

Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project

Quality, Assurance, Accountability: A Briefing Paper

The Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project has compared roles and operations of professionally oriented music schools in Europe and the United States. It has considered prospects and mechanisms for student and faculty exchanges, the extent to which there are commonalities sufficient to produce understanding and foster cooperation, and possibilities for improving present relationships. In music, quality is always an issue. In the profession, expectations remain extremely high, worldwide. Students and their institutions know the high level of competition for recognition and placement. They know that students' time in baccalaureate- or master's-level study is limited. Therefore, when student exchanges are being considered, comparisons of performance quality and curricular content become issues because time is limited and expectations are great. For artistic, intellectual, and physical reasons, student performers must sustain the quality of their instruction and their progression toward the highest competency.

This briefing paper explores questions of quality, assurance, and accountability from the perspective of music teaching institutions with high objectives for preparation of professional performers and composers. These institutions, both in Europe and in the United States, face challenges in dealing with issues of quality and its relationship to student and faculty exchanges that are different, though no less intense, than programmes focused on undergraduate general education, scholarly or scientific subjects, or pedagogy. Although this briefing paper will contain ideas and principles applicable to other music specializations, its focus on performance and composition addresses issues that to date have received little formal attention. This focus is a natural one because performers and composers work internationally, not only in the context of education in the profession, but in the world beyond it.

The Nature of Music Study

For aspiring professionals, music and music study are extremely important matters. Like many other disciplines, music is a combination of knowing and doing. Music performance requires an extremely high level of physical skill that must be obtained and sustained through hours of daily practice. Composition requires time-won mastery over a large range of information and processes. Music study also involves constant acquisition of theoretical and historical knowledge and skills to support and enrich the development of competencies in performance or composition. Progress means constant acquisition, refinement, and integration of the intellectual and technical means for artistry.

Music study is permeated with accountability. Music requires a special relationship between accuracy and freedom. In practice sessions, rehearsal, and even in performance, constant evaluation and adjustment are the norm.

The success of professional music study is evaluated in light of the high standards and high expectations of the larger musical world. Tours, recordings, and international competition continue to define professional expectations by exchange of work at the highest levels. In music, we have standards because we have art, not art because we have standards.

Educational Achievements

When music study is placed under the care of educational institutions, its nature dictates certain necessities. Musical excellence depends on the excellence of individuals. Therefore, even though a great deal of music is created for and by ensembles, the preparation of the individual musician is paramount. This reality is a major factor in the tradition of individual instruction central to the work of schools of music. At base, quality is an individual responsibility. Individuals who do not take this responsibility seriously cannot succeed as professional musicians.

Successful schools of music create conditions where individuals committed to quality are nurtured to the highest levels of achievement. Conservatories and schools of music have undertaken this responsibility historically with great success. There are no indications that these institutions plan to shirk this responsibility in the future.

Institutions engaged in higher music education have developed many traditional mechanisms for assessing the quality of student achievement. Naturally, many of these traditions are used worldwide. A range of evaluation techniques is evident, including jury examinations where many teachers judge students' performances. Institutions traditionally require high levels of achievement for graduation irrespective of time spent in the institution. Public recitals are also a standard feature of graduation requirements. All of these are intended to ensure that the individual music student has acquired the set of abilities necessary to work as a professional. Although techniques of evaluation and specific content priorities may change, institutions have fulfilled these functions as long as professional preparation has been an institutional responsibility.

Realities among Music Schools

Shared traditions, achievements, and aspirations produce, in an overall sense, a common foundation for schools of music in Europe and the United States. Evidence obtained from attending concerts and listening to recordings makes it clear that these institutions are continuing to nurture individual competence to the highest levels. However, both the foundation and the evidence reveal and document another fact about music as an art: there is more than one way to reach a common goal. Different approaches and different interpretations work. The process is not the content. This fact produces differences in the ways that professional music schools order their curricula, their schedules of instruction, their priorities, and their methods. These differences are present in the United States, where there are common curricular frameworks and a system for transferring credit. However, differences are far more apparent among the nations of Europe, and even among the specific conservatories within nations. While efforts are under way in Europe to create a greater degree of comparability in structural terms, institutions developing exchange programmes still have the challenge of matching requirements, levels of expectations, and schedules on an institution-to-institution basis.

