

Paul Craenen (ed.)

The promise of music

Hopes and expectations
in higher music education

Garant

Antwerp - Apeldoorn

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Content

Preface	7
<i>Stefan Gies</i>	
Introduction	11
<i>Paul Craenen</i>	
Once a pilgrim – Always a pilgrim	15
<i>Julia Pallanch</i>	
Nomadic musicianship	19
<i>Paul Craenen</i>	
Memories and contradictions	41
<i>Laura von der Goltz</i>	
My anchor	45
<i>Abigail Rowland</i>	
The promise of authenticity	51
<i>Johannes Boer</i>	
The composition of promise	67
<i>Richard Barrett</i>	
Live beyond life	81
<i>Noppakorn Auesirinucroch</i>	
I can't compose without my computer	85
<i>Celia Swart</i>	
Instruments of desire	89
Computer-operated prototyping machines and the development of musical instruments in a fluid division of roles between composer and performer	
<i>Aart Strootman</i>	

INHOUD

The future is intersectional <i>Shanice Skinner</i>	99
Tonight the time has come – lyrics <i>Dimitri Koutantos</i>	103
Mind the artistic gap Rethinking the concept of artistic quality within higher music education <i>Loes Rusch</i>	105
My relationship to music changes with my relationship to the world <i>Richard Hughes</i>	117
The worth of music What is it good for? <i>Sean Bell</i>	121
Moving with the times The changing profession of the music teacher <i>Margi Kirschenmann, Suzan Overmeer and Adri de Vugt</i>	125
No longer the silent observer <i>Katharina Jacob</i>	137
‘It has become mine’ <i>Petra Ruth Alexandry in conversation with Petra Ruth Alexandry</i>	139
Shock therapy The Royal Conservatoire and its classical department before, during and after COVID-19 <i>Marlon Titre</i>	143

Preface

Stefan Gies

PAUL CRAENEN PUT A QUESTION to young emerging professionals, as well as to experienced musicians and higher education teachers, asking how they think music today might be offering a promise. The ‘promise of music’ may have different meanings in this context. As a musician, one might ask:

- What promise does music make to me to enrich my life as a musician?
- What does music as a profession promise to me? What do I expect by making music my profession?
- What promise have I made to an audience that decides to listen to my music?

But one can also ask whether music promises to make the world better, to make people to be better human beings or to promote tolerance and social inclusivity – and how, if the answer to it is ‘yes’, this promise might be kept? The answers given to these questions by master’s students and experienced teachers at the Royal Conservatoire The Hague reflect the variety of possible understandings of what ‘promise’ might mean. But this diversity also reveals a remarkable core of shared experiences, interpretations, hopes and attitudes.

First of all, there is the experience of the *acceleration of change* that is explicitly or implicitly mentioned in almost all articles. Some welcome this phenomenon, others rise to the challenge it represents, but not a single one out of the 20 authors oppose or resist the change. No trace of cultural despair, and the once pervasive arrogance with which the representatives of ‘highbrow’ art music used to approach popular and foreign cultures has apparently vanished into air. Ironically, we have a representative of so-called Early Music enthusiastically welcoming the dynamic that is inherent in this change, discovering as he does almost

seismic energies in this change, more suitable to inducing renewal than to destroying the old: 'Art does not tolerate repetition'.

The question whether the dominant *concept of quality* at Higher Music Education Institutions (HMEIs) is still up-to-date runs like a red thread through the texts. At first glance it looks as if the question would be answered by a unanimous no. But upon taking a closer look it becomes clear that the common point in these texts is their agreement that the system for defining quality, as it currently predominates at HMEIs, is too one-dimensional. Beyond this agreement, there is an empty space that each author fills in differently, depending on individual perspective. For an educator, quality means something different than it does for a composer, and for them it means something different than it does for a performer. Loes Rusch identifies 'a gap between the tools and techniques offered at the bachelor departments [...] and the way successful graduated jazz musicians develop more full-fledged artistic ideas.' Interestingly enough, the term 'quality' only appears twice in the student testimonials, and even then, it does not stand for what the teaching staff members are discussing. In one case, it refers to the high-fidelity quality of technical devices, another student ponders about the quality(s) of music for the enrichment of human existence in an existential-philosophical sense. Could it be that quality isn't at all an issue for students? It probably still is, but they don't call it by that name any longer.

