

Executive summary

Report

Programme quality enhancement review

Royal Conservatoire Antwerp
Music programmes
(Antwerp, Belgium)

Site-visit: 4-6 February, 2025

Introduction

The Royal Conservatoire Antwerp was founded in 1898 by Flemish composer and music pedagogue Peter Benoit (1834-1901) as the first Dutch-language institution for higher music education.

In 1968, the institution moved to the brand-new campus on Desguinlei, where it is still located today. In 1995, 15 colleges in the province of Antwerp merged to form Antwerp Polytechnic. The arts campus was extended to a new building in 2010, allowing the drama, dance, music, and accompanying teaching courses to be brought together in one location.

Following the 2003 structural decree, the conservatoire's Music programme was transformed into a three-year 180-credit academic bachelor's programme and a two-year academic master's programme. As part of the decree requirement for university colleges to be associated with a university, the AUHA (Associatie Universiteit & Hogescholen Antwerpen) was founded. In 2013, the Artesis Hogeschool merged with the Plantijn Hogeschool to form the Artesis Plantijn Hogeschool, or AP for short. The Royal Conservatoire Antwerp and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp became two Schools of Arts within the new AP Hogeschool.

This Music programmes review is the latest step in the Quality Enhancement and Assurance processes of RCA and will consider two departments, Jazz and Classical Music, which offers degrees in Instrumental, Vocal Studies, Conducting and Composition.

To support continuing reflection, and after a previous assessment in 2018, more recently RCA has engaged further in a Critical Friend Review, which included visits of experts at departmental level. The SER for this review responds further in providing a document which is the result of interviews, data analysis, critical self-reflection and consultation, all driven from the Music programmes Heads and music staff. Teachers, students, policymakers, alumni and colleagues from the profession provided additional reflections as part of the SER preparation.

The review team for this Music programmes review comprised of:

- Henk van der Meulen (Chair): former Director, Royal Conservatoire The Hague (Netherlands)
- Brian Weir (Secretary): Director of Academic Administration and Student Experience, Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (United Kingdom)
- Julia Peters (Peer Reviewer): Research Associate in Music Education and Quality Management, Musikhochschule Lübeck (Germany)
- Ricardo Pinheiro (Peer Reviewer): Associate Professor, Escola Superior de Música de Lisboa, Polytechnic University of Lisbon (Portugal)
- Sara de los Campos (Peer Reviewer - student representative): Bachelor in Vocal Studies (Classical Music), Royal Conservatoire The Hague (Netherlands)

Summary of the compliance with the Standards and recommendations

The review team concludes that the Music programmes of the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp comply with the *Standards for Programme Review* as follows:

1. Governance and decision making at programme level	
Standard 1.1 The programme's goals are clearly stated and relevant to the national legal context. They reflect the institutional mission and vision, and they are aligned with the overarching institutional policies and strategy. They are effectively achieved through the content and structure of the curriculum, and its methods of delivery.	Fully Compliant
Suggestions for enhancement 1: The review team suggests that RCA strategically plans to navigate a challenging financial climate, working collaboratively with AP for mutual benefit and in support curriculum developments.	
Suggestion for enhancement 2: The review team suggests that RCA take opportunities to celebrate success - of note, continue to develop policies around multi-disciplinarity, student engagement, sustainability, internationalisation, and research activities.	
Standard 1.2 The delivery of the programme is supported by an appropriate organisational structure, and clear, transparent and effective decision-making processes that include a balanced representation of the programme's stakeholders (students, teaching staff, support staff, representatives of the music profession and related artistic domains).	Fully Compliant
Suggestion for enhancement 1: The review team suggests that RCA develops a broader framework for student feedback, including processes to elect and support student representatives.	
Suggestion for enhancement 2: RCA should improve stakeholder engagement to inform learning outcomes and curriculum reviews, particularly through more regular use of mechanisms such as a 'Think Tank' and the alumni/profession network.	
2. Students' perspectives	
Standard 2.1 Clear, coherent, and inclusive admission criteria exist, to establish artistic / academic suitability of incoming students at programme level. Admitted students are encouraged to take an active	Fully Compliant

