Polifonia 2004 – 2014. The distance Travelled: Reflections on the Project Decade, an Overview of the Results and Initial Thoughts Concerning the Future

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From Polyphonia to Polifonia

The ten years of activity in three Polifonia projects that we address today were not the first Polifonia projects. The history of Polifonia as cooperation between institutions in Higher Music Education (HME) in Europe dates back to 1992. Then, 14 institutions participated in a program in the framework of the ERASMUS, funded by the European Union. This group established the "ERASMUS Chamber Orchestra" and the "Erasmus Brass Ensemble" as joint intensive projects, they developed a mobility schedule for students, staff and tutors and they realised a curriculum development project called "Communicating Music".

When the new SOCRATES programme arrived in 1996, "Polyphonia" partners decided to continue with its co-operation activities as an independent network, and secured funding for two joint projects: a curriculum development project on subjects of pedagogical approaches for teaching musical instruments, and a project on post-graduate curricula for chamber music

The Bologna Declaration and the Bologna process
What happened next was the coming of the Bologna declaration and a strong commitment in AEC to continue work on important issues, based on experiences from Polyphonia. The ten years of activity in three Polifonia sycles has been an answer to the challenges put to higher education in Europe from the Bologna declaration and the Bologna process. This process started at a Ministerial meeting at the University of Bologna 15 years ago, in 1999. There, Education Ministers from 29 countries in Europe were assembled. They wanted to create a European Higher Education Area based on international cooperation, mobility and academic exchange in a situation with comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications. These aims were formulated and signed as "The Bologna Declaration" (BD).

This will suffice to remind us of the link between Bologna and Polifonia. Of decisive importance for Polifonia was the fact that the European Commission has played an increasingly important role in the implementation of the process.

Aims of Polifonia

The general objective for Polifonia 1 (P1) was to strengthen the employability of music graduates by addressing issues that will help institutions to improve the quality of professional training. In Polifonia 2 (P2) the overall aim was to enhance the quality, attractiveness and accessibility of the HME through cooperation at European level. And Polifonia 3 (P3) wanted to promote innovation in European HME and to assist institutions to enhance the quality and relevance (and attractiveness and accessibility) of HME through cooperation.

In short: The overall aim was to enhance quality in our institutions through cooperation, and to facilitate cooperation and mobility of students through comparable educational structures and curricula. The common framework for the transformation of the institutions was a suggested three-cycle structure.

Activities in working groups

Polifonia has organized its work in working groups, five in each cycle, and with an average of 7-8 members in each group. HME institutions from a total of 25 countries in Europe have been involved in the working groups. In P1 and P2, more than 60 institutions were partner institutions, while P3 had more than 40 partners. Representatives from external institutions and organisations were also involved, and contributed significantly to specific issues.

Group meetings have been distributed as much as possible to partner institutions that were not represented in the working groups. Some groups or members of groups went on site visits, to study specific practices in an institution. In addition there were seminars and workshops.

Throughout these ten years, AEC has proved it's excellence in the organisation of a rather complicated adventure.

Issues addressed by Polifonia

The basic issue of cycles was addressed in P1, where the "3rd cycle group" described the current status and latest trends in relation to 3rd cycle studies in European HME, identifying 40 institutions that offered 3rd cycle studies in 2006. There may have been more, but the overall picture told us that the majority of institutions had a two-cycle structure.

Based on the cycle structure, the BD and subsequent Ministerial meetings gave several recommendations to institutions. Two of them were rather basic if we want comparable studies across the continent. The first one addresses what we want the students to do and to know when they leave us, their competences, defined not in broad statements like "high quality", but as specific statements of knowledge and skill. This is the issue of 'Learning outcomes', and it has been addressed in several groups in both P1 and P2. Learning outcomes for each of the three cycles have been developed, influenced by the so-called Dublin descriptors provided in 2002. To coordinate the outcomes in a progression through the three cycles has been a challenging task, and learning outcomes have been an important framework for issues related to curriculum development and assessment, addressed in both P1 and P2.

Another basic recommendation from the BD process that intended to enhance comparability of studies was the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), giving a quantitative description of workload of programs and study modules. P1 addressed credit points and published a handbook as a helping hand to institutions.

In a situation where many institutions were faced with new cycles, ECTS and learning outcomes, curriculum reform was necessary, and curriculum design and development was addressed in both P1 and P2. A special curriculum issue that entered all three P cycles was "research". In P1, research was addressed as a central activity in the 3rd cycle, while P2 addressed the range of research activities taking place in institutions. Then, in P3, one group has addressed "artistic research", and established a European meeting-place (a "platform") for artistic research in music. This group has also looked at how programmes in the 2nd cycle should combine professional preparation with preparation for relevant Doctoral study in the 3rd cycle.

The issue of mobility has been addressed in P1 and P3. In P1, international exchange programs and cooperation between international relations coordinators were targeted. The handbook that resulted from this work offered advice on how to implement an international exchange programme, and practical advice to international coordinators related to student exchange. In P3, promotion of mobility through recognition of foreign degrees, reciprocal external examining arrangements and joint degrees were all issues of central importance for a smoother system of exchange.

Recognizing the decisive importance of pre-college training for future students in higher music education, a group in P1 collected information about levels of music education before the higher education level and about the preparation and admission of music students to higher education.

The admission and assessment issues were followed up in both P2 and P3, resulting in a guide to admission and assessment procedures in P2. In P3, the effort was to strengthen a shared understanding of assessment methods, procedures and standards in European HME, and highlight innovative examples of assessment as well as explore how external examiners might be used to enhance objectivity and the exchange of expertise.

