Embedding QA in the 'Fachkultur':

reconciling diversity and common standards through a discipline-based approach to quality assurance

by Dr. **Jeremy Cox**

This article presents an account of the work in the field of quality assurance carried out by the Association Européenne des Conservatoires, Académies de Musique et Musikhochschulen (AEC). Established in 1953, AEC now represents some 300 member institutions in 55 countries, including associate members in Asia, America and Australia.

AEC works for the advancement of higher music education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond. Higher music education, commonly abbreviated to HME, is understood among its members as musical study undertaken in the context of higher education that has a primary focus upon students' practical and creative development, leading to professional activity in the field of music. AEC serves HME in several ways: by providing support, information and expert advice to the specialist institutions offering HME; by engaging in advocacy and partnership-building at European and international levels; and through measures to raise understanding and enhance standards of HME across Europe and beyond.

With its three different institutional descriptors: 'conservatoires', 'académies de musique' and 'Musikhochschulen', the title of AEC in itself reflects issues of diversity within the field of European higher education. For some AEC members, the term 'conservatoire' on its own would describe an institution operating only at pre-HE level and therefore not at all on a par with a 'music university' or Musikhochschule; for others, it can be applied to the highest and most advanced institutions in a country's professional education system for music – one has only to think of the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris, the world-famous Paris Conservatoire, to understand this (the Paris Conservatoire, along with its counterpart in Lyon, occupies a pre-eminent place in French HME, with all other institutions

being grouped at a lower – non-superior - level despite offering qualifications with nominally comparable titles and status within the European Qualifications Framework – EQF).

This diversity within the HME sector is not merely a matter of labels; HME across Europe is treated in very different ways by its national governments. In some countries, conservatoires (AEC generally uses this term as a convenient shortening for all types of institutions active in the Association) report to the ministry of education; in others, they are organised under the ministry of culture. Similarly, in some countries, HME institutions deal only with the HE level; in others, they are responsible for the entire continuum of musical learning right from the early years; and, in yet a further twist, some institutions are HE-only from Monday to Friday, but run a special pre-college music department on Saturdays.

All these variations have an impact upon how quality is conceived and delivered in HME institutions across Europe. Indeed, how could this be otherwise? We expect institutions to implement quality arrangements that are congruent with their missions and, as can be seen, in the music sector we are dealing with institutions that have a broad spectrum of contexts and a similarly broad range of missions. Within the AEC community, there is a strong conviction that only those individuals who have a good internal working knowledge of HME can fully appreciate, when working as quality evaluators, the nuances of mission-setting and fulfilment that apply in these various circumstances.

But given such knowledge and understanding, establishing a broad consensus about common standards in HME is not as insuperable a task as might be imagined. Over a period of several years, from approximately 2002–2007 AEC succeeded in developing common Learning Outcomes for 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-cycle programmes in HME (cf. Tuning Educational Structures in Europe 2009). This was accomplished through a process which involved wide consultation among the member institutions of the Association. The Learning Outcomes therefore command a high level of buy-in from the conservatoires of Europe (and were also designed to be compatible with criteria used in North America, as well as with national benchmarks developed in the UK and The Netherlands). As Europe-wide reference points, they have provided an invaluable underpinning to the evaluation tools developed subsequently, including those directly concerned with quality assurance.

Embedding a culture of quality assurance in conservatoires is both helped and hindered by the fact that quality, in the sense of excellence within a particular endeavour, has always been at the forefront of the mission of conservatoires. In the conservatoire context, quality therefore means musical quality, and this deeply-embedded concept can easily feel in conflict with connotations of quality that arise from the generic apparatuses and procedures of quality assurance.

There are no universally accepted definitions of musical quality; qualitative standards in music are developed within musical traditions. That is to say, the artistic experiences and expectations embedded in those traditions form the basis by which musical quality can be assessed. But this does not mean that musical quality is solely a matter of 'fitness for purpose'. A piece of music may well serve specific functions; such functions should not be underrated, but as signifiers of quality they can never entirely replace what we might describe as inherent aesthetic value. Whatever the contingencies surrounding the assessment of musical quality, they all rest upon the premise that the aesthetic value of a piece of art is inherent in the art-work itself. Definitions may be elusive, but within the expert community of the discipline, there is generally a wide and reliable consensus around the recognition of musical quality when and where it arises.

