entrepreneurial skills, and the current emphasis on creativity, citizenship, and social engagement. The paper highlights the shift from externally imposed changes to student-driven demands for reform, reflecting a growing disconnection between traditional art music and society. It examines the nomadic approach of modern musicians, who seek to connect their craft with broader social contexts and other artistic disciplines. This shift towards project-based education and student-centred learning challenges traditional notions of musical autonomy, raising questions about the future direction of higher music education and the professional roles it prepares students for. The study argues for a balanced approach that maintains the core competencies of musicianship while embracing the flexibility and interdisciplinary connections demanded by contemporary society.

KEYWORDS: higher music education, curriculum reforms, nomadic musicianship, student-centred learning, project-based education, musical autonomy, social engagement, interdisciplinary approaches, creativity in music, entrepreneurial skills in music.

Looking at curriculum reforms in higher music education (henceforth HME) in the past two decades, several waves of reforms can be distinguished, not necessarily happening simultaneously or in the same order at every place but following broader developments in culture and society, and in national and European educational policy. At Dutch conservatories, three waves of curriculum reforms can be distinguished in the past decades (TITRE 2022).

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** This text is a revised transcript of a lecture given at the symposium *The Music/ian is Present* (Novi Sad, 16 September 2022), in the context of the DEMUSIS Erasmus+ capacity-building project. It summarises and discusses insights from the book *The Promise of Music. Hopes and Expectations in Higher Music Education* (Craenen et al. 2022), a collection of 19 texts by teachers and students from the Royal Conservatoire The Hague, and more particularly the author's concept of "nomadic musicianship."

The first major reform took place almost two decades ago when research was integrated as part of the Bologna process. In the next phase, in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, entrepreneurial attitudes and competencies received increasing attention, with the underlying aim of helping young professional musicians become more independent of the goodwill of politics and taxpayer support. Today, we entered a third phase of reforms that extend the notions of research and entrepreneurship through concepts of creativity, citizenship, and social engagement, leading to the concept of the musician as a “maker in society.” It has been conceptualised in a recent paper and used as the theme of an overarching European-funded project of the AEC (GAUNT et al. 2021).

Curriculum reforms in HME are often prepared by thematic working groups and collaborative projects such as the DEMUSIS project. In the outcomes of such projects, we usually find optimistic and persuasive language that seeks to convince people inside music institutions of the need for a change—for instance through an emphasis on the role of research and entrepreneurship in higher music education—and of the new opportunities that such change may bring about. At the same time, depending on one’s perspective, reforms can also be perceived as a threat or a danger. A word like “entrepreneurship” can be understood as promoting creativity and risk-taking on the one hand and as an undesirable symptom of neoliberal and capitalist worldviews on the other. The same mixed reception may be found with the current emphasis on qualities such as flexibility and versatility. Reform-minded music teachers welcome the renewed interest in all things related to improvisation or interdisciplinary projects. However, more concerned classically-trained musicians might also hear in these words a possible devaluation of their specialised expertise and perceive them as the harbingers of a less stable professional environment.

While previous reforms—such as the integration of research into music curricula two decades ago—were seen by many as imposed from above, an interesting observation is that now it seems to be the students themselves who are pushing conservatories to speed up reforms (TITRE 2022). It is as if the COVID-19 pandemic and the past years of isolation have unleashed a sense of urgency on all sides of the educational spectrum, creating an acceleration of change.

One of the main drives in this climate of change is the loss of social prestige of art music in the past decades. The term “art music” indicates fields such as classical music not only or primarily motivated by commercial interests, which also implies that they at least partly rely on funding of different kinds—governmental or private. As such, they are also very sensitive to changes in the cultural discourse in society and politics. This explains why a broadly shared concern amongst musicians in this field is the perceived

weakness of the connections between their profession and society. In his essay “Nomadic Musicianship” (CRAENEN 2022), the author links this situation to the ideal of the autonomy of music, which still pervades our conservatories. Without going too much into history, it is relevant to remind here that the emergence of the European conservatory model, with the birth of the Paris Conservatoire at the end of the 18th century, happened at a time when music emancipated rapidly as an independent art form, and instrumental music forms such as symphonies, concertos, and string quartets became the embodiment of this autonomy of music.

Today, music presented in such a “pure” form, not in combination with other disciplines, i.e. not at the service of language or any other external purpose, seems to have lost a lot of its attractive force, and this seems to be true not only for classical music. For most people today, instrumental music is not something to listen to attentively in silence but rather something to dance to, to create an atmosphere for other activities, or it may have a therapeutical function as well.