<p>role in creating the learning process and to engage in critical reflection. They are supported to achieve the intended learning outcomes through an appropriate and effective blend of teaching and learning styles and pedagogies. The programme and its methods of delivery are adequately catered by staff and support services.</p>	
<p>Suggestion for enhancement 1: The review team suggests that RCA increases the flexibility and choice of elective modules, particularly at bachelor level.</p> <p>Suggestion for enhancement 2: It is suggested that RCA raises awareness and articulation of the commendable study pathway options for students.</p>	
<p>Standard 2.2 The programme has effective procedures in place to formally monitor and review the progression of its students. Assessment methods are clearly defined and effectively demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes. There is an effective complaints and appeals system in place at programme level.</p>	<p>Substantially Compliant</p>
<p>Recommendation: The review team recommends that in support of the further development of an institutional feedback culture, RCA should reinforce feedback mechanisms to make them more robust and transparent and develop an assessment and feedback strategy, which includes peer-to-peer assessment.</p> <p>Suggestion for enhancement: It is suggested that RCA evaluates implementing a more effective student tracking system, within the existing AP structure.</p>	
<p>Standard 2.3 The programme has effective mechanisms in place to ensure that students acquire the necessary skills that facilitate their transition towards a professional life in the music and / or related artistic domain. Procedures are in place to formally and effectively monitor students' subsequent employability and professional achievement. The information thus collected is efficiently used to maintain an active link with the music / artistic profession and to further develop the curriculum.</p>	<p>Fully Compliant</p>
<p>Suggestion for enhancement 1: The review team suggests that RCA develops a more frequent alumni survey and use a graduates' network to inform future directions, including internationally.</p> <p>Suggestion for enhancement 2: RCA should utilise the enthusiasm of the alumni and professional network group already established as expressed during meeting 5 to inform curriculum development and graduate support.</p>	

3. Teachers' perspectives	
Standard 3.1 Members of the teaching staff are qualified for their role and are active as artists/pedagogues'/ researchers. The size and composition of the teaching body are sufficient and appropriate to effectively deliver the curriculum. There are adequate opportunities for teaching staff for continued professional development.	Substantially Compliant
<p>Recommendation 1:</p> <p>The review team recommends that RCA considers developing a People Plan which might support the enhancement of teaching staff with an international profile and/or professional experience in careers closely aligned to Track 2 outcomes. Such a plan might also usefully consider continued staff development and the sharing of best practice amongst colleagues.</p>	
<p>Suggestion for enhancement 1:</p> <p>The review team suggests that RCA considers what systems would support better tracking of teachers' qualifications and staff development needs.</p>	
4. External perspectives	
Standard 4.1 The programme offers a range of opportunities for students and staff to gain international perspectives and experiences.	Fully Compliant
<p>Suggestion for enhancement:</p> <p>RCA should consider whether institutional membership of a European consortium could enhance strategic mission and vision.</p>	
Standard 4.2 The programme's educational processes reflect the institutional policies and strategies in place for an active social engagement. The continued development and maintenance of links with the music profession and the wider artistic, cultural, educational and/or other relevant sectors within society is an integrated part of the programme.	Fully Compliant
<p>Suggestion for enhancement:</p> <p>In support of institutional profile raising, the review team suggests RCA considers organising more conferences and further develop international collaborations, in partnership with DE SINGEL and through academic research and outreach activity.</p>	
5. Resources	
Standard 5.1 The programme has means and resources to ensure its successful delivery and to secure its sustainable development.	Substantially Compliant
<p>Recommendation:</p>	

The review team recommends that RCA should benchmark funding methodology within Belgium to support further dialogue with AP for longer term financial sustainability. This benchmarking would also assist RCA in evaluating staff to student ratios and support consideration of longer-term estates and facilities requirements of specialist music training.

Suggestion for enhancement:

The review team suggests that online teaching methods could be developed (for example in theory classes) to free up time in the schedule and space in the building.

Standard 5.2 The programme ensures a safe learning and working environment. The programme provides effective support for all students and staff to preserve and improve their mental and physical wellbeing.	Substantially Compliant
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Recommendation 1:

The review team commends the work undertaken thus far in support of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion and recommends further consideration of how specific staff recourse and partnership with AP might support continued enhancement.

Recommendation 2:

The review team recommends that RCA considers the fullness of student timetables and looks to identify ways to prioritise learning for students on different tracks and to free time for wellbeing and self-reflection.

Suggestion for enhancement:

It is suggested that RCA considers how to contribute to AP's institutional identity for innovation and creativity, health, and wellbeing curricula.

6. Communication processes

Standard 6.1 Effective mechanisms are in place for internal communication within the programme. Information provided to the public about the programme is, clear, consistent, regular, and accurate.	Substantially Compliant
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Recommendation 1:

The review team recommends that RCA centralises internal communication to more limited systems and ensures clear messaging.

Suggestion for enhancement:

RCA should consider how to improve external marketing of performance activities. Increased profile of the already diverse performance activity from the Music programmes would not only enhance student experience but support the professional development and profile of staff.

7. Quality Culture

Standard 7.1 The programme builds an environment where internal and external feedback is sought and connected, and where staff and students are actively involved in an ongoing dialogue about the quality of education and the programme activities. The programme is thus	Substantially Compliant
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enabled to ensure the quality of its curriculum and educational processes, and to work towards an all-encompassing quality culture.