Professional music schools are mostly institutions of higher education. Thus, most are influenced by decisions taken for higher education as a whole. In Europe and in the United States, governments, businesses, and citizens are expressing new sets of expectations for higher education. Issues of access, mobility, affordability, and quality assurance are among the most prominent themes, irrespective of whether higher education is publicly or privately funded. Worldwide, greater interest in the mobility of students and educational credits has raised the connection between quality and mobility to a new level of prominence. Naturally, a simple solution seems to be greater standardization. Such views continue to have a strong influence on discussions about accountability and what has come to be called quality assurance.

One of the greatest dangers here grows from the idea that expertise and historical achievements in a specific discipline should take second or third place to expertise in establishing and operating quality-assurance systems. Obviously, such a view is counter to the nature of music and music study. It is also contrary to the demonstrated fact that there is more than one educational path to both competence and excellence.

Accountability, quality assurance, and student mobility are deeply complex subjects, and thus policy development in these areas requires great care. Danger comes when accountability requirements and processes become more focused on bureaucratic power than on individual learning. While musicians need no mandates or exhortations to set and maintain standards, schools of music now have a serious challenge. They must find a way to preserve conditions for excellence while at the same time responding to conditions in and mandates for higher education as a whole.

Initiatives, Trends, and Issues

In the recent past, requirements for student achievement were controlled primarily by institutions and faculties. Oversight from national ministries or accrediting agencies did not alter the responsibility of institutions and faculties for setting requirements in detail. For reasons we have already discussed, many current advocates are stressing standardization. In the past, standards were set in terms of end results established and maintained by each professional field. Now there are pressures to deal with achievement, methods, and stages along to the way to the final result in terms established and maintained by those outside the field.

Evaluations of students and institutions have traditionally been grounded in the expertise of reviewers, especially in terms of accountability for content. The higher the education, the more reliance is placed on high levels of expertise. For many of the reasons we have discussed, and because of applications of technological and mathematical values to evaluation theory, there are considerable external pressures to objectify reviews. These pressures can result in the creation of accountability systems that do not rely on disciplinary expertise. In the view of proponents, if such systems are put into place, anyone should be able to look at the resulting set of numbers or indicators and tell how well students or institutions are doing. This view is contrary to the concept of evaluation based on expertise, and to the ways musicians evaluate each other's work, especially at higher levels.

As global exchange evolves, this simplistic concept becomes more attractive and thus more dangerous. There *is* an increasing need to develop common frameworks for understanding, expectations, and accomplishments in different nations and among institutions. However, the word *framework* is chosen carefully. It signifies a basic common structure. The details are left to specific institutions and individuals. When a high level of detail is prescribed and evaluation is no longer based on expert judgment, one no longer has a framework, but rather a detailed set of specifications and mechanical reviews for compliance.

Currently, there are pressures to create better understanding and more cooperation by harmonizing frameworks. One goal is to make transactions more efficient by reducing the work involved in correlating curricular requirements and expectations between two or more institutions. As long as frameworks truly remain frameworks, such efficiency comes at a reasonable price. However, the cost of over-specification is great, especially if it is assessed technically rather than artistically and imposed by regulatory force. A productive relationship between commonality and differences is important to the health of professional music study. Evaluation by experts is indigenous to the field. These issues must be watched carefully.

The essence and quality of professional music study in Europe and the United States can be harmed if the following five ideas become the basis for evaluations.

First, there is the idea that quality in education can be dealt with in the same way as quality on a factory assembly line. In this view, standards mean standardization.

A second idea holds that the way something is done is more important than what is done. Here, methodology and technique are all-important; process has a far higher priority than content.

A third idea holds that quality is defined in terms beyond the discipline itself. In other words, quality is defined in terms of meeting social, political, or economic goals that are deemed ideal rather than actual teaching and learning in the discipline.

A fourth idea holds that to be valid, all accountability must have a mathematical base. It is a short step to the position that only things that can be counted matter. A fifth idea is that professionals in a field constitute a special interest group and thus they should not have a leadership or primary role in evaluations in their area of expertise.

