

# TRINITY LABAN CONSERVATOIRE OF MUSIC & DANCE

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**Breaking musical barriers - using online learning to bring musicians together**

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## ***Breaking musical barriers – using online learning to bring musicians together***

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Given that the practice of music making is widely seen as a creative endeavour that involves artists interacting with each other, it is perhaps surprising that the culture around teaching musicians in UK Higher Education contains so many barriers that restrict creativity and keep different types of musician apart. Some barriers, such as tuition fees, and the geographical location of the conservatoires in major cities where living costs are higher, are perhaps more obvious than others; arguably, issues relating to cost can be effectively countered with targeted scholarship funds to help those who need it. However, issues that relate to the culture of conservatoire education, which largely seeks to conserve and replicate the past through teaching students to embody specific characteristics that have proved successful in previous years, are much harder to respond to if widening the nature of musical creativity is your goal. As Benedict (2015) has pointed out, 'access does not equal equity when provided by the dominant culture' (p.119). Being given the opportunity to study at a conservatoire does not necessarily mean that you will be accepted as an equal participant in the creation of new music. Szekely (2012) has stated that:

Requiring students to conform to a particular musical tradition – and its attendant habits, affects, ideas, traditions and assumptions about what constitutes musical learning – is at odds with the educational goal of learning to inhabit new, increasingly multiple spaces. (p.177).

In recent times, a new battleground has emerged over the use of the term 'creativity' in relation to music. Creativity traditionally referred to the ability to develop new work of aesthetic value, through (e.g., Sternberg [1985]) manifesting latent aspects of the self. Moran has dubbed this view of creativity as 'positive surprise' (p.82). More recently, however, it has become fashionable to champion creativity, or creative thinking, as a personal attribute that allows musicians to offer an economically valuable form of labour to society, with aesthetic qualities very much secondary to this. Since at least 2010, the UK government, through various measures, has sought to link the success of Higher Education establishments to the economic output of their graduates, and music has not been excluded from this agenda. Kannelopoulos (2015) has argued persuasively that the understanding of the term 'creativity' in Higher Education has thus been appropriated by Neoliberalism, writing that it has shifted 'from a notion that relates to welcoming difference as a means for cultivating personal freedom and democratic participation, to a notion that designates readiness to be considered as a legitimate "player" in the ruthless, competitive struggle for "creative work"' (p.320). The teaching of creativity is now valued as important because it produces young entrepreneurs who can react spontaneously to the needs of the market.

Since the introduction of university tuition fees, institutions have been under increasingly direct pressure to show through graduate destination statistics that their students are using their training to earn high incomes. The belief is that high incomes will justify the financial outlay of the students (and often their parents) as well as the

state funding involved. A conservatoire might be able to demonstrate that their graduates are highly-skilled musicians, creating work of immense cultural value and contributing to their communities through leading transformative, educational projects, but this is not valued, metrically, unless it can be demonstrated to also produce economic growth. In the current climate, the more your graduates earn, the better you must have taught them.

This is not to deny the duty of care that Higher Education institutions have towards their students to prepare them for life after graduation. As music conservatoires have traditionally focused on students aged between 18-25, the need to demonstrate how to sustain a financially viable career is quite understandable. Unfortunately, the range of external pressures have led to an increasing emphasis on outcome-based as opposed to process-based tuition. The banking model (Freire, 1996 [1970]) is prevalent, as conservatoires seek to fill their students with predetermined 'important knowledge' to prepare them for work in the music industry. Yet, there are other possible responses to the situation I have described, and this paper will outline some suggestions prompted by a new course that launched last September and which has just finished its first presentation.

The Certificate in the Practice of Music Making (CPMM) is a blended-learning course offered by Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in conjunction with the Open University, and uses a virtual learning environment (VLE) to enable musicians from a wide variety of genres to interact through both curated and open forums. These forums encourage the students to develop an understanding of each other before they meet to create new music together at a residential school near the end of the study year. Students on the CPMM are welcomed from any background or musical culture, provided that they are regularly making music with others in some way. The focus of the pedagogy is on stimulating personal transformation through encouraging curiosity in the music making of others. Formative assignments are supported by the use of a learning journal, using self-reflective learning to develop the students' understanding of their musical practice, and their sense of personal identity in relation to other musicians and the world around them. Through this process, they are reminded that they are both "*in and with the world*" (Freire, 1970, p.452).