Recommendation 1:

It is recommended that RCA considers how teachers are assessed in their own teaching, supported with professional development and, through the sharing of best practice, enhancing student learning and experience.

Recommendation 2:

It is recommended that RCA develops student and alumni feedback mechanisms (including surveys) as part of developing formal review processes in support curriculum development.

Suggestion for enhancement:

It is suggested that RCA should extend more regular meetings with willing external stakeholders to support of quality assurance and curriculum development.

Conclusion

On reflection, the review team considers this process to be an informative, inspiring and wholly valuable experience. This was right from the first considerations of the SER to the conversations and observations during our site visit and, finally, the evaluation and drafting of this report. The diverse composition of the team enabled us to look at things from various angles, comparing our considerations with the people we met in all our meetings at RCA.

It is clear to the review team that RCA has talented and motivated students and dedicated and committed teaching staff and management, who work together to co-create valuable teaching-learning pathways for future professional musicians. The fact that all the MusiQuE standards reviewed as part of this visit have qualified with a level of compliance convincingly illustrates this. We wholeheartedly thank everyone at RCA involved in this review process for their valued contributions. We believe their participation made the clear trajectory towards continued quality enhancement obvious. Indeed, the review team were left with an overriding feeling that all stakeholders could be even more aware of the many achievements and qualities of RCA and celebrate them more.

Some overarching summative thoughts from the report of the review team are below.

Creating space for a holistic approach

The review team observed that, since the last review, RCA Music programmes have progressed with commendable developments in the fields of interdisciplinarity, entrepreneurship, research, diversity and sustainability. These are all major and fundamental themes. At the same time, it appears that more traditional elements of the curriculum, and the delivery of them, have largely remained unchanged. If the time and resources these topics require does not lead to integration with the curriculum, an overload for students, teachers and management may result. These curriculum elements offer a view beyond (individual) projects and working groups and could offer a more holistic approach to higher music education and the society RCA is aiming to serve. Combining this notion within the context of limited financial resources, one might think of the RCA Music programmes as a tree in need of pruning of its branches to grow stronger.

Student centred learning and interdisciplinarity

The RCA Music programmes are rightfully proud of the possibility students are given to create a personal pathway. However, in practice this seems to depend largely on a student's own initiative. The review team notes there might be room to (re)consider the shape which independent student learning could take, both within a larger elective part of the curriculum, and through a more structured place for peer learning. The contradiction occurs that, while some parts of the curriculum seem almost overcontrolled, the interdisciplinary projects appear under-coached. Most students we met regarded interdisciplinary practises as useful for their development. True interdisciplinarity requires a lot of time and the development of specific expertise and resources so that interdisciplinarity can become the RCA's unique selling point.

Financial (and other) resources

In the SER, as well as in various meetings, the review team noted comments regarding RCA's financial restraints. It is impossible for the review team to make a judgement on this issue. However, the review team observed that there might be opportunity for RCA to



attempt (again) to redefine its position within the AP University College. Comprehensive benchmarking with other institutes for higher music education, within Flanders, Belgium, and internationally might offer evidence and data to support discussions for an increase in AP funding or other opportunities from public and private sources. In addition, creative use of the existing budget, where one should not shy away from cutting spending practices which sometimes appear to be unchangeable, might lead to a greater efficiency while at the same time create some room for development.

Staff development

There are various ways in which teaching staff are offered possibilities to take part in professional development activities. However, the numbers doing so are relatively low and the review team notes that ways could be found to embed professional development (educational, didactical, through research) within a more structured framework. If the themes of interdisciplinarity, entrepreneurship, research, diversity and sustainability are to be developed across the RCA and across the curriculum, teaching staff will need to be given the opportunity to embody them.

Quality culture

The review team observed most members of the Music programmes community (be it students, teachers or management) were open to comments and discussion as part of their everyday operation. However, a lot of this valuable exchange and discussions seems to take place informally and survey data does not necessarily paint a truly representative picture when participation is low. So, between the day to day, often informal, communication and quality enhancement framework, this is an area that might be explored. The development of a clearly formatted student tracking system will certainly help, importantly to create the learning environment the RCA wishes to embody. This could include the day-to-day practice of feedback, across the institution, where well worded criticism is not seen as negative, but part of an ongoing process which will lead to the desired insight and improvement.

In conclusion

The subjects described in the paragraphs above are all interrelated, and the review team has described these thoughts for the RCA and its Music programmes to consider as part of our overall report. These summative comments are not prescriptive but should be seen as an invitation for the RCA to create its own and we believe, ever-evolving bright future. The review team realises that the issues RCA is facing, are by no means unique; however, we feel RCA's Music programmes could uniquely contribute to the wider discourse of the themes that international higher music education is currently facing. As they look to do so, the review team wishes everyone at RCA all the very best.