Any one of these five beliefs is extremely problematical for quality assurance and accountability in music. And when the five are combined together, as they often are, the mixture is extremely dangerous. As this paper has documented, none of them alone or together is consistent with either the truth about how music works, or the truth about the location of competence and expertise with respect to the development of quality in music.

Schools of music in Europe and the United States must work productively with evolving issues in the quality assurance arena and participate fully in seeking greater cooperation and exchange. Schools must work with other experts. It is up to music institutions to articulate what can and cannot be changed, what freedoms must be preserved, and what evaluation techniques work for music if systems of quality assurance, quality enhancement, and accountability are to support rather than hamper their potential.

Such an effort is long-term. Emerging dynamics of mobility and accountability and their relationship will produce continuing challenges and opportunities. Success requires clarity regarding what is at stake, patience, and sustained effort by institutions in Europe and in the United States and by their associations—the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) and the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM).

Basic Expectations

Music schools with high goals for the preparation of performers and composers expect graduates to reach a basic, national/international standard in their major field before graduation with the first professional credential. To some extent, the same is true for majors in other specializations such as music theory or pedagogy. This means that a fundamental professional level of knowledge, skill, and craft is required in those major areas. Performers may be rated higher or lower than one another, but all are expected to have gained sufficient technique and musicianship to perform the advanced repertory in their field. Composers are expected to have mastered sufficient technical fluency to produce credible works for soloists and ensembles. High performance standards are public. Performers and composers have nowhere to hide.

Beyond this fundamental commonality, there is great complexity. Music schools vary greatly in the range of subjects they teach. Some are focused on one or two areas, like performance and

composition. Others prepare a wider range of professional specialists in music. In Europe, the creation and performance of music has traditionally been taught primarily in institutions specialized for that purpose. In the United States, this same tradition has a distinguished history and current force. However, a significant number of US musicians are prepared in schools of music that are parts of colleges or universities. The most comprehensive of these schools may prepare specialists in ten or more areas, including fields of music scholarship, pedagogy, therapy, business, and engineering along with performance and composition.

Heretofore, the most common practice in Europe was to award a diploma, not a degree, for the completion of the first professional credential in music performance and composition. Normally, curricula included few or no requirements outside music or subjects necessary for its practice, such as foreign languages. In the United States, the first professional credential is normally a Bachelor of Music degree with requirements that 25-35% of the credits be gained in a programme of general studies that include the humanities, languages, the sciences, and the other arts. European musicians have been expected to gain most of their general education before they enter conservatories. In a number of European countries, students stay at the secondary level one year longer than in the United States, and often must pass an examination in general education before admission to higher education.

The 1999 [Bologna Declaration](#) is producing changes in European higher education. By 2010, a common framework of first cycle (baccalaureate) and second cycle (master's) degrees is to replace the disparate systems of specific nations. While national autonomy remains a goal, the framework will produce greater comparability of degrees within Europe and between Europe and the United States.

Shared expectations for achievement in the major field and evolving efforts toward greater commonality do not reduce appreciably the need for institutions considering exchanges to understand content, nature, and timing of specific expectations for musical development: for example, the weight given to the development of competencies in such areas as sight singing, improvisation, composition, the history of Western music, music beyond the Western tradition, harmony, analysis, counterpoint, and so forth. Different approaches and priorities among subjects and levels of expectation create the distinctiveness of individual institutions and often exemplify national perspectives on the value of specific content. Highly capable musicians can disagree about what among all there is to know about music contributes most to the development of the performer, composer, teacher, scholar, or conductor during the first three or four years of advanced study. Perhaps more discussion, experience, and cooperation will reduce these differences somewhat. However, it would be tragic for the art of music if they were to disappear altogether.

A Critical Conclusion

Realities and our conclusions about them return us to the necessity of institution-to-institution understanding about expectations and content. Unless two or more institutions have completely coordinated their programmes, there is no assurance that, for example, a third-year, first-semester student in one institution can obtain the same education at the same time in another institution, even though, for example, aspirations and expectations for achievement in performance or any other subject upon graduation are virtually identical. Even if co-ordination is extensive, differences in teachers and students are likely to produce different results.

A Common Body of Knowledge and Skills

Reviews of institutional practice in Europe and the United States and existing statements, or those in development by NASM and AEC, reveal an outline of what might be called a common body of knowledge and skills.