Even if consensus can be applied to a number of aspects and concepts relating to musical achievement, there is no single method or route that will attain artistic goals. A supportive environment is needed for the successful development of students. It enables them to challenge the traditional musical practices and expectations. Furthermore, such an environment demonstrates open-mindedness towards the diversity in the job market and is helpful in sustaining a continuous dialogue with a wide variety of professional communities. Finally, a conservatoire environment sets the stage for exploring the artistic potential in encounters between other musical cultures and traditions, and for preparing its students for international mobility.

The prominence of musical quality as a daily aspiration in the lives of those working in HME means that any system of quality assurance which ignores, or seems alien to, the quality that is so deeply embedded in the discipline will seem not only irrelevant but positively harmful. In common with other higher arts disciplines, but arguably even more so than others, HME can therefore often feel itself to be ill-served by generic quality assurance procedures, especially those that concentrate upon systems, committee structures,

etc. and neglect what is actually going on in pursuit of musical excellence in the teaching studios and performance spaces of its institutions.

This gives rise to what might be called the 'external' dimension of diversity as it affects HME. For all the internal diversity outlined at the beginning of this article, there is a strong sense across the institutions that are members of AEC that they are more united by their shared 'eccentricity' in terms of the HE sector as a whole than they are divided by their respective regional or national situations.

Conservatoires – and, in different ways, other specialist higher arts institutions - are indeed oddities within higher education. This is manifested in a variety of ways:

- They are focussed almost relentlessly upon professional preparation, and yet theirs is a very different discipline from others in the so-called professional higher education sector;
- Their teachers are mostly individuals who divide their working time between the institution and the profession and many are inside its walls for only half a day per week or less;
- Teaching is mostly delivered one-to-one or with small, tightly integrated classes of students studying the same instrument; the students themselves are spectacularly strong in their motivation concerning their main instrument but by no means always share the same broad interest and curiosity that one might expect in a typical university student;
- And finally, until recently, the actual qualifications given out by conservatoires were of little significance to those receiving them; being a Bachelor, Master or even Doctor was felt to stand for little in terms of a music graduate's credibility if, when it came to professional auditions, orchestral trials, etc., he or she failed to shine.

In short, by generic standards, conservatoires could in some respects be regarded as something of a quality-assurance nightmare! Their main teaching methodology – professionals coaching students in small studios – permits a high level of autonomy and detachment from the institution, often for the students as well as the teachers, while their dedication to excellence in musical practice, as we have seen, often comes to be characterised as opposed to the necessary but resented obligations of 'academic' content in an HE context. While there may be a universal disdain across HE for the bureaucratic aspects of quality assurance, in conservatoires, opposition to paperwork,

figures, etc. is conducted with an almost religious fervour. Indeed, the author has more than once had quoted to him by conservatoire colleagues the Biblical dictum that 'The letter kills but the spirit gives life'. Musicians express themselves, and manifest their quality, through doing, not speaking or writing, and a quality culture that is relentlessly text-based can easily fail to connect with the things which matter most to them.

Of course, many of the processes of evaluation that might be applied to conservatoires can be carried out based on common features with other disciplines in terms of assessment and quality assurance at higher education level. However, in order for a quality assessment procedure as a whole to be accurate as well as fair from the perspective of the 'Fachkultur' of HME, it is necessary to consider not only the broad characteristics of the discipline but also, insofar as this is possible, the diversity that exists between each individual student's special characteristics and needs. HME aims to give every student an optimized environment for developing his or her distinctive profile as a musician. Such an environment values the individuality of each teacher and student; but it also values and supports the search for, and sharing of, knowledge through open discussion and dialogue. All of these factors need, in some way, to be reflected in a quality culture that aims to be appropriate for HME and sensitive to its needs.

