

The 21st Century Conservatorium

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The following excerpt is from an Inaugural lecture delivered by Richard Vella on October 23 2007 at The Newcastle Conservatorium of Music, University of Newcastle.

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging the traditional custodians of this land, the Awabakal (*Arobbercle*) people and their elders, past and present.

We at Newcastle have an opportunity to show the Australian musical community an exciting future role for 21st century music education. My lecture presents an overview to some pedagogical issues facing tertiary music today and their relation to the music industry.

Technically, the word 'conservatorium' refers to our non-tertiary community music program. However, due its history here in Newcastle involving both tertiary and non tertiary structures, my use of the word 'conservatorium' will mainly refer to our tertiary music program.

The Music Industry

Before talking in detail about music, pedagogy and courses, I will discuss the higher education funding environment, and the music industry that graduates will enter, upon leaving the Con.

In 1988, the Hawke Labor government introduced the Higher Education Funding Act. This required any institution with less than 2000 students to amalgamate with a larger university partner. Since then, the tertiary music education environment has been in constant change.

Survival is based on music industry relevance and student numbers. There are now courses in industry skills, jazz, world music, music theatre, and music technology. Some institutions have begun to specialise in contemporary popular music such as Brisbane Conservatorium Gold Coast Campus.

Michael Hannan, in his book *Careers in Music*, identifies no less than 143 different jobs in music. In many ways, freelance musicians and composers belong to the small business sector. Music graduates enter the market selling their skills. These skills can be highly specialised or a blend of various skills. In either case, students must be totally aware of the market niche within which they wish to operate.

As with any new small business venture, it often takes at least five years to be profitable, be it a computer consultant, florist, service provider, etc. For many, in the initial stages of establishing a business, there will be a period of going into debt in order to finance the operation.

The music graduate will similarly take time to identify a market, establish networks, invest in capital infrastructure, get known to potential employers and develop audiences and clients. More often than not, this period will be financed by a range of activities, some musical some not.

The issues are important to acknowledge, however, with only three years to do a music degree, how does a conservatorium curriculum prepare graduates to enter the music industry as well as develop the necessary technological skills required of a 21st century musician?

What is a Conservatorium?

There are many historical resonances in the word 'conservatorium'. Its derivation can be traced back to the following root:

con-servo , āvi, ātum,

- I. ...to retain, keep something in existence, to hold up, maintain, to preserve, leave unhurt or safe

Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary*,
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.0059%3Aentry%3D%2310490>
Cited in The Perseus Digital Library <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>

In Europe and the US the term 'conservatory' or 'conservatoire' is used instead of conservatorium. A conservatory is defined as:

1. College or university school of music or a school devoted to other arts such as film (American Film Institute Conservatory)
2. a conservatoire, large greenhouse where plants are cultivated

Both these definitions imply a culture in which activities flourish, grow and are maintained.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica states that the term and institution 'conservatorium' derives from:

"...the Italian *conservatorio*, which in the Renaissance period and earlier denoted a type of orphanage ...The foundlings (*conservati*) were given musical instruction at state expense;...

<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9025945>

The Britannica goes on to say:

The *conservatori* were thus the first secular institutions equipped for training in practical music.

<http://www.britannica.com/ebc/article-9025945>

The training was for the choirs attached to churches. This shows that a conservatorium was as an industry provider.

We can amalgamate the various meanings of the word 'conservatorium' to embrace preservation and cultivation.

Preservation suggests the process of recovery such as the researching of traditional or stylistic performance techniques, while

Cultivation suggests the exploration of new contemporary performance practices, compositions or new relationships with audiences.

In the light of the above discussion, here is an updated interpretation of the term conservatorium:

Conservatorium: a hot house of activities associated with musical recovery and discovery and linked to the music industry and various communities.....

Towards a Theory of Repertoire

So how do we do foster musical discovery and recovery? One strategy is in the development of a *theory of repertoire*.

rĕpertōriūm , ii, n. [reperio] ,

I.□ *an inventory, catalogue, repertory* (post-class.),

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The word *repertoire* comes from the Latin *repertorium* meaning 'inventory' or 'catalogue'.

Repertoire is associated with the catalogue of works that ensembles and performers have under their 'belts'. In this sense, repertoire defines specialisation and identity. This could be defined by a period, style, composer's output, collection of diverse works, or even on an institutional level such as a conservatorium's curriculum offerings. I call this repertoire on the **macro level**.

On the **micro level**, repertoire as an inventory refers to the stock of techniques and ideas present in any single musical work. A composition may consist of gestures such as fast passages, leaps, pitch slides, harmonic and rhythmic formulae, etc: all contributing to the list that the composer or musician wants us to hear.

The collection of sounds within any work means that in order to play that work successfully, the musician must be aware of the references embedded in each gesture. For example, a trill in a piano solo is only meaningful if the player understands the expressive content behind that trill and its stylistic context. If not, the trill will be 'flat', inexpressive, and reduces the meaningfulness of the performance.

