

Global Conservatoires – the post-national era

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The international community of higher education music providers (HEMPs) is entering a new era of greater interconnectedness, which will lead to notions of national, continental, and global identities around music education being reframed.

Attending the recent Association of European Conservatoires (AEC) Congress and General Assembly in Milan¹, it was immediately apparent that there were many representatives from Asia, Australia, Canada and the US. Was it a European conference? Certainly, in so much that it was held in Europe, but the conference was by no means a regional enclave, and the activities were structured to enable the sharing of good practice across international contexts. Looking beyond the AEC, other regional associations, such as SEADOM (South-east Asian Directors of Music)² allow for membership outside of the region; others, such as the National Association of Schools in Music³, affiliate with sister associations in other territories. It would be fair to say that while associations appear to be divided along regional boundaries, their activities and outlooks have a cross-regional, international perspective.

Regional focus

At the tail end of the AEC conference, a session was held in which institutions met with their regional colleagues, and as the representative from Trinity Laban (a London conservatoire) my regional group was the United Kingdom. Many of my colleagues in this session I had seen a month previously at the Conservatoires UK conference⁴, where we had already shared ideas and concerns relating to current issues in the UK; and here we were again, this time, sharing reflections as a sub-section of Europe (notwithstanding the confused status that Britain now holds post-Brexit). Whilst regional institutions share common areas of concern in respect of territorial law and localised politics and economics, from a cultural perspective, regional demarcations are becoming increasingly loose with HEMPs finding partner organisations in other regions with whom they feel a philosophical alignment. Reflecting on the totality of these experiences, my interim conclusion was that regional distinctions are becoming increasingly arbitrary as a result of greater internationalisation.

¹ <https://aec-music.eu/event/aec-congress-2024/>

² <https://www.seadom.org/>

³ <https://nasm.arts-accredit.org/about/relationships-with-other-organizations/>

⁴ <https://conservatoiresuk.ac.uk/about-us/>

‘Conservatoire’ notion

Institutions resembling the modern ‘conservatoire’ first emerged in Europe, and the model of a specialist music institution that provides high quality one-to-one instrumental and vocal tuition, and opportunities for collaborative music making, has proliferated across the globe. Many HEMPs still centre the core part of their training on western classical music, but increasingly this core focus is only part of their curricular offer. Many HEMPs support a wide range of musical genres and practices and have largely outgrown the restricted national or continental outlook of their founders. These institutions could be seen as ‘global conservatoires’, with typical features including:

- A campus in or near a major city or cultural centre (which facilitates international exchange)
- Students and staff from many different countries (e.g., above 60)
- Exchange programmes and activities with international partners
- Online programmes with students and staff from across the world, working in different time zones
- A culture that embraces and values western and non-western musical traditions and pedagogies
- A local, cultural presence of some kind, which adds a degree of authenticity to the location of the campus and the institution’s connection to a tangible community. This is a difficult challenge for largely online providers
- Programmes and activities that develop the internationalisation of the student perspective; students graduate with an internationalised, global outlook.

Whilst my own institution is legally, financially etc. based in the UK, the philosophical underpinning of the artistic strategy and pedagogy, and the range of musical genres supported by its activities far transcend a national or continental approach. The same could be said for many other HEMPs across the world, and it is these institutions that provide fertile territory for partnership work that aligns with our philosophy.

The next phase of development

My prediction is that the next phase of development will feature two broad types of HEMPs. The first type will form an interconnected global community, undertaking institutional peer-to-peer learning and sharing of good practice, and presenting a wide range of music genres for study from several distinct geographical areas and cultures; some of these institutions will involve global communities of online learners, increasingly facilitated by instantaneous language translation. This community will lead to AEC, SEADOM and other regional affiliations integrating their various working groups. The second type of HEMI will have a smaller focus – perhaps the protection of a unique tradition that would otherwise die out, or a clearly defined commercial focus that is not seen to require a broader outlook.

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