Musicians must have high levels of skills in artistic expression, including the ability to conceive and realize artistic concepts. This means they must obtain the technical competencies, musical crafts, and artistic sensibilities to create and/or present work at a professional entry level. This includes the ability to perform representative works from the repertory of the principal study area; ensemble and rehearsal skills, including the basics of musical leadership and the ability to work in collaboration with others; and score reading, sight-singing, and ear training sufficient to understand musical works and to be fluent in such areas as sight reading, oral acuity, memorization, and manipulating the materials of music. First professional degree or diploma recipients need to know how music works as a communication system, including the common elements and organizational patterns of music and their interactions; an understanding of music forms, processes, and structures; and the ability to apply this knowledge to work in their specialization.

Musicians ready to enter their profession in Europe and the United States are expected to have a general knowledge of music history and musical styles. They are expected to understand the nature and content of the repertory of their own and related specializations. Also required is a basic understanding of technology and how it relates to the field of music as a whole and to the area of specialization.

There are also common expectations that students be able to conduct the work of music in spoken and written form. Extremely important is the ability to draw from a range of musical knowledge and skills in the creation or preparation of a work for performance. This means the ability to apply musicianship, analysis, technical knowledge and skill, analytic procedures, and historical and cultural knowledge in integrative ways. Although it may not be explicitly stated, all professional music graduates must be able to do such work independently.

These expectations should be considered together with the previous analysis regarding commonality. International professional standards for performance and composition inform expectations in these areas. There is significantly more variance in expectations regarding any specific theoretical and historical and technological skill.

Futures Issues

The Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project has been conducted during a period when the future will be determined by choices among an unusually large number of strategic and tactical options. In Europe, work progresses to establish systems and other means to foster comparability to the extent necessary to improve mobility for students and professionals. This means refashioning elements of previous systems and combining them to produce common frameworks and approaches to reciprocity.

In the United States, systems for achievement, commonality, reciprocity, and accountability have been in place for many years. However, the United States is struggling with issues of purpose and confidence. Pressures on accountability grow from forces such as increasing competition for fewer places in higher education, cost and price increases for higher education that are higher than inflation, and a reform movement that appears to see constant dissatisfaction with the present as the best route to the future. Institutional accountability and quality assurance are being pushed to become a

prominent element in consumer choices about higher education. There are significant pressures to weaken the barrier between accreditation results and public relations.

With respect to accountability and quality assurance, nations in the European Union are endeavouring to refashion their systems. Some nations are considering or have implemented features of accreditation. Educational leaders in European music schools are working to ensure that all evolving systems include proper structural safeguards and procedural checks and balances that will preserve a place for the distinctive features of instruction in music.

Educational leaders in the United States are trying to preserve the basic philosophy features and the operations that have made accreditation effective, such as reliance on peer expertise, confidentiality, a system to promote honesty in reviews, standards that reflect a field-wide consensus, respect for individual institutional differences, and a focus on functions to be served rather than on methods employed, especially with respect to issues of quality assurance and accountability.

Leaders in both Europe and the United States are dealing with newly evolving conditions that include (a) both real prospects and fantastic hyperbole regarding distance learning; (b) policy initiatives that increasingly treat education as a market and institutions as businesses serving customers; and (c) repositionings of education as a fundamental commodity.

Many of these developments in the ways individuals and societies value education are especially challenging because at base they seem remote from the goals of artistry and learning that are at the centre of successful professional music education.

These issues are important because standards and accountability mechanisms are both technical systems and shapers of educational purposes and results. The next decade is likely to find those concerned with higher music education in Europe and the United States faced with challenges of justification, including the need to translate the nature of music in high-level music instruction in ways that keep the work of schools of music connected to higher education but also connected to the greatest traditions of musical aspirations and achievement that, in turn, provide the artistic and intellectual reasons for professional education and training. A primary question is the extent to which accountability and quality assurance efforts can contribute by serving artistry and learning, or the extent to which they will become taskmasters that assign precious time and resources to bureaucratic processes.

All these challenges point to the wisdom of close consultation and cooperation in schools of music in Europe and the United States, both bilaterally as individual institutions and through their organizations. As professional music schools move through this period of uncertainty, common effort within the United States and Europe and between Europe and the United States can provide some of the best insurance that change will be for the better.