Digitisation has changed musical life at all levels, and since COVID-19, this message has reached also the musicians' community. Marlon Titre speaks of a salutary shock, and Aart Strootman dreams of emancipating the composer's imagination from the limited sonic possibilities of age-old analog instruments. Numerous others before him have done the same, but unlike Busoni, Varèse, Stockhausen or Lachenmann, Strootman can allow himself to dream of a 3-D printer. Here, too, there is very little sense of the cultural despair of bygone days, but between the lines it becomes sensible how much pressure the increasing digitisation is laying on the shoulders of performers, teachers and educators.

And what about the students? In contrast to the teaching staff members who are (mostly) from the older generation, memories of life in a non-digital world are not part of the students' personal experience. And so the question arises to whom the emblematic statement is addressed that young composer Celia Swart uses by way of headline to her student

testimonial: ‘I can’t compose music without my computer!’ Does she want to justify or even apologise? Is it the defiant answer to annoying questions she gets asked over and over again? Is the statement an expression of pride in having freed herself from dependency on pencil and eraser? Probably a bit of everything, but above all it bears witness to the fact that a young generation is capable of productively and constructively reflecting on the generation gap in dealing with the digital shift.

Young emerging professional musicians want to know for whom they are making music. Identities as artists are often proactively constructed in a long, controlled process and are no longer selected from a manageable repertoire of standardised role models. It seems that musicianship has become more diverse, but also more stressful than it used to be. No other topic in the present anthology is discussed in as multifaceted a way as is *the social mission of art* and the *raison d’être* of the musical profession. The issue as such is not new, but some aspects of looking at it are. It is heartening to see the increase of the number of young musicians with a different social background from that of growing up within a well-educated white bourgeois middle class environment. And it is precisely those coming from ‘outside’ who provide new and fresh impulses for the preservation and steady further development of our musical heritage. The articles also suggest there might be a specifically Dutch aspect to the way they treat the relationship between art and society. At least in Europe, there is certainly no other non-English-speaking country in which the everyday practice of art and culture is as heavily burdened by neoliberal thought. It becomes clear that not everyone is happy with this state of affairs, but it remains unclear to outsiders whether they are taking it for granted or whether they have given up the fight.

At HMEIs all across Europe, one can often hear the complaint that the number of young people who are able to meet the requirements of the entrance exams and are thus capable of carrying forward the European musical heritage at the level of excellence we are used to is decreasing from year to year. Reading the reflections and testimonials compiled in this valuable and readable anthology suggests that the opposite might be true. Perhaps it is not some supposed lack of highly talented young musical talent that is causing problems for the HMEIs in recruiting young talents, but rather the lack of flexibility in further developing the entrance requirements and, more generally, their expectations

STEFAN GIES

regarding the skills and competences needed to pursue a successful career as professional musician. Audiences today expect different things from art and culture than they used to; the way people deal with music and musical life as such has changed and will continue to change with great dynamism. Perhaps the HMEIs have simply neglected to readjust their searchlights regularly and to take ongoing changes into consideration? Perhaps they are looking for tomorrow's professional musicians based on ideal biographies that are on the verge of extinction? It seems worthwhile to give due consideration to this thought when following up on the topic. The numerous and very valuable contributions to this publication should provide good new starting points for this urgent debate.

Stefan Gies

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Introduction

Paul Craenen

YOUNG MUSICIANS WHO START professional music studies today have a mission. Choosing a labour-intensive study, in a highly competitive environment that offers little guarantee of a stable job, requires courage and faith. Faith in their own abilities, but also in the potential of music for the world of tomorrow. But what and where is this hope that the aspiring professional musician can put in music? This publication asks how music today can be promising, and how conservatories can help to fulfil that promise.

Focusing on what is promising does not mean that this book is about futurology or speculation about a distant musical future. That which holds out promise is not yet a reality, but what is recognised as promising necessarily appeals to today's ambitions or ideals. That is why we undertake a quest for a better understanding of what guides our musical actions and listening. We prick up our ears to recent modulations, shifts in sound and rhythm in musical practice, but also to the harbingers of change that may not first become audible in the music itself, but in the discourse that surrounds it. After all, the past teaches us that it is often developments around music that determine what can resound as promising *within* music. The temptation is great to look for connecting themes and global evolutions, as we recognise them in the musical revolutions of the past. However, today's storylines seem to be drifting in different directions more than ever. In the public domain, identity, diversity and the importance of heritage and ownership are themes that provoke controversy and lead to conflicting viewpoints. Musical institutions, including conservatories, are caught between the historically embedded values and symbols of which they are the heirs and treasure-holders, and the ever-increasing expectations to take a position in the social polarisations around themes such as decolonisation, Black Lives Matter,

#MeToo and cultural power relations, all against the backdrop of ecological crises and disruptive technologies.