The age range of the CPMM students is perhaps the most obvious point of difference from other UK music conservatoire courses. In general, the majority of music conservatoire students are aged between 18-25. On the CPMM, the first cohort varied in age from 18 to 70, with most students in their forties or fifties.

The CPMM also differs from other conservatoire courses, in that there are no restrictions as to the genre of music that the individual students operate within. The UK conservatoires were originally established to provide a training in Western Classical Art Music, and though jazz departments have now been allowed to exist (with Trinity Laban being the first to create one in 1999) and music theatre departments are flourishing, there remains a cultural block over formally admitting genres such as pop and folk into the conservatoire community. Electronic music is accepted in relation to contemporary classical composition, but genres relating to electronic dance music are not currently seen as appropriate in the conservatoire sector. Matthews (2015) has criticised this exclusion of certain genres as a form of

structural violence, writing that, 'in music, privilege determines whose music gets heard, who gets to create and participate in it, and whose music is excluded. It also determines which traditions count as musical' (p.239). Szekely (2012) argues that exclusion of some kind is an inevitable consequence of institutionalization '...as with other academic disciplines, music education must address and answer the call of institutionalization. It thus creates stipulations with respect to procedures, curricula, preferred genres, appropriate techniques, membership, and so on' (p.163). Narita and Green (2015) write that the inclusion of newer genres of music into the conservatoire curriculum would possibly be a false enhancement of student choice. They argue that student choices around genre are not 'free', as they are often a direct result of the 'rampant commodification and corporatization of pop music' (p.313). Arguably, conservatoires have a duty to redress this balance in favour of those genres that are not venerated by the marketplace.

Leaving aside this argument continues in respect of other conservatoire programmes, the first cohort of the CPMM welcomed musicians working in: punk, folk, brass band, pop, classical (orchestral and chamber), jazz, Christian rock, music theatre, choral music, function band, marching band, recorder group and busking. There were also two military musicians. Launching a new programme provides an extra flexibility concerning student types that is not bound so much by past experience. Existing programmes suffer from the expectations created by their history and the veneration of particular types of alumni; they often seek to replicate past successes through identifying personal attributes that have proved successful before, particularly those that are most marketable to sponsors and funding bodies, (which will ensure financial survival). This 'safety-first' approach extends even to the students that *are* accepted, as Szekely (2012) writes:

Attempts by students to venture into other creative, experimental, and other genre-mingling modes of music making are often discouraged... Therein is the irony of a *lack* of "individuality" that results from an emphasis on imitating other individual musicians in order to arrive at an "individual style" (p.171).

Perhaps more importantly, the CPMM is different from other HE music courses in that it attempts to bring musicians from different genres *together* in order to create new music. The mixing of genres does not happen at conservatoire level, where, for instance, jazz musicians and classical musicians are typically segregated into different classes of work. The most obvious reason for this segregation is to prepare each student for professional work in what is seen as their specific culture, and the need for a *lingua franca* within the classroom for this training to take place. Due to pressures outlined earlier, this need to train for the profession is seen as more important than free experimentation and mixing of genre. As Kannellopoulos (2015) has noted, 'The progressive modernist vision of education... has currently been abandoned in favor of a view of education as a vehicle for survival within twenty-first-century knowledge economies' (p.320). Alone amongst the conservatoires, Trinity Laban commits to an annual two-week festival of collaboration - CoLab - every February, where all students are taken off their regular timetable to collaborate in experimental projects; however, this is a lone example amidst current conservatoire culture.

Given the burden on conservatoires to demonstrate that their graduates are professionally successful, and a limited appetite amongst funding bodies to consider alternative measures of 'success', it is difficult for conservatoires to embrace cross-genre forms of music making; as the outcome cannot be predicted, such teaching is seen as a risky use of precious learning hours which are already tightly-squeezed. If a classical violist and a jazz saxophonist spend their time experimenting together and learning from each other, how will that prepare the classical violist for a career in a symphony orchestra? How will it help the saxophonist to learn their ii-V-I changes and bebop licks? As Moran (2010) explains:

...creativity creates a bumpier ride: The result is more unpredictable than if the situation is stable and we can count on tomorrow to be much like today was. Our optimism holds that new will be better, but the law of unintended consequences says we might want to hedge our bets (p.77).

