

# Re-thinking Conservatory Education as an Open System

Learning to Play through Playing – Letter  
from a Piano Student to an Educational  
Philosopher

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## Abstract

This paper is formatted as a letter from a piano student in a European conservatory educational program to Aleksandra Marjanović, an educational philosopher from former Yugoslavia. The student was one of 24 interviewed in a larger study concerning conservatory cultures in Eastern and Central Europe. A narrative analysis approach was taken, and the student's expressed experiences were intertwined with Marjanović's philosophical thoughts in the form of a letter. In the article the student turns to the philosopher, as she feels disoriented and had imaginatively read the philosopher's thoughts regarding creating one's own life plan through creativity and play (as in playful approach), as well as about education as an open system, where students' actual social circumstances are taken into account, and transform institutional education to societal education. She feels that she has neither been encouraged nor able to create or follow any life plans through her education. Instead, she finds herself questioning the directions she was led in, if they existed at all. Her insights make her see higher music education, not least in the Western classical specialization, as a closed system, which makes her even more frustrated. Now, in her doctoral studies, she wants to discuss her experiences with Marjanović, whose writings recently became available in English. The philosophical exploration aims to shed light on and reflect upon how conservatory education could take Marjanović's thoughts into account aiming to contribute to meaningful interrelations between conservatories and society from a democracy point of view. The specific aim of this paper is to present a view of higher music education as an *open system*, where students of classical music are invited to play and to create their "life plans" as becoming musicians. Throughout the paper the ambition has been to stay as close as possible to the original student interview transcription as possible.

Keywords: Open system, conservatory, play, creativity, imagination, Marjanović

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## Introduction

**A**lexandra Marjanović was a scholar in the field of early childhood education in Yugoslavia. She was active at her most during '70s and '80s of the 20th century, in the time when several intellectuals engaged in social sciences used their scholarship to take a critical stance toward the ongoing social project of Yugoslavia and tried to contribute to the building of a socialist democratic society, quite different from the Soviet version, aiming to build a socialist, democratic society through a system of self-management, worker control, and a unique form of market socialism.<sup>1</sup> Open democratic socialist society, with its unique fabric of political, economic, social, and cultural life, at the time was a vision shared by many Yugoslavian intellectuals, including Marjanović. This vision was based on a belief in

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creative potential of human beings and their collective action, values of emancipation and freedom. For Marjanović, in such a society, children would be respected as equals, closely connected with their families and communities, intertwined with social life and culture, and actively involved as participants in public sphere. At the same time, they would be supported to pursue their own *life-plan*, create their own personalities and ways of relating with others and the world. This was Marjanović's vision of "emancipation of childhood" that she was heartfully dedicated to through her pedagogical work. Marjanović studied pedagogy at the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, where she earned her PhD.<sup>2</sup> Working with interview material conducted among music conservatory students in Northern/Eastern/Central Europe, I got curious and wanted to explore what Marjanović's thinking could contribute with in relation to one of the interviews with a piano student. The student was one of 24 interviewed in a larger study concerning conservatory cultures in Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>3</sup> A narrative analysis approach was taken,<sup>4</sup> and the student's expressed experiences were intertwined with Marjanović's philosophical thoughts in the form of a letter. The letter constitute a re-thinking of conservatory education as an open system, where students' actual social circumstances are taken into account, and transform institutional education to societal education.

## Letter

Dear Dr. Marjanović, or may I call You Aleksandra,

I write to You as I came over the two of Your articles that recently have been translated into English but not yet published, which made me see my music educational experiences in a new light. It was an overwhelming experience, and I am still touched, concerned, confused, and frustrated, as I start to understand what I have been through. Of course, I am really happy for all the fantastic musical situations I have been active in, and contributed to, but I also see what a limited space of society I have

been “locked” into, and how much harm all hours alone with the piano, and all stressful competitive occasion have made to my being.

I will come back to Your thoughts about play and education as an open system, where relations, as well as connection with life and community are in the center,<sup>5</sup> and how such holdings could challenge conservatory education, but I will start with my musical experiences, from when I was a little girl.

