

# Executive summary

## Report

### Programme quality enhancement review

### Master of Music and Master of Sonology

### Royal Conservatoire The Hague

### University of the Arts The Hague

### (The Hague, Netherlands)

**Site-visit: May 2021**

#### Introduction

##### About this review procedure

The Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes offered by the Royal Conservatoire, the faculty for music and dance of the University of the Arts The Hague in The Netherlands, were visited by an independent review team of international peer-reviewers in the context of a quality enhancement review coordinated by MusiQuE - Music Quality Enhancement. In this report the review team presents its findings in relation to the MusiQuE standards for programme review.

##### Overview of the MusiQuE quality enhancement review procedure

The review procedure followed a three-stage process:

- the Royal Conservatoire prepared a self-evaluation report (SER) and supporting documents, offering background information and self-critical insights about the two master's programmes under review;
- an international review team studied the self-evaluation report and materials, and carried out an online site visit;
- the review team produced the present report.

## Context of the review procedure

The review team assessed both the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes in the context of the Dutch external quality assurance system, which is regulated by law and implemented by the Accreditation Organisation of The Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO). For the assessment of the programmes, the review team was asked to make use of the NVAO assessment framework for the 'Experiment Institutional Accreditation with a Lighter Programme Accreditation'.<sup>1</sup> The review team presented its findings resulting from the assessment based on this framework in a separate report.<sup>2</sup>

However, because of its international profile, the Royal Conservatoire expressed the wish not only to have the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes assessed on the basis of the relevant national frameworks, but also to receive feedback on the programmes based on the internationally recognised assessment framework of MusiQuE – Music Quality Enhancement. In its self-evaluation report, the institution explains this choice as follows: "This is consistent with the opinion of the Royal Conservatoire that an institution can only call itself truly international if it is also willing to use internationally based methods for assessment and tools for external review. Therefore it is only the MusiQuE framework that can assist in a qualified comparison of programmes and institutions at an international level and confirm an international profile of a programme or institution." (SER, p. 6) For this reason, the review team assessed the programmes also against the MusiQuE standards for programme review.

## Context of change and innovation

The review procedure takes place in a unique and innovative context, by combining national and international frameworks and through participation in the 'Experiment Institutional Accreditation with a Lighter Programme Accreditation'. The ambitious and experimental character of the procedure reflects the ambition of the Royal Conservatoire not only to improve its quality culture still further, but also to strive continually for the enhancement of its programmes in terms of international comparisons.

The review procedure is taking place during the pandemic caused by the Corona virus. In response to the lockdown and the restrictive measures taken, the institution was urged to intensify forms of e-learning and to develop online assessment methods.<sup>3</sup> In its self-evaluation report, the institution provided the review team with detailed information on how it has responded to the crisis situation and included reflections on how elements of digital teaching and learning are expected to remain embedded in the master's programmes and to be developed in a way that will make them sustainable in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> The University of the Arts The Hague passed an Institutional Audit in 2020. Institutions that have successfully completed the Institutional Audit have the opportunity to apply for participation in the 'Experiment Institutional Accreditation with a Lighter Programme Accreditation'. The experiment was set up by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and is implemented by NVAO. The University of the Arts applied, and was permitted, to take part in the experiment. Existing programmes offered by institutions which have passed an Institutional Audit are normally assessed with a limited framework featuring four NVAO standards. In the context of the 'Experiment Institutional Accreditation with a Lighter Programme Accreditation', however, these programmes are being reviewed with a lighter framework: only the assessment in relation to standard 1 (Intended learning outcomes) and standard 4 (Achieved learning outcomes) is presented to NVAO as part of the application for accreditation of the programmes. The institution is responsible for organising the assessment of standards 2 and 3 independently, without involvement from NVAO in the review process.

<sup>2</sup> The *Assessment report* will be made publicly available through the online database of NVAO (<https://www.nvao.net/en>) and through the DEQAR Database of Quality Assurance Results on the website of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) (<https://www.eqar.eu/>).

<sup>3</sup> The institution gathered an overview of the information regarding the impact of the pandemic on the education for students, applicants and other stakeholders on a bilingual website ([www.koncon.nl/corona](http://www.koncon.nl/corona)).