There is no pressure on CPMM students to train for specific career types; whilst it is a Level 6 qualification (final year of undergraduate study), the students are not assessed on their ability to play their instrument or sing; rather, the achievement of Level 6 is demonstrated through four formative reflective-writing assignments, and a Final Project of self-directed work which is open to any form of output provided that the stated learning outcomes are demonstrated. For all assignments, students use a recording device (typically a mobile phone or tablet) to record examples of their musical practice, rehearsal, improvisation or performance which supports claims made in the written submission. As the nature of the Final Project is open, and the formative assignments are self-reflective statements that relate to each individual student's journey through the course, the students are not in direct competition with each other to provide the right answer to a set, factual question (e.g. *what key does this piece modulate to in bar 20?*). As the quality of their musical performance is not being assessed, there is less focus on stylistic judgments relating to genre.

This apparent focus on 'self', and the emphasising of 'student voice' over established pathways perhaps rings alarm bells in relation to what Spruce (2015) and Fielding (2004) identify as the "personalisation" agenda that lacks any "convincing account of the common good" (Fielding, 2004, p.205) and 'which serves to promote a key tenet of neo-liberal philosophy by privileging "self" over "community"'. Personalization is then promoted as being synonymous with freedom' (Spruce, p.291). I would argue that the CPMM has not fallen victim to this trap, for while the study of self is central to the learning aims of the programme, it is done so in relation to the individual's place in society and their music making within their community. If anything, it provides an antidote to the neo-liberal agenda, which seeks to encourage individuals to impose their identity over others (usually through some form of marketization of their music). The focus here is on sharing music.

Spruce (2015) refers to Fielding (2004), arguing that personalization, along with its handmaiden, "choice", 'typically provides a range of pre-ordained options which are limited to those that serve to sustain dominant discourses and power relationships' (Spruce, p.291). I would argue that this is not the case for the CPMM, as the choice of Final Project is left entirely open; the learning outcomes need to be demonstrated, but the form of the project is free. This situation provides what Green has referred to

as 'differentiation by outcome' (cited in Narita and Green, 2015, p.306), a task that is adaptable according to the differing abilities of each student.

The absence of any burden on the CPMM to reproduce what has been successful before, makes it possible to create a more open, problem-posing pedagogy inspired by Freire than is the case for other courses. In traditional conservatoire training, the wish to reproduce past success has led to a reliance on the master-apprentice model, (as documented by Schmidt [2012] and others), which is almost identical to the banking mode of knowledge transfer identified by Freire; each new cohort of students is encouraged to look at the pantheon of past successes as a place from which to draw their knowledge from. There is also an issue of homogenisation, with large cohorts of students graduating having modelled themselves on a narrow range of exemplars; a recent blog post by Chris Lloyd (2016), a graduate from the Royal Academy of Music, bemoaned the nonsensical approach to education that he experienced there whilst a student, describing a system full of paradoxes.

Having identified certain barriers to creativity evident in conservatoire education, and the ways in which the structure of the CPMM has tried to avoid them, I would like now to examine some observations from the first cohort of students to complete the course.

Turning first to the online forums, the curated discussions resulted in some interesting exchanges that demonstrated that students were learning from each other's embodied knowledge and adapting their perceptions of their place in the world as a result. An example came early in the course, after the students were asked to read the opening chapters of Ruth Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* (2007 [1989]). In this book, Finnegan examines the different music communities in Milton Keynes, and the motivations behind each form of music making. In response to this reading, the students were asked to consider why they themselves made music, and to share their reflections through a forum post.

