

Leaving the Bubble

Final reflections on the meeting of AEC's Pop and Jazz Platform at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, London, UK, 17-18/2/2017

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This was the first time I attended a Pop and Jazz Platform meeting of the AEC. My involvement with AEC goes back for some time now. My first experience dates from 20 years ago, when I witnessed Yehudi Menuhin standing on a staircase addressing the delegates of the AEC Conference in Brussels. I think at that conference the number of delegates was lower than the 170 people that have been present these two days. The AEC has grown. The number of pop, jazz, world and folk music schools and departments has grown. Its importance within the sector has grown. And that shows in this meeting.

I consider myself to be a researcher. An ethnomusicologist, interested in the importance of music in the everyday lives of all members of our western societies. A player of 'things with strings', ranging from the fiddle through the 5-string banjo and the bass guitar to the Arab 'ud. As such, being at the PJP feels for me as a variant of 'at home'.

But I should not overstate my street credibility. My own musicianship is far removed from being at any professional level whatsoever. I am, as a musician, an outsider here. As an ethnomusicologist, however, I am even a *professional* outsider. That is the role I have taken up these two days, and from that perspective I will give a short summary of what we – I – have gone through, and I will share some thoughts with you.

To start with, I want to congratulate you. It has been a great meeting. Not only in the number of participants, the organization, or the programme, but also when it comes to atmosphere. I felt, and many expressed the same feeling, that the PJP is an AEC meeting characterized by a friendly, constructive, laidback and relaxed atmosphere. Of course, one is aware that there always will be differences, and sometimes rivalry, between organizations, institutions, persons. Alliances are forged or fortified during meetings like this. But for me, the overall feeling was one of a meeting between colleagues and friends.

For me, two elements helped to foster this atmosphere. One was the presence of students. I know AEC is working hard on student involvement, and it was great to have students present at break-out-groups, giving good, pertinent and sometimes uneasy comments on our work. In that respect, the planning of the platform to coincide with the CoLab project helped enormously.

The other one was the openness of the program. Yes, there were conference themes to be addressed – audience engagement, for one. But the choice for only very short official statements and just one keynote, for open break-out groups without fixed agendas or fixed questions, and for using the World Café and Bar Camp formats gave a maximum of ownership to the attendants of the platform. Especially the Bar Camp, where the topics come from the attendants and the attendants make a choice, is a form to be cherished.

Let me quickly go through the programme. I witnessed only a small part of the PJP Q&A session for newcomers, but it's great to have this initiation rite at the beginning of a conference. The students in the Opening Event showed us the result of a weeklong musical interaction. I spoke with a number of them throughout the conference and they told me stories about the joy of working together in a new setting, working with students from all over Europe and from different styles and genres, being able to share strengths as well as insecurities, and eventually feeling it all coming together.

Our hot shots Claire Mera-Nelson, Eirik Birkeland and Stefan Heckel addressed us in ways that prevented us from actually seeing them as hot shots. I felt their words as warm, inviting, and in no way as political or strategic – slightly uncommon for words spoken in Opening Sessions.

We then went straight into Dominic Murcott's keynote about the importance of 'art music' – of creativity, originality, imagination, intuition, and maybe also personality. He pointed out the importance of other sorts of virtuosity than the often so central technical virtuosity in our institutions, with their backgrounds in classical music – the virtuosity of curation, of listening, of conceptualization. He pointed out that this was not meant as a contrast between pop and jazz versus classical music, but rather between imagination and mere reproduction. His characterization of some current renditions of music as "playing incredible imaginative music in incredible unimaginative ways" should therefore not so much be taken as a characterization of classical music practices but as a warning for any musician, in any style.

We then went into breakout groups to discuss this further. I could only witness one, of course; we shared thoughts about the different roles of the performer and the creator, being different but maybe not different in importance; asking ourselves the question 'Are we educating artists or educating musicians?'; of course ending up with the agreement that there is no division; and with some nuances on the concept of the 'industry' and the importance to also look in the direction of communities – "we should be experts in reaching communities but we are not", one of the attendants remarked.

The afternoon started with a presentation of Trinity's Co-Lab project and visits to groups of students working on their project. I witnessed a very outspoken comment of one student, backed up by many of his peers, about the importance of the project. "Why do we only do this once a year?" he asked. I can imagine many answers to the question, including the fact that this school counts only one Joe Townsend. But I can imagine a curriculum where this beautiful concept is integrated in the curriculum in an even more fundamental way. Food for thought. Yesterday ended with some information on the Full Score project to which the PJP sessions deliver an important contribution, and a presentation of and vote for Bar Camp topics.

This morning we were introduced to Animate Artists. It is one of those wonderful projects where conservatoires take care of the communities they are located in, providing opportunities for children to play music that is challenging, interesting, and fun. We then went into the five short presentations which we would later discuss in world café tables. A nice mixture, I feel, of topics relevant to many of us – given the content of my own presentation at that time you can imagine that I was especially taken by Andrea Spain's remark "We need to give if we

wish to receive and to receive if we wish to give”. But I equally liked the reflections on the creation of the term ‘world music’, the research examples about the efficiency of Facebook communication, and the great quotes of famous jazz musicians like Gustav Mahler.

Again, I could not be present at all world cafés. In mine, I can tell you, we had lively and wide-ranging discussions, ranging from the philosophical to the practical. Present was also the chairwoman of the EJM, and the eagerness of the discussion between stages and conservatoires and the looking for concrete possibilities to co-operate shows once more the importance of meetings and cooperations like the one I witnessed those past two days.

The day continued with the Bar Camp sessions. I could only witness parts of some of the sessions because I had to write this little report. What I saw there was again a lively discussion about a theme that was of importance to all present. Gender issues in jazz and pop education, for example.

