

Lecture given by :

Eibhlis Farrell  
Head of the Conservatory of Music and Drama  
Dublin Institute of Technology.



## Music Education---Maintaining a Harmony?

Synopsis of Presentation to be given at  
The Young European Strings  
International Symposium on Music Education,  
NCH Dublin, January 2001

Boethius the philosopher who more than any is regarded as the harbinger of the Middle Ages wrote in his great work *The Consolation of Philosophy* that the world in constant change maintained a harmony. There are many changes taking place today in music education and whether we can maintain a harmony is one of the issues we are here to discuss at this symposium presented by "Young European Strings". Boethius wrote extensively on music theory, an historical trend to which most of the great philosophers contributed thus ascribing music to a lofty position within the field of knowledge and understanding. In our education system today has music fallen from its lofty heights and become bracketed into the area described often pejoratively as technical education? To the possible detriment of future generations of practical musicians Boethius in his hierarchy of musicians put the practitioners at the bottom of the pecking order. Performing musicians have historically been regarded as intellectually inferior to the theorists and quite often the butt of humour in that regard.

The power and importance of music has been recognised from earliest times as a potent symbol which could be used for good or evil and education in music carries with it a burden of historical responsibility in promoting such benefits as emotional well being and balanced minds and souls. Music education is also changing rapidly and we must strive to keep abreast of our subject. Many of us involved in the area are probably tired of hearing of yet another initiative to highlight the plight of music education in Ireland. Music would seem to be the last bastion of the unprofessional, a subject where anyone can appear to be an expert and give an opinion and where everyone else grows tired of hearing the pontifications of others.

Our young people undoubtedly deserve quality education and from that grows artistic discernment and the ability to make informed judgement. We are all very aware of the benefits accruing from a sound musical and artistic education for young people: social interaction, skills development, personal growth through achievement, creativity and critical thinking skills, and above all fun and enjoyment. In the past many have contributed to the promotion of music education in Ireland and in many cases the cause has been carried by gifted committed individuals working against the odds and in spite a lack of systematic support. There are many problems, some of which are obvious. I would highlight the isolation which has endured on many fronts. Firstly the subject itself has become an appendage on the school curricula separated from other subject areas especially the maths and science areas where historically it has belonged.

Instrumental teaching further isolates the child from normal school life and becomes a lonely extra-curricula activity quite often the prerogative of those with the financial means. Poor access to instrumental teacher training in this country has hindered many potential practical teachers from further developing their skills. In fact in instrumental and vocal teaching anyone can set up as a practitioner regardless of ability or qualification and have the potential to do physical and artistic damage to unsuspecting clients. There are no controls, checks and balances in place to monitor this growing area of private music education. Instrumental education in particular has also suffered from a teaching mentality dependant on music of the past with no knowledge or understanding of contemporary music, the "nothing more modern than Debussy syndrome" which ignores the music of today and feeds the student a constipating diet of classical and romantic recipes only. Music must not be taught in isolation. It is enmeshed with so many other aspects of education: drama,

art, science and maths, languages and religious studies that all training should grow from this holistic basis. We must broaden the educational base and avoid the tendency to regard music as being a subject suitable only for those on the educational verge.

Music Education in Ireland is costly and if there are any unsung heroes it must be the many dedicated parents who have scrimped, saved and made sacrifices to provide their children with the best affordable. I know from my own experience the mileage and time accrued travelling to lessons, rehearsals and concerts. Add to this the expense involved in purchasing and maintaining instruments and the outlay can be punitive. Recent research from Cranfield University has indicated a £100,000 investment to bring a young violinist to sub-professional standard at 18 years of age. A student without access to financial resources has very little hope

of achieving a future in music...

We are constantly being told that Ireland's god quality education system created the Celtic Tiger. Perhaps--- but can our present system of secondary education maintain the Tiger? The OECD has pointed out a 15% illiteracy rate, there exists a crisis in the teaching of maths, physics and chemistry, and the second-level teaching profession is demoralised. Perhaps the problems in music are symptomatic of a system that has ceased to be relevant to the needs of tomorrow.

I believe we need a root and branch reform of the entire system.

The Celtic Tiger celebrates financial and commercial success. There is little room for poorer artistic endeavours and we are encouraged to accept artistic mediocrity because it is safe and unchallenging. In the past classical music in Ireland lay in an uncomfortable post-colonial bed, associated with a form of social snobbery and ill-prepared for the meteoric rise of traditional music, closely followed by rock music, as the ascendant art form in music during the latter part of the twentieth century.

If what we identify as classical music is to survive we must learn from the success of traditional, rock and pop media and make it also the music of the young. We have suffered from purist stances from both traditional and classical musicians which have been educationally divisive. Music education in its broadest form must embrace inclusivity. Our institutions must move beyond short-term territorialism and look to the future altruistically. Ireland is a small enough country for shared vision.

Proposals for the Future:

It must be recognised by Government that music education is in the same crisis situation at second level along with maths, science and technology. We must restore music to the intellectual arena to which it belongs. It is not just a system of technical training. It demands a stringent intellectual approach cognisant of the philosophical and metaphysical domains linked historically with the subject. A long-term view must be taken by educational policy makers and the subject must be given priority equal to maths and sciences or there will be no future.

A nationwide peripatetic music service must be created. Each county should have a custom-built music centre and a government-funded music teaching service to provide access for all. A scheme similar to the Health Service provision of "clinics" should be initiated in which the Government could fund private music teachers and formal links be established with third-level institutions.

A strict quality assurance control on teacher qualifications and schemes to upgrade skills arranged through third-level institutions is a necessity.

Every primary school to be given specialist music space and facilities with full access to instrumental teaching, and travel grants for the very talented.

An outreach programme for third-level institutions, linking in to county music centres, providing support through teacher-training programmes and specialist advice and educational consultancy services. Third-level funding could be in accordance with numbers recruited from their partner music centres.

At third level institutions should focus on ongoing staff training and development programmes and in fostering research in this area, which has largely been overlooked by traditional teacher training courses. The upgrading of teaching skills on a part-time and short course basis is also an important prerequisite for the future.

Courses to familiarize teachers with contemporary repertoire and ongoing developments in new music must be encouraged and, as we move further in to the realms of technology, providing adequate training in music

technology.

Adapting to the process of change is vital to our future, moving beyond older structures and reflecting in our institutional programmes both current need and future practice.

Dr Eibhlis Farrell is a composer and member of AOSDANA, the state-sponsored academy of creative artists. She is currently Head of the Conservatory of Music and Drama at Dublin Institute of Technology.

<mailto:eibhlis.farrell@dit.ie>