**Overview of the compliance with the standards and strengths and recommendations / suggestions for improvement**

The review team concludes that the programmes comply with the *MusiQuE Standards for Programme Review* as follows:

<b>Quality culture, critical friends and accreditation</b>		
<b>MusiQuE standard 7</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review team would like to commend the Royal Conservatoire for its self-critical approach. Throughout the meetings during the site visit, the review team noted an enormous desire to move forward and continuously search for ways to strengthen the programmes still further. The quest for enhancement was not only apparent in the various meetings but also in the materials studied by the review team, in which the programmes show a high capacity for self-evaluation. It is clear to the review team that the teams responsible for these programmes are not only self-critical, but also willing to share these self-critical observations with others.</li> <li>The review team was impressed by the critical friend system and by the deeply committed way in which the departments are engaged in this process. The review team noted that all the steps in the process seem well developed and admired the thoroughness of the exchange between the critical friends and the departments. The review team was particularly impressed by the in-depth view which critical friends can offer in their reports, by the way in which the departments consider their suggestions together with staff and students, and by the follow-up process. The review team welcomes the fact that the critical friends are selected internationally instead of locally. The review team noted strong support for the critical friend approach across both programmes, and in particular with heads of department.</li> <li>The review team would like to recommend to the Royal Conservatoire that it considers organising an exchange of views between critical friends. Although one might argue that organising such an exchange creates an additional layer of complexity, the review team makes this suggestion in order to ensure the optimal operation of the system. At the moment, the programmes are missing out on relevant information and insights from critical friends, as the observations they share in their reports are almost exclusively focused on the specific departments, while all critical friends to whom the review team spoke had relevant comments to share about the programmes as a whole and their organisational structures. Organising an exchange between different critical friends might offer them a platform to share these insights and discuss them with representatives of the programmes.</li> </ul>		
<b>Intended learning outcomes</b>		
<b>MusiQuE standard 1</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b>		

- The review team commends the Royal Conservatoire for the dynamic and progressive character of the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes. The master programmes are organically reworked and continuously improved to offer the students the best possible learning experience.
- The review team is convinced that the way in which the intended learning outcomes are currently described is fit for purpose and responds to the recommendation made by the panel at the time of the previous assessment procedure in 2012. However, the review team would now like to encourage the Royal Conservatoire to consider presenting the intended learning outcomes in a simpler fashion. The intended learning outcomes can be viewed as over-elaborate, and their highly detailed nature may diminish their effectiveness and 'memorability' for students and staff. Providing concise summaries (in addition to the current descriptions in the curriculum handbooks) of the intended learning outcomes which highlight their main goals and overarching ideas might help stakeholders of the programmes to better internalise their content and significance.

MusiQuE standard 2.2	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

#### Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement

- The review team considers the ambition to offer students a truly international learning environment as highly commendable and agrees with the observation by one of the critical friends that the international orientation of the institution is a kind of 'cantus firmus', permeating the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes in nearly all their aspects. The review team saw clear evidence that both programmes are continually building on ways in which students can gain international perspectives. The review team also noted that the Master of Sonology programme is well networked internationally and that, through its long history and eminent position in the sector, it offers a platform for the international sonology scene.
- As the review team noted that in the discourse about internationalisation there tends to be a focus on Europe and the Western world, the review team would strongly encourage deeper reflection on the meaning of internationalisation in a global context. What does 'international' mean today? The review team does not presume to offer any one answer to this challenging question but believes that continued discussion on this matter could strengthen the Royal Conservatoire's international policy for the twenty-first century. In this context, the move to the new Amare building will bring opportunities for fresh exploration, together with other arts organisations and societal stakeholders. This could help to re-examine the terms 'international' and 'intercultural', as well as the place of non-Western traditions, in the master's programmes.

MusiQuE standard 8.1	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

#### Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement

- The review team took note of the ongoing reflections about interdisciplinarity and would like to encourage the programmes that they explore further, and increasingly promote, opportunities for interdisciplinary exchange. In this context, the review team would like to encourage the institution to make full use of the opportunities offered by the move to Amare to reach out to other art disciplines, and jointly (with the co-residents of the building) to reflect even further on new possibilities for collaboration across disciplines. Such joint reflections could enrich student experience, and also inform

future discussions within the institution on how (classical) music can reach out and strengthen its role in today's world.

MusiQuE standard 8.2	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

**Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement**

- The review team was impressed by the large number of high quality professional relationships in which the programmes are involved. At the same time, the review team had the impression that opportunities for collaboration are sometimes seized in an *ad hoc* manner, rather than selected strategically. The review team would therefore like to suggest to the institution that a more strategic approach to the prioritisation of partnerships for the programmes is adopted. Those partners identified as key partners of the programmes could be brought together in an overarching meeting or forum such as an Artistic Council. Such a forum might offer opportunities to reflect jointly on institutional priorities and on the strategic relevance of relationships beyond the intrinsic value of individual projects.