To finish I would like to share with you my thoughts on two issues that came up during those two days. The first one is simple. In a little chat with Eirik Birkeland in some break, we exchanged thoughts on the question whether all those meetings organized by the AEC are in a way not constantly addressing the same issues, and whether we formulate any answers to the questions we pose ourselves. Are we not constantly, from year to year, reinventing the wheel?

I think we agreed that that was not the case. If one looks at meetings such as this one as meetings where problems are raised and then solved, where points of the agenda have to be raised and decisions have to be made, one might indeed get the impression that we do not go forward very much. But I think that is the wrong way to look at sessions like this.

Yes, there is a lot of talking going on. No, there are no tangible hard ‘results’. But I guess the talking actually *is* the result. Meetings such as these are not meant to make or take decisions. They are meant to foster interaction, to inspire, to meet, to share, to discuss. It is part of the networking society we live in, and one of the main contributions of AEC is to facilitate our exchange of thoughts in such a networking society.

To make a variant of a well-known saying: ‘talk global, act local’. There are no general solutions, no one-size-fits-all conclusions to be made. Our work is done in different contexts, and our work only works if we respect that context, if – to quote Andrea again – we give from that context and receive from it. We therefore constantly *must* reinvent the wheel, and inspiration from other contexts helps us to do that. The open form of break out groups, world cafes and bar camps fit exactly those goals. So you are doing a great job.

The second point I want to raise is connected to the FullScore theme of audience engagement, which has been present at the Pop and Jazz Platform meetings for three years now. I feel hesitant to talk about this topic again, because apart from being the ‘wrapper-up’ I was also presenting on the topic. But given the fact that I was asked to do so, I consider this topic to be a topic of FullScore and the PJP, and not my personal topic.

I am aware that for some people it feels as if this topic is a FullScore topic, rather than a Pop and Jazz Platform topic. I feel inclined to disagree with them. It may be so that AEC’s

FullScore project has put the topic on the agenda of the PJP. And I guess it will stay on the agenda in the new SMS-project. But even if that was not the case, the PJP should have put it on their own agenda independently.

In the discussions I heard yesterday and today, the relationship between musicians and their audiences is of importance to virtually everyone. In many different ways: political, industrial, educational and social; from the mechanisms of marketing to more philosophical existential thoughts, from curriculum discussions to thoughts on outreach programs, it is one of the central points in the current and future discussion of the position of higher music education in society.

We must not forget that in many countries there is an ongoing debate about the position of the arts in our societies, and specifically about the responsibilities of governments for the funding of the arts, including higher arts education. In my own country, just two days ago the major political party suggested a 50% reduction of students in higher arts education. Symphony orchestras, but also a widely renowned orchestra as the Metropool Orchestra, are threatened in their existence. On the individual level, the income position of many musicians is dramatic.

One may, rightly, see this as a threat to everything that is so dear to us. But one may also interpret it in a different way. Seen from some distance, I think many societies are unsure about the position of the arts in their quickly changing societies. We may interpret recent discussions about, and even demands for, the reconnection of arts to society as a cry for help. A cry for help from a society unsecure about the value of the arts, of music. A cry to help them in formulating an answer.

I think that is one of the major tasks within the arts sector, including the conservatoires, for the years to come. We have to show what the potential value of music in society is. We have to take away misconceptions, for sure. But we also will have to show that our answer to this, that our story about the value of music in society is an inclusive story – and maybe a more inclusive story than we are inclined to tell thus far. That becoming more meaningful to a wider variety of people is not only on the agenda of governments officials and funding authorities, but also on our own agendas. That we struggle with the same questions they struggle with, and that we, as a sector, will formulate the answers that will help them to base their decisions on.

For me, one of the major points in all this is the idea to be interested in the outside world. In what happens out there; what other people, outside our sector, think and feel. Someone mentioned one of these days the word ‘conservatoire bubble’. As beautiful as bubbles – and specifically this bubble – may be: if we give our society the impression we are living in our own bubble, we won’t go far. We have to leave our bubble, to look for connections, for new adventures, also in the places we would least expect them.

Just some concrete observations to end with. I saw all these CoLab student groups doing fantastic things for a whole week. They worked on their own ideas or an idea of one of their teachers or guest teachers. But I missed groups of students working with ideas coming from the nearest primary school, hospital, factory, office, residential elderly home, local music hub.

Probably I simply missed the right examples, but it seemed that many of the projects, fantastic as they were – I really enjoyed them – were coming from inside the bubble.

The same counts for the eight Bar Camp themes. As I read them, seven of them were connected to our own teaching, to curricula, to the professional performers. One of them connected outside the bubble; and in the Bar Camp session I joined the two (!) people discussing this theme for a short while. And for the Brexchange Jazz Collective: they have been working amongst them and performing in this building for us – next time we might hook them up with other musicians, other audiences, other buildings.

And finally our own discussions. It is great to be amongst ourselves, and as I said before, the result of this platform meeting is all the talking we have done. But wouldn't it have been great if we would also have heard the voices from outside the bubble? Voices from the neighborhood, from people who could have told us why they don't come to our concerts, why we are not important for them, and in which ways and on what terms we might become meaningful to them.

I stop here. I thank you for allowing me to be your guest, to sit in and contribute to your discussions, to make new friends and meet old ones. I hope you are looking forward to the next meeting. I hope we will keep on discussing not only the whats and hows of jazz, pop and world music education, but will also allow ourselves the time to think about the whys. I hope we will keep on discussing our place in society and our relation to our audiences. Inside the bubble, and outside of it.

Not because someone tells us we must, but because we know we have to.