The first students to respond posted about the important social role that music played in their lives. Their comments included:

- *I rehearse because I love playing music with other people... I perform as an excuse to have rehearsals!*
- *I enjoy the excuse to dress up and behave differently to my normal self...Engaging with an audience is something I enjoy a lot.*
- *I discovered that the weekly rehearsals and periodic engagements were an excellent way of allowing me to forget the stresses of employed work, if only for a few hours – and to 'take me out of myself' to concentrate on the music.*
- *... not only an educational experience, a de-stressing one, but also a social and developmental one. My life experiences would have been so much narrower without it!*
- *It is really difficult to say why I play music. I couldn't imagine not playing music. I may not always be playing the same style of music or the same instrument, but throughout my life there has always been something. I think maybe it's a fundamental part of being human - maybe part of the drive to create.*

Later in the discussion, one of the younger students posted their comment; this student had had violin lessons from the age of 3 and was preparing for a professional career, having instrumental lessons with a conservatoire professor. They posted:

*Music as a social activity is [a] pretty new idea to me. This course is challenging my perceptions and practices – in a good way. There was a point in the past when music felt far from social and involved a great deal of pressure, punishing regimes, and negative judgments. Expectations related to perfection and I was taught that music was not a place for the technically weak or fallible.. Ensembles were not about socialisation but ‘professionalism’ and perfect performance. Interaction with the audience was limited to conveying the composer’s ideas.*

The alteration of this student’s world-view is an example of what Green describes as ‘delineated meaning’, one that is created through interactions with other students (cited in Narita and Green, 2015, p.307). An observation of difference, such as this, is not uncommon among conservatoire students, but it usually occurs a few years after graduation, as the student realises that they have been learning in a somewhat artificial environment, and that the function of music in the lives of many other musicians is quite different to their own. Amongst this first CPMM cohort, some students were preparing for a professional life, some were treating themselves to the course as a retirement gift, others were balancing their study with full-time work or caring responsibilities - the wide range of life experiences inherent in this mixed-age cohort allowed for a resulting wider range of observations than would typically be found in a cohort made exclusively of 18-25 year-olds. It is also worth pointing out that this conversation took place between musicians from England, Scotland, Switzerland and Jersey – musicians that would not normally have been able to meet in this way.

The second exchange that I would like to share came out of a discussion on performance anxiety. In this online forum, students were asked to post about their experiences of feeling nervous in public performance. Two classically-trained musicians made assumptions about pop musicians, and were gently corrected by a pop musician:

*Classical musician 1: I try to make the best of any adverse circumstances and once on stage I feel OK. Sadly, I have at times witnessed severe anxiety in other classical musicians - the shakes, nausea, even physical sickness. I cannot help contrasting this with the pumped-up joy with which rock bands seem to enter the stage – are they as relaxed as they seem?*

Classical musician 2: *I too wonder whether the apparently exuberant performance by, say, a 'hard rock' pop group is as spontaneous as it seems or, sometimes, perhaps camouflaged by 'substances'.*

Pop musician: *I suspect some rock bands are as relaxed as they seem. Personally I cannot have any alcohol before or during a performance to calm me down as I think it might affect it.*

This exchange is a reminder that, as Matthews (2015) has explained, '... every music education environment offers genuine opportunities for important social transformation' (p.248). Musicians often make assumptions about the cultures of other genres, and this sort of dialogue can demystify and nurture understanding between different groups. Again, the students in this conversation operated in completely different cultures and would not normally have met through their usual networks. Learning about each other's different approaches, from each other, transformed their perceptions of the world and their places within it.

At the residential school, these musicians met, physically, for the first time. As they had got to know each other through the VLE, a level of trust had been generated that enabled them to collaborate, thus creating original musical interpretations borne of their own agency.

The improvisation sessions were particularly illuminating, as musicians from different traditions were put into small groups and asked to create compositions in response to curated stimuli. This approach to improvisation allowed for the demonstration of Szekely's (2012) view that 'A more expansive view of improvisation would... acknowledge that when people come together to improvise, they bring to the music their full ranges of life experience, seeking collectively to create something both new and meaningful' (p.170). The improvisation tutor, Douglas Finch, was amazed by the fecundity of some of the work produced by these mixed-genre groups.

Following the Residential School, the students worked on their Final Projects. These included: creating a set of arrangements for their group(s), recording an album with new collaborators, writing a teaching resource for their students that expressed their philosophy of approach, organising a large community performance, organising a charity fundraiser and many other examples. Reading the concluding paragraphs from these projects, it became clear that the trajectory of learning had given a number of students the insight to make positive changes to their approaches to music making.