MusiQuE standard 8.3	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

**Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement**

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**Teaching and learning environment**

MusiQuE standard 2.1	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

**Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement**

- The review team was impressed by the substantial curricular innovations in the Master of Music programme, including the introduction of the concept of the three pillars (artistic development, research and professional integration), the master projects and the master circles. The review team is convinced that the new structure allows students to give shape to their own educational trajectories, and effectively assists them to develop themselves as arts professionals.
- The review team noted that the new curriculum has been well implemented throughout the Master of Music programme but suggests that further work is done to align the curricular structure of the ArtScience discipline with the curricula of the other disciplines to ensure greater consistency.
- The review team admires the institution's commitment to student-centred learning and how it is realised through the structure of the master's programmes and the variety of approaches to learning and teaching. The individual mentoring of students and the combination of artistic coaching, research supervision and professional integration coaching which come together in the master circles offer an effective structure for student support and mutual exchange. The review team particularly applauds the institution for maintaining its student-centred approach and for the implementation of the new curriculum during the difficult circumstances occasioned by the pandemic.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review team noted that diversity is a theme that is currently being discussed in the master's programmes under review. In the opinion of the review team, however, diversity has curricular consequences, which seem as yet to have been relatively unexplored in these programmes so far. The review team would like to encourage the institution to reflect on the concept of diversity in contemporary society, and its implications for the content of these master's programmes.</li> </ul>		
<b>MusiQuE standard 4.1</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b>		
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<b>MusiQuE standard 4.2</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review team considers it a strength that the Royal Conservatoire invests significantly in the continuing professional development of its staff. The 'Artist as Teacher' programme and the possibility for teachers to obtain a master's degree are convincing examples of the institution's ambition in this area.</li> </ul>		
<b>MusiQuE standard 5.1</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The move to Amare brings opportunities for the Royal Conservatoire, but also places on the institution, as a leading resident of the building, a responsibility to put into practice the rhetoric and expectations about Amare - with inclusiveness and the integration of arts in society at the heart of it. In this context, the review team would like to repeat its suggestion to reflect, together with other residents of the building, on three themes: the implications of the terms 'international' and 'intercultural' as well as the place of non-Western traditions in the master's programmes (<i>cf.</i> MusiQuE standard 2.2), the meaning of 'diversity' in contemporary society and its implications for the content of the programmes (<i>cf.</i> MusiQuE standard 2.1), and the opportunities this brings for interdisciplinary exchanges and collaborations with other arts organisations (<i>cf.</i> MusiQuE standard 8.1).</li> <li>The review team would like to recommend to the Royal Conservatoire that the planning and organisation of the use of space in the new 'Amare' building (for rehearsals, concerts, classes and so on) is undertaken on a co-ordinated institutional basis and not viewed simply as a matter for individual departments to arrange for themselves. Coordinated planning for, and transparent information and communication about, the use of the rooms and facilities will be important for all stakeholders of the programmes to ensure smooth operations once the institution has moved to the new location.</li> <li>The review team realises that the situation caused by the pandemic has meant that for many people the past months have been for many people a difficult, dispiriting and challenging time. The review team admires the institution for focussing wherever possible on the positive aspects and commends the</li> </ul>		

institution for its determination to continue to exploit the possibilities of e-learning and to reflect on lessons learnt.		
<b>MusiQuE standard 5.3</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b> /		
<b>MusiQuE standard 6.1</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Fully compliant	Fully compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review team found that effective mechanisms are in place for internal communication within the programmes. The review team suggests however that the institution should consider further strengthening communication between the various departments. This would encourage more frequent exchange of educational expertise between the various departments and the sharing across the programmes of some of the inspirational practices and examples which already exist. This would bring benefits to both students and members of staff of the programmes.</li> </ul>		
<b>MusiQuE standard 6.2</b>	<b>Master of Music</b>	<b>Master of Sonology</b>
<b>Compliance level</b>	Substantially compliant	Substantially compliant
<b>Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The review team recognises that higher music education institutions have traditionally been structured 'vertically' (around individual instruments, disciplines or departments) and that there is certainly not only one right way to organise a programme. The review team noted, and welcomes, that major efforts have been made to increase comparability and compatibility across the disciplines in the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes. However the review team recommends further reflection on whether the current organisational structure for the programmes facilitates an appropriate degree of 'horizontal alignment' and beneficial 'cross-fertilisation' across and within the master's programmes. Do the organisational structures encourage departments to collaborate, or do they tend to inhibit this? Although the review team does not presume to answer these questions, the team would observe that more traditional structures may have the effect of reinforcing traditional ways of thinking.</li> <li>In discussion, the review team was unable to discern whether decisions to open (or close) disciplines in the master's programmes were taken on a clearly strategic basis. While admiring the flexibility shown by the institution in creating new disciplines within the master's programmes when appropriate, the review team gained the impression that such decisions may at times have been taken in a somewhat <i>ad hoc</i> manner.</li> <li>The review team recommends to the Royal Conservatoire that it should strive to preserve a judicious balance between the flexibility, freedom and informality which characterises the internal management on the one hand, and the need for structure and strategy on the other. The review team endorses the institution's efforts to maintain flexibility, freedom and informality in its operations. These qualities are precious, and vital, to allow further innovation throughout the programmes. But strategic connections</li> </ul>		

between departments and structures for dialogue across disciplines are equally important to ensure horizontal alignment and to avoid internal contradictions.

