

ExTra! Final Event und Annual EMC Conference in Athens, Greece 23 - 26 April 2009

"Welcome brothers and sisters! We all originate from eight African mothers", is how Umayya Abu-Hanna, who is Palestinian but lives in Finland, opened the European Music Council's (EMC) Annual Conference this year. The theme of the conference, which was the final event of the EU-funded "Extra! Exchange Traditions" project and was co-organised by the Greek partner En Chordais, was "Immigration and Multiculturalism. The Musical Dimension".

Abu-Hanna painted an ironic and self-critical picture of our multicultural society. She called on her audience not to think in categories between which bridges have to be built but to be open for all things new as well as old and to approach other people and cultures on an equal footing. Afterwards, the professor Nikos Papastergiadis (University of Melbourne) pointed out that the notion of a local people with a unique individual culture in a clearly-defined state was no longer contemporary considering migration movements were so deeply intertwined. "I don't want to integrate," he said, arguing that people with immigrant backgrounds often felt as if they belonged to neither culture fully and thus wanted to be considered simply as individuals. He added that art and music could help to develop appropriate ideas for community life today because of the way they dealt critically with society.

These two introductory speeches laid a rich foundation for further discussion: Does traditional music lose its original character if it is brought to the stage? Can and should one mediate between cultural traditions? Which legal questions arise if one wants to make traditional music available online? These and similar questions, that resulted directly from the project activities, were discussed by the project leader Simone Dudt and the ExTra! partners.

The invited music education experts, Eva Saether (Malmö Academy of Music), Gilles Delebarre (Cité de la musique) and Timo Klemettinen (chairman of the EMC and the European Music School Union) all agreed: It is much more important to learn from one another than about one another.

George Mouchtarides (Director of "Kosmos FM" of Hellenic National Radio), Kurt Danner (International Music and Media Centre), Peter Rantasa (Music Austria and Vice President of the International Music Council) and Stef Coninx (Flanders Music Centre) called for a particular sensitivity to traditional music in the media. They argued that there must be deeper awareness for the fact that some musical traditions are removed from context when they are distributed by the media and this is not always necessarily good for the music or the performers.

Katérina Stenou, Director of the UNESCO Division of Cultural Policies and Intercultural Dialogue, defined one of the state's central roles as being to create general conditions that promote culture and that are inspiring without exercising a direct influence on cultural and artistic developments.

Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, Member of the European Parliament, referred to the legal basis for cultural variety on which the "European Agenda for Culture" was founded. She called on the cultural sector to think positively and to stand up for its rights.

Christian Höppner (Vice President of the German Cultural Council and Secretary General of German Music Council) shed light on some of the questions regarding the implementation of political strategies and stressed the necessity of raising more public awareness for cultural variety. Ruth Jakobi (EMC Secretary General) hosted the subsequent inspiring debate between the conference participants.

The International Music Council's (IMC) "Protection and Promotion of Musical Diversity" study provided a scientific background to the different discussion rounds. The IMC Secretary General, Silja Fischer, presented the findings of the study that was commissioned by UNESCO and deals with the cultural and socio-political aspects of musical variety.

The Theocharakis Foundation provided an inspiring space for the event. The conference programme was rounded off by a concert given by two musical groups: A mixed group made up of Iraqi, Kurdish and Greek musicians and the Albanian vocal ensemble "Brotherhood," whose members dressed in traditional costume gave an impressive and interesting performance of traditional Albanian choral singing.

Music traditions thrive on exchange – both the ExTra! Project and the conference confirmed this. After three intensive days packed full of new exciting ideas and information, the 75 conference participants from the whole of Europe and Israel made their way home with the desire to keep this exchange alive. The European Music Council will also continue to campaign for the survival and further development of different musical traditions and to advocate for the required conditions with the political bodies.

Rebekka Leibbrand

Translation: Anne Thomas