In contrast to this sense of fragmentation and cultural upheaval, we see in the youngest generation of music students a new engagement, a need to be part of the world they live in as musicians. In our search for what is musically promising, we therefore want to start by listening to this upcoming generation of musicians. They feel the musical pulse of our world better than anyone and are focused on what is yet to come. That is why we asked master's students from various musical disciplines to share their vision. To what extent can we hear in their testimonies the faith in a musical future that they themselves can shape? How does the state of the world inspire their practice? Do they experience the conservatory as a sanctuary or a laboratory? Is there an atmosphere of sacred devotion or is there excitement about what is to come?

Music students who enter the conservatory from all corners of the world are usually already advanced musicians themselves. They have often excelled for many years on their instrument or as creators in their own environment. In that respect, being admitted to professional music education is not only an acknowledgement of their talent, but also an endorsement of the cultural infrastructure and the musical education or talent development programmes in which that talent has been able to blossom. At the same time, the world of orchestras, conservatories, festivals and other music institutions still provides a strong motivation for many music students to build a successful musical career within that established music world, with its challenging standards and norms of excellence. We therefore surround the student testimonies with contributions from researchers and teachers who reflect on whether and how the promises of the past are still meaningful today, and how conservatories can keep up with current developments in the professional music field and wider culture and society.

Johannes Boer describes how the ideal of authenticity that inspired the early music movement in the second half of the 20th century has since been transformed into a spectrum with many variants living side by side or in competition with each other. Against this background of a 'survival of the fittest', the current focus on historical improvisation in the early music departments of conservatories offers opportunities to build new bridges between the past and present through creation and

recreation, between the initial ideals of the early music movement and more recent aspirations to provide openings for external influences and musical crossovers as well.

The importance of spontaneity, improvisation and collaboration emerges strongly in several contributions. Richard Barrett argues that in contemporary music creation, the focus is shifting from *what* music can be, to *how* it is created and experienced. This shift requires a methodological renewal in music education and new tools to make both creation and performance more collaborative, for example through the use of digital technologies.

An example of this can be found in the contribution by composer and guitarist Aart Strootman, which addresses the anachronism of the traditionally static, historical instrumental models in music creation. Strootman investigates how the possibilities of 3D printing and 2D laser cutting can be used to develop new instrumental prototypes that can be shared digitally as scalable vector graphics from anywhere in the world, without the need for physical transport. These prototypes can be adapted at any time to the needs or wishes of musicians or creating artists, thus leading to more fluid instrumental approaches and a blurring of the traditional roles of performers, composers and instrument builders.

The growing importance of interdisciplinarity, diversity and social engagement puts the familiar norms and values of quality and excellence in music education to the test. Loes Rusch questions whether definitions of 'artistic quality' in the jazz department are not in need of revision. Is it sufficient today to have technical command of an instrument and a good theoretical basis and knowledge of the jazz tradition to be appreciated as a performing musician? Rusch maps out the opinions of bachelor students and teachers and investigates possible points of improvement in education by also making a link with tendencies in the current Dutch subsidy policy for performing arts.

Margi Kirschenmann, Suzan Overmeer and Adri de Vugt investigate how the choices of future music teachers are determined by their personal experiences and future expectations. How do aspiring music teachers see their own musicianship, and the role of artistry, ownership and entrepreneurship within it? And what infrastructure is needed to support their development? Kirschenmann, Overmeer and De Vugt offer the example of Amare, the new cultural centre in The Hague which, as a

centre that is firmly embedded in the urban social fabric, offers opportunities for students to develop into music teachers who can serve the entire professional field.

In the various student testimonies and contributions from researchers, there is clear evidence of a pre- and post-COVID era. COVID-19 produced a shock effect, an acceleration of evolutions that had often happened earlier, but whose importance and scope is only now becoming clear. Music students are looking more explicitly than before for connections between their own artistic work and social projects and perspectives. There is a strong urgency to develop new formats for sharing music both online and offline in a more versatile way. The potential for more intensive collaboration between the different music departments at the conservatory, but also with external artistic and social partners, is emphasised in almost all the contributions. Interdisciplinary learning from each other may become an important factor in making the music curriculum future-proof, but also in giving higher music education institutes a role in the cultural debate. Or, as Marlon Titre puts it, ‘...in this way, the conservatory can be a promise, not only for the students, but for the entire community it engages around them.’