### Student assessment

MusiQuE standard 3.1	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

### Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement

- The review team commends the institution for the real support, encouragement and care given to students in elaborating their master project plan.

MusiQuE standard 2.3	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

### Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement

- The review team welcomes the constructive and open way in which students are provided with formative feedback that supports their further development. However the review team gained the impression from various meetings during the site visit that the way in which feedback is provided to students could be more simply and efficiently arranged. The review team would therefore suggest that the institution considers whether it might be possible to develop a more clearly coordinated approach to the providing of feedback to students, as this may help them to grasp more readily the interconnections between different aspects of their activities.
- The review team suggest that the institution continues to monitor very carefully the consistency in the application of grading scales in order to ensure comparability and compatibility across the disciplines in the master's programmes (cf. MusiQuE standard 6.2).

### Achieved learning outcomes

MusiQuE standard 3.2	Master of Music	Master of Sonology
Compliance level	Fully compliant	Fully compliant

### Strengths and recommendations / suggestions for enhancement

- The review team noted that student achievement is explicitly monitored in terms of intended learning outcomes and considers this a strength. The linking of explicit learning outcomes to each course makes it clear which learning outcomes each student has achieved.
- The review team saw a sufficient number of final works from graduates of both the Master of Music and the Master of Sonology programme. The review team did not encounter anomalies in the grading. In the Master of Music programme, however, the review team noticed a slight generosity in grading in the initial selection of final works made available by the institution. In order to enable the review team to give a balanced opinion on the satisfactory-unsatisfactory cutting scores, it requested the institution to provide additional final works that received lower than average gradings. After consideration of these extra final works, the review team concluded that the overall grading of the final works in both the Master of Music and Master of Sonology programmes can be considered as fair. The review team noticed a



certain disparity in the discourse substantiating the grading of final works across the various disciplines of the master's programmes. Gradings are justified with varying levels of detail. The review team sees room for further improvement in increasing the consistency across the disciplines in this regard. The review team would like to note that the general level of the final works is commendably high. Many of the final recitals which the review team was able to hear were performed to a high musical standard and were extremely well prepared.

While the self-evaluation report identifies a range of quantitative and qualitative methods currently used for monitoring the achievement of graduates, most of these methods do not appear to be providing precise information on the professional activities of most students (in particular, non-European students who return to their country of origin after they complete their programme of study). The review team acknowledges the difficulties involved in obtaining such data but would like to encourage the institution to seek ways of collecting more fine-grained information. This may prove helpful to the institution in critically evaluating the achievement of students in the longer term.

It was clear to the review team that the institution is committed to intensifying its efforts to assess whether graduates meet the demands of the sector and whether the master's programmes are educating students who achieve high levels in their chosen professional fields. In this context, the review team welcomes and encourages the plans of the Royal Conservatoire to strengthen the connection to its alumni community in order to keep track of their integration in the profession. Strengthening the ties with the alumni network through the new online platform will not only allow the master's programmes to get greater insight in the needs of young graduates and the changing demands of the music sector but will also facilitate the further optimisation of the educational provision of the master's programmes on a continuing basis. It was clear to the review team that the institution does not intend to rely solely on positive feedback from graduates, but that there is a genuine willingness to investigate their satisfaction levels thoroughly and to respond to what is learnt as a result. The review team also supports the commitment of the programmes expressed in the self-evaluation report to seek ways of increasing the involvement of alumni in the delivery of certain parts of the programmes, in various roles and capacities.

The review team considers the involvement of external examiners from outside The Netherlands as good practice to ensure that the intended learning outcomes are also met at an international level and endorses the efforts of the institution to continue comparing grades awarded by internal and external examiners in order to achieve appropriate grading.

## Conclusion

The review team found that the Royal Conservatoire is absolutely committed to preparing students as fully as possible for the realities of the musical profession. Both the Master of Music and the Master of Sonology programmes facilitate the students' full immersion in professional practice. This ambition is not only shown in the rhetoric of the rationale of the programmes but is also translated into sets of detailed intended learning outcomes. Students' achievements in their final work and their successful integration into the music profession further demonstrate the relevance and the coherence of the master's programmes being offered by the Royal Conservatoire.

The review of the Master of Music and the Master of Sonology programmes took place in a unique and dynamic context, shortly after the implementation of the revised curriculum of the Master of Music programme, amidst the uncertain times occasioned by the pandemic, and just months before the institution's move to the new 'Amare' building. During this period of dramatic change for the Royal Conservatoire, the institution has continued to question itself rigorously and has remained strongly self-critical. It is rare - and refreshing - to encounter a world-leading institution so committed to improvement and so determined not simply to rest on its laurels.