Therefore, repertoire, be it on the macro or micro level requires the recognition of diverse musical experiences. These experiences can be stylistic, technical or cultural....

Repertoire and Recognition

The root of the word *repertoire*, 'repertor', means 'a discoverer'.

rēpertor , ōris, m.

I. *a discoverer, inventor, deviser, author*

This enables us to explore many nuances. Through a collected musical inventory, we discover new musical experiences or sounds. This is similar to any devised collection of works which we discover, for example, when in a museum or art gallery.

The next series of examples show the role of repertoire on the macro and micro levels in the development of a musicianship. The examples are based on the use of speech rhythms in music. Whenever we speak, we are also speaking a rhythm.

The 16th century French chanson was a popular song form heard all around Paris. It modelled the Parisian declamatory speech style with usually one note for each syllable. Let us listen to an excerpt from Jacques Arcadelt's 16th century chanson.

3. *Margot labourez les vignes*, (Margot sings the vines), Jacques Arcadelt (1504? – 1568)

In these songs, the words controlled the musical form. They were often bawdy, sexy, physical, comic. They used sounds from everyday life such as bird calls, trumpets, natural sounds and people sounds. Now let us listen to Ravel's *Nicolette*, from his *Trois Chansons* (1915).

Upon hearing *Nicolette*, one is reminded of the previous 16th century version. The two works, on the macro level, 'speak' to each other over the duration of 350 years.

On the micro level of repertoire, Ravel includes the popular French chanson style using one note per syllable as part of his inventory of techniques. Just as the 16th French chanson referred to bawdiness and human utterances, so too does Ravel include bawdy utterances in his inventory. This is the wonderful pitch slide on the word 'jolie' (pretty) by the low male voices as if they are licking their lips at the sight of Nicolette.

To perform this piece properly, in other words go beyond the notes, a musician must be able to recognise the references, be they contemporary, popular or historical.

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has written much about this recognition process. To paraphrase and over simplify his work, Ricoeur says that we bring to any situation our own history.

This history interacts with that situation in order to understand it. The result is a deeper understanding of that experience thereby enriching future similar engagements.

A performer has the potential to enrich a performance of *Nicolette*, with an understanding of French declamatory speech patterns, the earlier French Chanson form or vernacular utterances such as the onomatopoeic glissando in the male voices on the word 'jolie'.

Let us now listen to a recorded excerpt from Edith Piaf's song *The beautiful story of love*. Again you will hear the direct relationship to the earlier French chanson style with the use of speech rhythms.

La Belle Histoire d'Amour,
Words by Edith Piaf, Music by Charles Dumont (1960)
Sung by Didier Fredeic

On the macro level, these three examples have defined a repertoire based on French declamatory speech rhythms. We have been able to understand the inventory on the micro level of each work by translating the experience from one work to inform the other. As we make these translations, musical knowledge crosses boundaries thereby broadening our understanding.

Now I would like to play two contemporary examples of speech and music representation. They definitely are not French chansons but excellent examples of contemporary speech declamatory style.

***Well may we say....* Robert Davidson (2001)**

Well may we say... by Robert Davidson enables us to identify and experience contemporary patterns in speech intonation and rhythm. The humour in this work is created by our recognition of a particular musical style associated with the speech rhythms and historical context.

The next example is modern a day equivalent to Ravel's *Nicolette* and the 16th century chanson by Jacques Arcadelt.

Testimonial Year, Hilltop Hoods (2007)

Like the previous chansons, the rap song *Testimonial Year* refers and comments to contemporary culture and sounds, using speech rhythms. Just as Arcadelt's *Margot works the vines* informed our listening of *Nicolette*, the experience of both these French Chansons informs our understanding of the rap song. This results with an understanding of the use of music and speech rhythm in all these works be it from the 16th century, early 20th or now.

Repertoire: knowledge recovery, discovery and rejuvenation

The Ravel and the 16th chanson incorporated their contemporary world around them. In being open to the world around us, a theory of repertoire helps us understand:

*where we have come from,
who we are, and
where we might like to be.*

Knowledge boundaries are traversed and the repertoire becomes strongly linked to location, community, history and ideas. Our musical identity is continually rejuvenated and invigorated. New knowledge and old knowledge are waiting to be discovered.

The Russian linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, in his wonderful book, *Rabelais and his World*, writes that rejuvenation is essential for growth, and this rejuvenation involves exploring opposites such as mixing high status with low status, the authoritative with the vernacular or the popular with the elite. This produces a thriving discourse. Opposites complement each other in a complex intricate game of quotation, parody, allusion, burrowing, juxtaposition and transformation. A dynamic relationship of renewal is created as everything is repositioned in relation to each other. Nothing is sacred in repertoire's desire to rejuvenate itself.