In 2002–2004, AEC and the U.S. based National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) collaborated on a project entitled "Music Study, Mobility and Accountability" which, through such discussion and dialogue, generated a set of principles for appropriate quality assurance practice in HME (cf. Music Study, Mobility, and Accountability Project 2002–2004). Part II of the document states that, to be effective in reviewing professional music schools and conservatoires with respect to music content and institutional mission, the review process should:

1. Respect the content and nature of music and their relationships to education and training in music at the professional level.

- Recognize music as a unique, nonverbal means of communication, discourse, and insight.
- Respect music as a medium for intellectual work expressed both in music itself and in words about music.
- Work with a conceptual understanding of the elements in the content of professional music study including, but not limited to, performance,

composition, musicianship, music theory, music history and repertoire, and pedagogy.
- Exhibit understanding and respect for the multiple ways these elements are ordered, prioritised, and integrated to develop and synthesize the artistic, intellectual, and physical capabilities of students.

2. Respect the fundamental characteristics of education and training in music at the professional level.
- Recognize and support the necessity of curricula that include one-to-one tuition, ensembles, courses, and final projects such as recitals and compositions.
- Recognize fundamental necessities for time allocations that grow from the nature of music and music learning, including the time requirements for developing the integration of artistic, intellectual, and physical knowledge and skills.
- Understand the necessity of resources essential to music study such as expert specialized personnel, facilities conducive to various types of instruction, and financial support.
- Be able to connect issues of financial allocation to necessities regarding time and resources.
- Understand that students must demonstrate significant levels of artistic and technical mastery in order to be admitted.
- Recognise that musical, instrumental, vocal, or compositional technique – while essential for entrance, continuation, and graduation – enable high levels of artistry but are not a substitute for artistry.

3. Respect the natures, achievements, aspirations, and structures of individual institutions.
- Conduct evaluations with respect for, and in light of, the various missions, goals, objectives, and methodologies chosen by the individual institutions.
- Have a sophisticated understanding of how music schools and conservatoires are the same and how they are different.
- Respect the fact that various structures and approaches to music and music study work effectively and produce outstanding results.
- Understand both individual and group responsibilities for the development of musical and educational quality.

4. Maximize the use of evaluation systems and methods consistent with the natures of music, music study, and the operation of music schools and conservatoires.

- Recognise the intense evaluation and assessment pressures that come from the public nature of music performance and composition.
- Respect that the concept of multiple effective approaches extends into teaching and learning as well as to matters of interpretation in performance and aesthetic accomplishment in composition.
- Understand the continuous, moment-by-moment evaluation and assessment essential to both the preparation and presentation of performances and to the composition of music. In music, assessment is integrated continuously into the work as well as being applied to completed work.
- Make use of high levels of expertise in music, music teaching, the operation of education and training institutions, and the relationships among the three. Peer evaluation is essential for credibility in reviews of music schools and conservatoires.
- Describe in advance the purpose of any review and the specific criteria on which the evaluation is to be based. Do not attempt to conflate artistic and educational criteria with economic and market criteria.
- Make clear to all evaluators that the focus is on functions to be served, rather than methods to be employed.
- Have protocols indicating that individual evaluators are to make judgments about effectiveness with regard to the criteria chosen for the evaluation and not on personal preferences regarding choices in areas where there are many correct answers.

In the light of the above, it should be clear why, from AEC's perspective, an important choice arose when considering the implications for the HME sector of the reforms of higher education since the start of the Bologna process, and the rise of quality assurance as an element within these: was the Association simply to reflect the views of many of its members and seek to keep quality assurance at arm's length from the discipline, or should it try to forge an alliance between the key aspects of the emerging quality culture and the distinctive nature of higher music education?

AEC chose the latter path and has moved progressively: from offering individual counselling visits to discuss quality, to organising voluntary quality

enhancement procedures, and then to co-operating with national agencies in formal accreditation exercises. At every stage, the Association has sought to keep musical priorities in the forefront, but in many ways AEC members have been pleasantly surprised by the extent to which, with such an approach, many of the conventional features of quality assurance processes can actually be applied to music without violating its essential character.