Polifonia has also been concerned with trends and developments in the profession (P1), and educating for entrepreneurship (P3). Addressing these issues we have had groups with members both from HME and professional music organisations. They have explored innovative, "entrepreneurial" ways of structuring music-making and determined the skills and competencies required for innovative actions, and provided guidelines for training.

To educate instrumental/vocal music teachers has been an important issue for many institutions. Over the last decades we have seen a change in work context and professional roles of instrumental and vocal teachers, due to a multitude of musical, cultural and social backgrounds for the pupils, and changes in the teaching context, for instance the challenge from a wide spectrum of musical genres and learning styles. One of the groups in P2 addressed these issues, and described the variety of ways in which students are prepared for the teaching profession, and they suggested a set of competencies for these teachers that supplemented the existing AEC learning outcomes.

All these issues have had one overarching aim: To contribute to quality enhancement in our institutions. To emphasize the importance of this aim, questions of quality enhancement, quality assurance, and accreditation were addressed in separate groups in all three Polifonias. P1gave the first overviews and suggestions for internal and external quality assurance and issues of accreditation, and a AEC project, parallel to P1, developed a framework document on quality assurance and accreditation in HME. These suggestions were followed up in P2, where one of the outcomes was a handbook on 'How to Prepare for an Institutional and Programme Review in HME'. In P3, the training of a body of experts in quality assessment and accreditation procedures has benefited from institutional and program review visits, and issues of benchmarking and the role of a European accreditation system for HME within national accreditation procedures has been addressed. P2 also addressed one of the issues related to quality enhancement, i.e. improvement of governance. This was done through an analysis regarding continual professional development for conservatoire management staff, and two training seminars.

This overview is, of course, a brief description of the major issues addressed in the three Polifonias. Naturally, all of these issues include a broad and varied set of specific issues and questions that have been addressed in the groups.

Dissemination

In planning and in practice, P has tried to reach all those in our institutions who deal with institutional management , curriculum development, strategic partnerships with external bodies, quality assurance and accreditation, research, etc.

Outside our institutions, several groups of people and institutions have been targeted, like:
- Policymakers and officials in national ministries of education and culture
- Policymakers and officials in quality assurance and accreditation agencies
- Officials in the European Commission responsible for European-level policy development in higher education
- Individuals active in the music profession as representatives of the non-academic partner organisations involved in P

Individuals and groups have been reached through:
- Members in the working groups that have disseminated information in their home institutions and to institutions in their region/country.
- A contact database with more than 3000 contacts.
- A project website.
- Handbooks, reports and studies, newsletters, policy papers, descriptions of examples of innovative practice etc.
- Site visits, counselling visits, seminars, workshops, presentations at conferences

Eyes from the outside

All Polifonia cycles have been closely followed by external evaluators, responsible to the European Commission. They have given feedback during the process, and a final statement.

P2 had an "External stakeholders group" that evaluated the professional relevance of the work being done, and provided information and encouraged dialogue between HME and the music industry.

In addition, several working groups have benefited from expertise from members of external organisations in the music business or experts from HME outside of Europe, for instance from the National Association of Schools of Music in the US.

Impact

Has all this activity made a difference for HME institutions in Europe? The overall aim was to enhance quality in our institutions through cooperation, and to facilitate cooperation and mobility of students through comparable educational structures and curricula.

My impression is that this aim has been reached. We have seen that basic features of the Bologna process have been adopted in a large number of institutions. Many countries and institutions have introduced three cycles, ECTS and learning outcomes, mobility has developed strongly, both for students and staff, joint programs have been established, the issue of entrepreneurship has taken an important position among our responsibilities towards our students, and research in all its disguises have developed from a more or less negligible activity in many institutions, to the role as an important part of institutional identity for several institutions.

These and other consequences of ten years of Polifonia are fairly easy to observe. There is, however, a special consequence that was not included in the range of aims for the Polifonia cycles,

and that is a new level of understanding between institutions. Today, we know much more about each other than we did ten years ago, and we have all the opportunity we need to learn from each other. We have seen an opening up of institutions to sister institutions, through all the channels of cooperation that have been offered by Polifonia. Think, for instance, of the institutional assessment and accreditation system and procedures that is introduced. So far, around 30 institutions have used this system for institutional or program assessments or accreditation procedures. This is an obvious indication of the interest shown by the institutions to improve, but it is also an indication of the openness and transparency institutions are willing to offer to their fellow institutions.

What if AEC had not taken up the Bologna challenges? What if every institution had been left to act on its own, within a more or less organised framework of higher education in each country? From bi-lateral contact and other meeting-places than the AEC there would certainly have come strategies and solutions to challenges and problems. Some of the institutions would have established cooperation over local and national borders; some of them would have addressed a specific issue, like research, and developed a tight group around their speciality. What is special with Polifonia is that is has tried to reach all HME institutions in AEC. Not to streamline the institutions, but to encourage quality enhancement within certain structures and common views. As far as I can see, collaboration through Polifonia has brought us a long way forward on this road.

The future

Is there more to do? Of course it is, because the search for quality is a never-ending quest. Luckily, Polifonia has provided a wealth of contact persons and meeting places available for those who want to collaborate about matters of common interest. AEC is also commencing a new project with many collaborative strands. These include closer cooperation with the European Music Council. The Council wants to bring together all the music sectors in Europe, i.e. the creative, productive, education and so on, and get the sector to speak in one voice of the future of music in Europe. AEC will contribute with the knowledge and tools developed within the Polifonia, and deal with some of the wider cultural and social issues: for instance, how to ensure music education for all and how to strengthen the recognition of the social value of music through social inclusion and involvement in social institutions like health care and prisons. This will bring us out of a context where the institutions and our students' wellbeing are at the centre of our attention. The social contract of HME institutions is an issue of highest importance, and I hope it will be a central issue in this coming work.