The above speech rhythm examples show how a tertiary music program can combine traditional, contemporary, popular and non-western music making. It is interesting to note that many conservatoria do not engage with contemporary music other than a few isolated examples. Therefore it begs the question: when does a work using popular or contemporary references become part of conservatorium's teaching repertoire?

Do we wait 10, 20, 30 years or simply embrace it now and establish an identity that points to the future“

The love for new sonic relationships and the preservation of historical sounds can be summed up with the following.

A diverse approach to repertoire enables us to hear:

New Sounds in Old Contexts
Old Sounds in New Contexts
New Sounds in New Contexts
Old Sounds in Old Contexts

In this way, students and staff members discover and recover musical knowledge and experience

REPERTOIRE and COLLABORATION

ICON,
performed by Continuum Sax and Mick Davison (didgeridu),
(2005)

Collaboration exists between individuals agreeing on working within the same terms of reference. The work you are hearing now is a collaboration between didgeridu musician Mick Davison and Marge Smith, lecturer in clarinet and saxophone. In this piece, the musicians are negotiating commonalities and differences. The work is a unique statement about reconciliation and new possibilities through repertoire creation. However collaboration can only exist if all musicians involved are open to translation.

Collaboration also can occur between the conservatorium and various musical communities. It is a partnership between the two. Any musical community will be defined by a particular choice of instruments and repertoire. A Scottish bagpipe signifies a very different musical repertoire and culture than does a harmonica. Hence a theory of repertoire must be open to the implicit relations that can exist between repertoire, instruments and community.

This is why I played the Piano accordion arrangement of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*. To evoke Paul Ricoeur's work again, in acknowledging this work, we are acknowledging the piano accordion as a 'foreign' instrument with its own history. The 'foreign' instrument in this case is the accordion but it could also be the banjo, didjeridu, etc.

So called folk and indigenous based instruments are seen as being 'foreign' to the catalogue of instruments found in the 19th century orchestra. It is interesting to note that the instruments of the 19th century orchestra underpin traditional conservatoria identity.

The 'foreign' instruments enable alternative music histories and other communities to be included. They are like "new sounds in old contexts". In doing so, repertoire becomes revitalised and opens the possibility for innovation and new community partnerships.

Repertoire as danger

Music is a sensory experience. It goes straight to the body and our being. Because of this sensuality, musicians over history have continually strived for new means of expression. This could be a power chord in a rock song or the opening chord of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. Musicians love to push boundaries, play with and revel in ambiguity, contrast and similarity. It is what musicians find pleasurable.

Think of the gorgeous extended chords in Mahler's symphonies, the transparent orchestrations of Debussy, the seductive rhythms of African music, the vocal colours of Bjork, or the ecstatic polyphony of Palestrina. As musicians we communicate through the body and this is why music, be it a performance or composition, is dangerous and exciting. It seduces us, demanding we give over to its sensuality.

Let us listen to Mozart's extraordinary 'Queen of the Night' aria from *The Magic Flute*.

**'Der Hölle Rache Kocht in meinem Herzen',
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,
from *The Magic Flute* (1791)**

Can you imagine what it must have felt like to have heard Mozart's Queen of the night aria for the first time: the extreme use of registers, the dramatic shifts in phrasing, rapid changes in orchestration, the ecstatic sound of the high voice, and shifting harmonies? Its impact must have been as shocking as Jimi Hendrix's guitar solos from the sixties or punk rock in the seventies.

While the vocabulary of Mozart's music was familiar to audiences with his use of tonality and rhythmic gestures, it was in the way he challenged, or rather played with, musical structure that made his music dangerous. The writer and pianist Charles Rosen writes about this danger in his book *The Classical Style*. For Rosen, Mozart's music was seductive in its desire to push the boundaries for expression.

Just as Mozart's music was dangerous in his time, so too we must allow the conservatorium curriculum to be open to 'danger' in our time. In other words: be open to the unfamiliar, the new, the foreign or the popular.

Because it is this 'danger', that may be the very future stuff that will feed our music graduates.....

.... To sum, a conservatorium's curriculum must be continuously porous at its boundaries so that it can embrace change and keep abreast of new ideas, pedagogies and developments. The music industry today demands not only traditional performance training skills but also:

- creative skills
- improvisation skills
- the ability to play different genres
- the use of appropriate contemporary technologies
- analytical and pattern recognition skills
- studio recording skills
- management, business and communication skills

- □ collaboration and team work skills
- □ problem solving strategies

These skills are fundamental to repertoire creation and recreation. In doing so, our curriculum preserves traditions but also cultivates innovation.

This is essential if we want our graduates to engage with the music industry and by default the knowledge economy. Whether it be a tango, a sonata, rap, a mass form, rock, fugue, orchestral work, metal, disco or glitch culture, these experiences are all to be included so that we produce a musician totally adept in performance and composition.

This is what empowers our graduates, and the way to empower the graduate is to give them opportunities throughout the curriculum to experiment, explore and evaluate.

Thank you. I would like to thank all staff and students in helping me putting together this evening's lecture.