In principle, an approach to quality assurance that is embedded in the 'Fachkultur' could be beneficial in any discipline. But it almost certainly has particular relevance when the discipline in question is small and, has been seen, idiosyncratic in terms of higher education more generally. Moreover, when quality issues are so deeply embedded in the way the discipline is practised on a day-to-day basis, it is vital that the evaluators, as well as being well-trained in generic quality issues, are on the 'inside' of this very special knowledge system.

In this respect, a key aspect of AEC's quality assurance capability has been the Europe-wide pool of experts in HME upon whom it can call when forming review panels. Starting from a relatively informal process, this has now developed into a fully-fledged European Register of Peer-reviewers. The Register enables panel members to be selected who are sufficiently far from the physical and locational and political situation of the institution being reviewed to retain objectivity, but who can extrapolate from their own experience and readily grasp the local conditions that may be driving what the institution can and can't do.

Another advantage of having a Europe-wide catchment is that the diversity of specialisms found in conservatoires can almost always be matched by that found across the experts. For example, only by operating at a supranational level could AEC have found an expert for a panel that was required, as part of its visit to an institution in a particular country, to review the only department in that country devoted to the teaching of Dalcroze Eurhythmics.

Between 2009 and 2011, AEC saw unprecedented activity in the field of evaluation and accreditation. Paving the way for this, it produced a set of criteria and procedures for quality assurance and accreditation activities in institutions delivering higher music education. This Framework Document Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Music Education: Characteristics, Criteria and Procedures called attention to the specific characteristics of the music sector, listing the criteria developed by the AEC and suggesting the

procedures to be used in the evaluation of higher music education institutions (cf. AEC Framework Document 2010).

An important feature of the criteria is that they relate back, in turn, to the Learning Outcomes for 1st-, 2nd- and 3rd-cycle programmes in Music referred to above. It should be noted that, after their generation through intense debate within working groups of the Association and their testing upon the wider membership at annual congresses, the AEC's Learning Outcomes were developed further into the form of one of the template booklets of the Tuning Process, Reference Points for the Design and Delivery of Degree Programmes in MUSIC (2009). The discipline-based methodology of the Tuning Process, and its emphasis upon a European consensus that is forged at the subject level and both recognizes and celebrates diversity alongside the common features of each discipline, is of inestimable value when it comes to securing widespread support for Europe-wide reference points and, in particular, for the evaluation tools which, in disciplines such as Music, have been developed from the reference points.

As for the AEC Framework Document itself, it was designed to be used in the context of what was originally called the AEC Institutional and Programme Review Scheme, an initiative giving AEC member institutions the opportunity to request a peer review visit resulting in an advisory report with recommendations for improvement written by international specialists in the relevant musical fields. During 2010, seven such AEC Review Visits took place, including one in the Far East. Because this process is advisory and geared to improvement, rather than gate-keeping, in spring 2011 it was re-named the AEC Quality Enhancement Process.

During its first phase of activity, the fact that the AEC's scheme was advisory felt like a positive feature and one consistent with the Association's primary purpose: namely support, information provision and capacity building for, and among, its members. This emphasis is reflected in the fact that, alongside its Framework Document, AEC produced a practical handbook, How to Prepare for an Institutional or Programme Review in Higher Music Education, in which advice, recommendations and cautions are offered in ways intended to de-mystify the accreditation and review process and bring it into frames of reference more familiar to musicians working within higher education (cf. AEC Handbook 2010). But since this meant that AEC possessed a Europe-wide evaluation tool for the Music discipline – and one that commanded a high level of confidence amongst conservatoires across the

continent – it was natural that discussions within the Association began to turn towards whether this tool might be used in a formal capacity as part of the compulsory official accreditation procedures that are increasingly faced by these institutions.

This is why AEC is currently engaged in taking its boldest step yet into the realm of formal quality assurance. In October 2014, an independent foundation was established to carry forward the work conducted up until now by AEC itself. This entity, named MusiQuE, standing for Music Quality Enhancement, includes on its Board representatives from two other European organisations related to music. These are the European Music Schools Union (EMU), and the Performing Arts Employers Association League Europe (PEARLE*). Their presence strengthens both the independence of MusiQuE from AEC and the integration of quality considerations for HME with those of the educational levels that prepare for it and the profession for which it prepares its students. MusiQuE will submit itself to the processes necessary to be entered on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). This will begin with an external review in summer 2015 and, depending on the outcome of this, will lead to application for registration in spring 2016 (when EQAR will be considering the first round of applications to be made under the revised European Standards and Guidelines [ESG]).