In this regard, it might be disturbing to see how much conservatories are still investing in labour-intensive instrumental repertoires and craftsmanship. At the same time, the status of classical music also remains ambiguous. It has been declared a dead art form many times, and while its audiences have indeed been ageing and declining, it still shows remarkable resilience and versatility. It seems this phenomenon is often not very well understood by sociologists of music. From a socio-economic perspective, it is difficult to explain why so many young talented musicians still apply for conservatory programmes every year. But as we can read in the contributions of the students in *The Promise of Music*, there is something in dealing with music that remains very rewarding. Therefore, it can be said that the vitality of this field today is much more dependent on its makers than its audiences, and this might be different from the situation in commercial music.

Nevertheless, it also seems that the newest generation of our students is searching for new connections, for better ways to share their passion felt inside the music with the world. And it seems that this long-held ideal, the autonomy of music, is no longer felt by them as something to defend or worry about. In 2020 and 2021, together with pianist and curator Heloisa Amaral, the author conducted research into the choices master students in The Hague make in their so-called Master Project, a format in which students are expected to combine research, professional activities, and artistic development. It was surprising that more than half of over 120 students—a large majority of which came from the classical department—chose projects that focused on making crossovers to other musical genres or other artistic disciplines. These outcomes were confirmed in follow-up surveys of student

proposals in 2022 and 2023¹. Next to this cross-disciplinary interest, many students show a curatorial interest in emphasizing narrativity, storytelling, and audience interaction in their practice, while some (although not many) also mention topical subjects in their motivations such as gender-related issues or climate change. This reflects a tendency in the professional field as well—music festivals have been working with thematic approaches since long. This trend only seems to be intensifying, as if today's audiences need a theme or a personal story to connect to the music. It probably explains the search for what can be called the “aboutness of music” amongst the current generation of students, and this clearly goes against the famous quote of Igor Stravinsky that music is incapable of expressing anything but itself (STRAVINSKY 1936: 83). Unlike the traditional opposition between “absolute” and “programmatic” music, the current quest for “aboutness” should not be understood simply as a more narrative approach to musical composition and performance, but rather as an attempt to embed concert practice in a larger context. This may also be realised through focussing on changes within the musical creation process itself. For instance, in the testimonies and proposals of many master students, we can read their concern about the lack of diversity in classical music or the capitalist mechanisms to which the field of classical music is also subjected. Students also increasingly display an awareness that valuable knowledge for their career path is to be found outside the domain of music. Therefore, they engage with knowledge from health and wellbeing studies, sports sciences, culinary experiments, and much more. As composer Richard Barrett states, in contemporary composed and improvised art music, a shift of focus can be observed from what music can be (the musical material) to *how it is made* (BARRETT 2023: 70). With this question of the *how*, ethical considerations also start to come to the table. Who is involved in the making of music? What is the relation between composers and performers in a creation process? Can we still fly around the globe whole symphony orchestras in times of climate crisis?

These questions explain why there is an eagerness in HME to make new connections to other knowledge fields, other artistic concepts, and other communities, although it is also clear that conservatories cannot accommodate all these possibilities at once. The result is a more nomadic behaviour of our music students, in artistic, academic, and engaged ways. They start exploring new themes and possibilities, sometimes from a strong personal engagement with the world but also in more pragmatic ways, depending on the opportunities and the expertise available. These nomadic musicians are driven by a combination of curiosity, concern, scarcity or perhaps also an

¹ A discussion of these results can be found in “Creative and Social Intentions in Research Proposals of Music Performance Students. A Reality Check of Curriculum Discourse in Higher Music Education” (CRAENEN 2024).

abundance of resources, and above all by a desire to make a meaningful contribution to the world they live in.

Nomadic approaches to music creation imply less predictability. How do conservatories cope with this? What should be the core of the music curriculum if valuable expertise is often to be found outside the conservatory? Three general, often complementary tendencies of a reorientation can be observed:

1. The first is the emphasis on the so-called meta-competencies. These can range from problem-solving, reflective or communicative skills, to aspects of citizenship and social engagement. A risk of using such words is that they remain too abstract or sloganeering, or seem much more complex to realise when transposed to concrete situations. Social engagement may also come into conflict with values of artistic autonomy or quality. Nevertheless, there is a tendency today in the discourse around the curriculum to bridge such oppositions by proposing combinations of different sorts: traditional craftsmanship with co-creation, social engagement, activism, and more. In “The Musician as a Maker in Society” (GAUNT et al. 2021), such combinations are called “partnering values.” This sounds very interesting as a concept, although there is a doubt that “adding up” values, skills, and competencies is always the best response to the current challenges. Taking into account the pressure on curriculum, one could also imagine new programmes in which other and more specific choices are made, implying that existing norms and standards have to be adjusted to make room for something new.
2. The second feature of the reorientation is to be found in the greater responsibility given to students to define their own learning trajectory. The so-called “student-centred” learning promotes the autonomy of students. The experience of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague with such approach is that it may indeed stimulate ownership and foster experimentation and autodidactic learning, especially when students search beyond their own discipline. A drawback is that students may sometimes lose a lot of time reinventing the wheel, or get lost in possibilities. Therefore, giving more autonomy to students can never be enough. Institutions have a responsibility to bring together musicians, researchers, and experts in specific areas, such as the role of music in public space. This may lead to new “communities of practice” and perhaps even to new professional profiles that are quite different from the ones we are familiar with.
3. The third form of reorientation can be found in project-based approaches to curriculum, which strongly resonates with the notion of the nomadic. The central idea of project-based education is that people learn by doing,

and that real-world situations can offer a context to integrate a diversity of skills in a holistic and reflective way. Project-based approaches often oppose the ideal of the autonomy of music because they usually start from an already existing context that to a large extent determines what is possible. Performing music in public spaces, in shelters or refugee centres, or at the bedside of a patient, requires insight into the situation and background of the participants, and this will inevitably have an impact on what is possible artistically.

A crucial question concerning project-based education is what provides the ground or the continuity in curriculum. If an educational programme becomes a project, to what extent can it really prepare for a future practice that will probably consist of very different and unforeseeable types of projects? A part of the answer may be found in the first reorientation discussed above—a focus on meta-competencies rather than specialisation. However, most conservatories will look first at traditional craftsmanship as a starting point from which new orientations can take place. Therefore, they emphasize developing social competencies *as a pianist* or finding a role in a community through doing local projects *as a composer*. Some institutions are experimenting with programmes where traditional craftsmanship seems to be less central to the thinking and the focus is more on specific contexts or curatorial approaches. In most cases, mastering an instrument and musical skills is still a requirement to enter such a programme, but in the long term, this might lead to a fundamental change of perspective, and only time will tell to what extent this also can lead to new professional profiles.

It has to be acknowledged that student-centric and project- or context-driven approaches in HME are still in an experimental phase to properly evaluate their impact on professional music practice, and this is something that should be monitored and evaluated in the near future. Therefore, while searching for new grounding, it may be worthwhile to return to the music itself. All students and teachers who contributed to *The Promise of Music* seem to share a trust in what can be called the “resonating power” of music. It can be argued that this power precedes any communicative, social, or therapeutic functions of music. In that sense giving up completely the ideal of music autonomy might be a mistake because it is not only a cultural construct or an invention of idealist philosophers and composers but also an expression of a universal human sensitivity, a *musicality* that can resonate beyond borders of identity, language and culture, at least if we create the conditions for it.

Defending this ideal requires reinforcing the social and political trust in music and creating the conditions, including financial ones, for music to resonate and for music education to amplify this resonance. Therefore, we

need projects like the DEMUSIS to offer living examples of how art music can play its role in society in the most diverse places and contexts.

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Пол Кранен

Музичари номади

Сажетак

Овај рад истражује развој високог музичког образовања кроз призму реформи курикулума током последње две деценије. Идентификује три таласа реформи које су обликовале наставне планове и програме у холандским конзерваторијумима: интеграција истраживања, промоција предузетничких вештина и тренутни нагласак на креативности, грађанској свести и друштвеном ангажману. Рад наглашава прелазак са промена наметнутих споља ка захтевима за реформом које су покретали студенти, што одражава растућу неповезаност између традиционалне уметничке музике и друштва. Испитује номадски приступ савремених музичара, који настоје да повежу свој занат са ширим друштвеним контекстима и другим уметничким дисциплинама. Ова промена ка образовању заснованом на пројектима и учењу, усмерава студента да доводи у питање традиционалне појмове музичке аутономије, постављајући питања о будућем правцу високог музичког образовања и професионалним улогама за које оно припрема студенте. Студија се залаже за изbalансиран приступ који одржава основне компетенције музичара, истовремено прихватајући флексибилност и интердисциплинарне везе које захтева савремено друштво.

Кључне речи: високо музичко образовање, реформа наставног плана и програма, номадско музицирање, учење усмерено на студента, образовање засновано на пројектима, музичка аутономија, друштвени ангажман, интердисциплинарни приступи, креативност у музици, предузетничке вештине у музици.