

Reflections on a performance program for folk and art music from 'other' cultures at the Royal College of Music, Stockholm (Kungliga Musikhögskolan)

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What do we study? What do we teach?

#folk #other #integration #access

This case study reflects on the experience of the performance program 'Folk and Art Music from Other Cultures' that was started in 2000 at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm, giving musicians from non-Swedish music culture backgrounds the opportunity to access higher education within their own genre.

Background

Since the mid-1970s, we have offered higher education for Swedish folk musicians at The Royal College of Music in Stockholm (KMH), and in 1994 the Department of Folk Music was established at KMH, giving possibilities to form a performance program not only for fiddlers, but also for other instrumentalists/singers within Swedish folk music. As of 1996, a plan for providing education for applicants from other cultures was presented:

We... proposed to open a corresponding educational variant for folk musicians with a different focus than Swedish folk music, especially in view of all immigrant folk musicians and folk music traditions. The idea was the same as when the courses with Swedish folk music started – creating opportunities for this category of musicians to work professionally as musicians and pedagogues within Swedish musical life. There were many immigrant musicians with high artistic skills, but lacking the keys to the music scene to be able to work on the same terms as other musicians or get jobs as instrumental pedagogues in e.g. community music schools. (Ahlbäck, 2009)



In 2000 we decided that there was a need for such a performance program at bachelor level and that, in response to changes in Swedish musical life and demographics, we had to take matters into our own hands.

The head of department at that time, Professor Sven Ahlbäck, decided to propose to the education board at KMH to re-assign a number of study places to welcome applicants with a music cultural background other than Swedish. It was a deliberate choice to not make this a 'World Music' education; instead we wanted to form an educational program for musicians with other music cultural backgrounds residing in the country and give them the same opportunity to develop their skills in their field in higher music education in Sweden. The name of the program, 'Folk- and Art Music from Other Cultures' was not optimal, defining the identity in terms of 'other', but it described what we wanted to do at the time: an education not only for folk musicians from non-Nordic traditions, but also art musicians from other cultures than the western who could not otherwise access western classical music education at KMH. Thus, in academic year 2001/2002, we set aside a slice of our budget for this applicant category

The main structure of the program

Within the Swedish folk music program, we have developed an artistic, theoretical, and methodological foundation that underpins our approach to all subjects, developed from the older Nordic folk music traditions. This includes promoting oral methods for teaching and learning in all subjects; the development of a specific folk music theory describing the modal musical character of the older Nordic traditions; and the development of specific tools for the teaching of traditional/folk instrumental and singing styles (Rosenberg, 2009).

Furthermore, one of the incentives for the program was our observation that these students of non-Nordic origin in many ways were similar to our Swedish folk music students: learning by ear, focusing on artistic interpretation, need for integrating different subjects, etc. Therefore, the program that we had already developed for Swedish folk music could act as a useful basis for the construction of this new program devoted to 'other' music cultures, as we could build the new program on these same parameters – the theorising of folk music and the orality of learning and teaching – and adapt them to the applicants' *own* tradition.



We also recognized the need for these students to be able to situate their own music in a Western musical context, something that we already have given a lot of attention to when it comes to the relationship between Swedish folk music and Western Classical and Popular music: giving us tools to communicate and describe our music to others. One subject is the 'style analysis project', which provides the opportunity to describe and verbalize important parameters within a specific playing/singing style. And in addition to the main instrument lessons, theory, arranging and ensemble, there are also subjects such as Folk Singing, Folk Dancing, KMH FOLK (a big band), concert practice, freelance knowledge, digital tools and some joint artistic projects together with all the students within the Department of Folk Music.

These elements all provided a useful template for the foundation and delivery of a program in 'Folk and Art-music from Other Cultures'. However, our aim was not simply to 'open up' our Swedish folk music program to non-Nordic musicians – it was important to create a program specifically for these musicians, and thus to design an individualised program with many special solutions.

The main instrument teacher – a key competence

Early on, we identified that a Main Instrument teacher who can guide the student through the education was essential, and decided that only if we could find the right competence for the applicants, could we provide quality education.

This is important, since the applicant is admitted according to their specialty and receives education on the basis of this specialty, which means we have to find a skilled Oud player to teach an Oud student, and that a guitarist who play a little lute would not be sufficient.

It has sometimes been difficult to find a main teacher on sufficient high level nearby, but this has become noticeably easier in recent years because of the refugee streams into Europe. There is now usually a high-level expertise to be found within a perfectly reasonable geographical radius.

Entrance examination

How could we ensure that we admit adequate students? In this case we have developed an overall assessment tool. The tool is helping the jury to evaluate from four different perspective:



- artistic skills
- technical level
- developmental potential
- skills within their own genre

Since all these parameters require specialized competence to evaluate, it has been necessary to have a jury with skills in different musical genres, resulting in a very big and broad jury reviewing different genres and instruments in a reliable way. This has shown worth the effort and cost, finding the students that are fitting for this highly tailored individual performance program.

Our experience so far

Over 50 musicians and singers have finished the program since the start, and this means that we have allocated around 20–30% of our study places for this program. The students have come from diverse musical traditions such as *Senegalese, Turkish, Iranian, Estonian, French, Iraqi, Kurdish, Bolivian, Indian, Baluchistan, Afro Cuban* and *Sabar* traditions, both folk- and art music traditions. Around 80% has been male and 20% female (a gender ratio we are working to address by studying how to reach more female applicants from other music cultural backgrounds). Two instruments have dominated so far – voice and percussion, with around 30% of the students in each category.

Conclusion: integration and access

As the years have gone by, we realized that with a fairly minimal budget, we have created a direction shift in music life not only at KMH. Through collaborations that have arisen, including both students and teachers, new music and new musical ensembles have emerged, which has had an effect also on Swedish musical life at large outside of KMH.

Students on the ‘Folk and Art Music from Other Cultures’ program are often strong, unique individuals with high status in their subculture which has had great positive effect on so many levels for KMH. Through their studies, the students have been offered a new context within higher education: not only obtaining an education, but also receiving access to Swedish music cultural life; thus the program can be said to have become an integration project.



There is a generalized view that musicians from other cultures primarily need a Western Classical education in order to be integrated, and that this is a matter of training efforts earlier in e.g. primary school. But here we identify musicians who need higher education within their own genre, and who can be shown to contribute positively back to Swedish musical society. In the end, it is a matter of making good use of state funding to create an adequate education aimed at a professional life as a freelance musician, in order to give these musicians an opportunity to have a career in Swedish musical life today.

But to get this kind of higher education to work, you need fingertip sensitivity and high competence as education providers, something that we at the Department of Folk Music, KMH are constantly struggling with and developing pro-actively and reflectively.