MusiQuE will continue to offer counselling visits and voluntary quality enhancement procedures; it will also continue to work in co-operation with national agencies where this is felt to be the best model for all parties. But it will additionally be able to offer to conservatoires the option of formal review and accreditation processes conducted by subject experts and within a framework which, whilst fully compliant with EQF, has been designed by individuals with a long and deep experience of what quality means in a conservatoire context.

MusiQuE aims to conduct its review procedures in a manner that is characterised by the following principles:

- Respecting the special characteristics of higher music education and the contexts and traditions in which music is created;
- Encouraging higher music education institutions to reflect on their own practice, development and challenges;
- Assisting them in the enhancement of their quality by focusing on learning and experience-sharing;

- Striving towards a higher level of objectivity (through the involvement of international review teams);
- Bringing a European/international dimension to the process;
- Striving for the improvement of higher music education as a whole.

MusiQuE provides a total of four services:

1. Quality enhancement process for institutions, programmes and joint programmes
2. Accreditation procedure for institutions, programmes and joint programmes
3. Bilateral collaborations with national quality assurance and accreditation agencies
4. A quality assurance desk for institutions

1. Quality enhancement process for institutions, programmes and joint programmes

Under this process, higher music education institutions have the opportunity to engage in a Quality Enhancement Process, i. e. a peer-review visit, either for the whole institution or focused on one or more programmes, which results in an advisory report.

2. Accreditation procedure for institutions, programmes and joint programmes

Higher music education institutions also have the opportunity to engage in formal accreditation procedures coordinated by MusiQuE. This means that, in countries where evaluation and accreditation bodies other than the national agency are authorised to operate, institutions may combine with a MusiQuE quality enhancement process the accreditation procedure required by law. Under these circumstances, the subject-specific and enhancement-oriented process will not be an additional burden for the institution, over and above its national accreditation obligations, but will fulfil the two functions in one exercise. Any such process will continue to be subject to the national legislative framework where the institution is located, and to other factors of suitability.

3. Bilateral collaborations with national quality assurance and accreditation agencies

An alternative to an accreditation process conducted solely by MusiQuE is for MusiQuE to operate in collaboration with a national quality assurance and accreditation agency through a merged set of standards and procedures. This option is especially attractive for institutions wishing to engage with a subject-specific quality enhancement process but obliged to conform to national requirements in relation to formal accreditation. The basis of such collaborative accreditation processes is that of a participation of equals. Both MusiQuE and national quality assurance agencies have their own strengths, expertise and accumulated history; it makes obvious sense to combine these in a complementary way.

In contexts where the use of a reviewing body other than the national agency is permitted but an institution believes that close collaboration with its national agency may benefit it, MusiQuE will also consider providing this possibility as an alternative to its own formal procedures, in view of the added value that always comes from the exchange of practices between organisations.

4. Quality assurance desk for institutions

Finally, as a complement to the procedures operated by MusiQuE, its staff and experts also provide advice to higher music education institutions on quality assurance procedures.

In offering this suite of services, MusiQuE reflects a recognition that the HME sector, as well as being diverse in itself, has a diversity of needs. But MusiQuE also plays its part in adding another dimension of diversity to the quality assurance sector itself. The emergence in significant numbers of sectorally-based, pan-European quality assurance systems will complement and strengthen the existing network of national agencies. In the view of the author, we can look forward to an enriching diversity of review models, some separate and some collaborative between different types of agencies. Having real choice when it comes to reviewer and review culture should act as a further encouragement to all institutions to engage with quality assurance issues, and especially with the cycles of review to which they are increasingly subject, in a more positive, critically-engaged and pro-active way. And for those disciplines, such as HME, where the identity of the 'Fachkultur' is arguably stronger than that of belonging to higher education in general, having the choice of a

quality assurance provider which is deeply embedded within this culture will represent a real, and eagerly awaited, step forward.

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