

Why Professional Music Training Institutions Should Be Involved in International Exchange

Conservatoires and schools of music are increasingly welcoming foreign students and teachers nowadays. However, many institutions have left their international programmes relatively unstructured. If an institution wishes to give international contacts a more structured place in the curriculum, it should proceed, realizing that the greatest benefits are obtained when international contacts are used in a variety of ways, such as student and faculty exchanges and programme development activities. It is important to stress that the presence of international students and teachers does not necessarily give an institution a truly international outlook. An international perspective comes from students and staff, but also from combinations of persons, ideas and ways of thinking, and operational structures. The extent of an institution's exchange programmes and its collaborative nature of student, teacher, and (most importantly) information exchanges are major indicators of an institution's approach.

Below are several frequently mentioned issues regarding the benefits of international exchanges.

- **Enrichment of the internal culture of your institution.** The presence of foreign students and/or teachers will give your institution a different kind of internal culture: opinions developed by students and teachers on local, regional, and national levels will be challenged by those coming from abroad. Other teaching approaches, working methods, styles of playing, and approaches to interpretation will enrich existing philosophies. Furthermore, the community in your institution will reflect on a small scale the reality of the increasingly international music profession.
- **Improvement of the external image of your institution.** An active portfolio of international activities will make your institution more attractive for future students, teachers, and the community in which your institution is situated. A report of two national surveys about international education conducted by the American Council on Education confirms this opinion:

The importance given to international learning opportunities by both students and the public suggests that institutions with robust international offerings will have a competitive advantage in attracting future students.¹

The document reports that 70 percent of the students considered it important that the institution they attend offers foreign language and international courses, study abroad programmes, and opportunities to interact with foreign students. Nearly 8 out of 10 national survey respondents remarked that the presence of international programmes would positively influence the choice of college or university for them or their children. Although it is important to keep in mind that these figures are not specific to music students and their parents, they do show a certain trend. Similar surveys in Europe as a whole have not been found, although individual European states might have conducted such studies.

¹Fred M. Hayward and Laura M. Siaya, "A Report on Two National Surveys about International Education," American Council on Education 2001, page 3 (www.acenet.edu).

Student mobility can also become part of the institution's strategic plan. Offering concrete study openings abroad could reinforce sections that for some reasons fail to attract students.

Experience in the European exchange programmes shows that students who have spent a short study period abroad within an exchange programme, usually return as regular students after graduation at their home institution.

- **Benefits for your students.** Students will benefit from international activities in many ways. Those able to travel abroad will have a unique chance to get acquainted with different cultures, musical traditions, languages, teaching approaches, but also with challenging situations. These experiences will not only have positive effects on the student's development as a musician but also as a individual, having to deal with many new and unknown factors during the stay abroad. Being part of another institution, in another teacher's class where achievement expectations could be different (maybe higher!), in a different city and country where people speak a different language; all these aspects will help the student to develop inner strength, cultural understanding, and respect for different values and methods. Moreover, the student will have the basis for reflecting from a distance about home, seeing both home and the world at large from a new perspective.

Here is a key point: the institution should be able to offer students opportunities to study abroad by means of exchange programmes without causing any delay in their studies if they can participate in a well-structured exchange programme. Students should be entitled to their grants and possible additional grants in the home institution without having to pay college fees at the partner institution.

However, not all students will be able to travel, for various reasons. It is just as important to offer the benefits of international experiences to those staying in the home institution by bringing in foreign students and teachers, and organising international projects.

Student exchange can sometimes be a good way to strengthen the morale of 'lost' students or students who are having temporary difficulties (for example, with their teachers). Department heads, in cooperation with major subject teachers, must play an active role. All institutions and faculty should be able to assess during intermediate examinations, for example, whether a student would benefit from spending some time abroad. Often, when students are having difficulties, they leave. A study period abroad could help prevent these premature departures. It is important that heads of department point out the possibility of studying abroad if this is appropriate for the particular student.

- **Benefits for your teachers.** In a way, most of the benefits for students apply to teachers as well. Teachers will develop their own knowledge and skills through being in contact with other ideas and influences. In this context, it is worthwhile to offer teachers an exchange abroad in the framework of their own continuing professional development.

Another benefit of sending teaching staff on exchanges is the opportunity for more international exposure, with positive effects in terms of student recruitment and institutional reputation. Some excellent teachers fail to attract foreign students simply because they are not known outside their own country or region. Exchange visits, including guest classes at foreign institutions, may improve these teachers' reputations, which could result in larger enrolments. Faculty exchanges may become part of an institutional policy to build or reinforce certain areas of study.

Incoming teachers are important for the international character of the entire institution, giving students and teachers not able to travel the benefit of being confronted with new perspectives and impulses. Experiences in the European situation seem to indicate, however, that few conservatoires have succeeded in combining their programmes for guest teachers and master classes with the activities in their exchange programmes. There are many reasons: complexity, the nature of personal interaction among various music specialists, availability, preparatory time, and organizational structures all contribute. Department heads and production employees are usually responsible for the guest teachers/master classes, while officials for international relations make arrangements for students and teachers who participate within the exchange programme. If the master classes can be organised to take into account the framework of an exchange programme, several content and financial advantages can be gained.

In terms of content, guest teacher series may benefit from exchange programmes because they create new opportunities. The guest teacher arrives and gives classes. If contacts are well established with local teachers, they may be able to repay the visit in the guest teacher's country. The exchange programme may finance the follow-up visit. Moreover, the students of the local teacher may spend a study period abroad at the guest teacher's studio. Since teachers are now well acquainted, they can discuss an exchange student's progress and they are less suspicious of the possibility of one of their students being 'stolen', because the student is simply required to return after the period abroad. Thus a much closer and more permanent contact between the guest teacher and local teacher is established. Students may especially benefit from a regular guest teacher, who possibly visits once a year. For example, the guest teacher will have a different perspective on any students' progress because of the passage of time between lessons or evaluations.

Inviting celebrities to give a master class will always remain attractive. A formal exchange programme may provide few opportunities for this type of interaction; however, such initiatives can be encouraged concurrently. Although the visits of celebrities do not usually result in the possibility for an exchange of students or teachers, such visits can be useful in many respects. Exchange programmes seek a much more extended exchange of viewpoints.

Examination committees, juries, or boards may also benefit by inviting external experts from abroad whose costs are covered by the exchange programme.

- **Benefits for your curriculum.** One of the main benefits of structural international cooperation (as opposed to incidental international activities) could be lasting positive effects on the development of your curriculum. By comparing curricular content and teaching methods, you might gain new insights and perspectives. In Europe, joint curriculum development has been pursued through European cooperation programmes and through bilateral relationships outside the framework of the programmes. Many lasting developments have been realized in terms of new modules, new teaching techniques and even entirely new study programmes and departments, simply by having people from various institutions exchange information about a certain subject area.
- **Financial benefits.** Setting up structural links with one or more partner institutions might also bring your institution financial benefits. By developing a cooperation agreement to which both institutions have to contribute financially, you might be able to share the costs of the various activities. Remember that occasional teacher visits for incidental master classes are the most expensive of all: usually the hosting institution has to cover all costs, ranging from travel and subsistence expenses to sometimes hefty teaching fees.

- **Learning More and Getting Started.** When institutions are interested in gaining one or more of these benefits, they may wish to consider the international programme presented in *'Ten Steps on How to Implement Your International Exchange Programme'*.