Firstly, the emotional and social support provided by the forums generated hope among those whose confidence was low. One student, who had been told previously that they were a 'bad improviser' was able to re-assess their perception of self and validate what they were producing; this student has now formed their own improvising group. Another student had enrolled on the course to return to practical music making after a psychologically damaging childhood training that had left them feeling worthless and untalented; this student is now performing publicly and enjoying the experience. A third student had only ever sung in choirs, thinking that they were 'not good enough' to sing in smaller groups; this student has now formed a duo and is performing in residential homes for adults with learning disabilities – a

personal ambition that was identified during the trajectory of the course. Within an inclusive atmosphere these students flourished and developed the confidence to take on new opportunities.

Moran (2010) emphasizes the importance of hope in generating creativity:

Hope signifies a desired future state. It involves optimism, thriving, and anticipated positive change. Hope instills balance, providing a more psychologically stable path toward the future. Creativity breeds both hope and benefits from hope because it provides a way to realize that hope (p.76.)

We are reminded here of Freire's Pedagogy of Hope:

'One of the tasks of the progressive educator, through a serious, correct political analysis, is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be. After all, without hope there is little we can do' (p.3).

In the following example, a student underwent a significant change of perception in terms of how he perceived the ownership of artistic work. Prior to the CPMM, this student had received an education that had convinced them that their own musical personality was largely a hindrance to authentic musical interpretation, a belief that the CPMM curriculum subsequently shattered. In this respect (a changing of perception) Narita and Green (2015) have linked Freire's concept of 'conscientization' with Marx, in terms of the need for the student to 'throw off their "false consciousness" – to recognise "arbitrariness"' (p.308). The student in question wrote:

*I have completed something of a personal journey, having had a long-held view prior to the start of the CPMM course that the composer had sole ownership of the creative and artistic input to a musical experience. A consideration of the role of the performer and the requirements of the listener during the course, however, has altered my opinion on this and I now recognise that creativity by the performer and listener are an essential requirement in order to complete the artistic enterprise initiated by the composer.*

On a wider scale, the students' experiences have impacted on communities across the UK, as personal transformations have led to new approaches towards their music making in their local communities. For instance, A wind band in Malmesbury now tune by ear, not with an electronic tuner; a choir in the Isle of Man now practise intervals together at the start of rehearsal, and a group of local schools in Lichfield now collaborate together to perform large choral works. As Moran (2010) has stated, 'Creativity is a particularly visible way of impacting others in our communities because it changes the status quo for individuals and sometimes for the entire group' (p.77).

In conclusion, this first year has shown specific advantages relating to a blended-learning model that welcomes a wide demographic of student. Transformational learning has taken place that would not have done so in other contexts. The artistic identity of the individual students has been placed at the heart of the process; the musicians have not been placed under pressure to conform to a standard,

homogenised 'ideal', yet they have been encouraged to contemplate their place in the world and how their music connects with their communities.

Szekely (2012) reminds us that:

To effectively enhance music teaching and learning, a music education profession requires systematizing, ordering, regulating, and boundary-setting. The question we need to ask from time to time is, at what cost?' (p.164).

Being the Programme Leader for the CPMM in its first presentation, while concurrently teaching on other HE programmes, has given me a chance to contemplate the extent of these costs. Freire wrote that, 'Teachers... have an ethical obligation to be 'biased,' that is, to direct their teaching towards the construction of a just and humane society' (cited in McCowan, 2006, p.68). I feel this obligation in my vocation as a teacher, and am frustrated when structural barriers or cultural conventions prevent me from pursuing these aims.

Kannellopoulos (2015) has called for small developments 'that produce small but not insignificant cracks to the perceived ways of thinking about creativity' (p.330). The CPMM could prove to be one of these cracks, and my hope is that it can provide an example for how musical creativity can be nurtured in other contexts. I leave the last word to Szekely (2012):

'Change only threatens or undermines music education if we start with the flawed assumption that it is an entity rather than a process. The notion of change as process has the value of actually helping to define and enrich the discipline of music education' (p.177).

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