I come from a musical family. Many relatives of mine, uncles, aunts, and cousins are musicians. I started at a quite early age, actually when I was six years old. I chose the piano as I wanted to be like my mother, she is a good pianist. She is a teacher in an upper secondary school, and we had a piano at home. I was the oldest girl in the family. All my siblings are musicians, and I have a great support from my family. They found me talented. I went to many piano competitions so one thing led to another, and I ended up in a secondary school, specialized in music.

I think we practiced an insane amount in those four years, from the age of 15 to 18-19, specialized in music. We had other classes too, but we had lots of music classes. And 80-90% of the students from that secondary school came to this Academy, where I still study or to other academies in this country or in Europe. So, there was already quite an open path, I guess. For me, it wasn't really a question. Of course, I finished the four years in the secondary music school and then went to the Academy of Music. The path was already set.

So, Aleksandra, why did we compete, and why did we practice so much at that young age? What consequences for our being and becoming did that give? Where did the play go?

I had some really horrible times when I thought this whole thing through. Maybe, I think, I saw it too black, too dark, those days. But I can tell You that sometimes I felt, Jesus, I was using my teenage years to practice six, seven hours a day. I

barely ate. I barely had social connections. And now I am talking about myself. I know people who had social connections and were quite okay with those years. But for me, and I know others who did the same, these four years, for example in the music secondary school, were lasting like this.

Why didn't we get the chance to think, to play, to be creative, and create diverse imaginations about our future? Your thoughts, Aleksandra, about the role of play in human development towards flexible and creative individuals that can transcend biological existence and be active in making of culture, made me think.<sup>6</sup> Why didn't we get the chance to discover our potentials and establish ourselves as humans and musicians, through processing and reflecting upon our environments that You underline as important?<sup>7</sup> Why didn't we interact with society on other occasions than competitions, or through teaching just to have some extra money, why weren't we engaged as "makers in society?"<sup>8</sup>

You know, Aleksandra, I realized that maybe what I have learnt after this much practicing, sweating and stressful situations before exams in the academy, crying after lessons and working at midnight, still not satisfied with a piece – I didn't want to bring anything imperfect to my teacher, not unusual for girls, I know,<sup>9</sup> – has nothing to do with my future in society. After all this, I wonder if I even want to teach in a primary school level of music, where I have to say I'm sure I could teach already, with four hours of practice when I was a teenager, or something like that. What was the meaning? It was cool to think that I would become a concert pianist, but we educate maybe 50 pianists each year, and they need about five, I can imagine.

So, what I tell You now are the dark thoughts from the other side. I don't think I will end up working in a music school in a village, because otherwise I wouldn't have started the doctorate, nor getting the chance to read Your articles.

But, to think about how to go on after the studies, that's the trickiest question, and I guess that makes more students than me quite stressed. For pianists it's quite hard to get chances, as I already wrote. An orchestra musician somehow has to audition and can somehow get into a reasonably good orchestra, if that is what they want with their future. For me, it has sometimes made me anxious to think like "I love to play big music and maybe I will end up teaching these really stupid, easy child songs". I understand, now, that it is not black and white, there could be many other alternatives for musicians in society, so many meaningful ways to act and react. I think Your thoughts are a great help when it comes to rethinking conservatory education – towards an open system in relation to society.

I know that female pianists like me are disciplined towards and through conservatory studies, by traditions, expectations, teachers' responses, and self-conceptions, which seem to influence our views of possible futures.<sup>10</sup> When I read Your articles Aleksandra, I started to think: What if conservatory education had been organized as an open system? What consequences could there be for our self-conceptions, what expectations we could meet, and what kind of responses we could get?

Already in my bachelor I discovered that this Academy is a rather closed system. Even if I loved my teacher, I needed fresh air. I needed a change. I needed a new teacher, a new approach. I felt that I needed to grow, somehow, in my musical attitude, I needed a new approach. So, I went to schools in other parts of Europe. I really feel that my knowledge expanded. I also met teachers with totally different holdings. These were more in line with Your way of thinking, Aleksandra, not completely, but in a way. And I was encouraged to interact with a diversity of co-students as well.

In this country<sup>11</sup>, many professors were raised in the spirit of the Russian method<sup>12</sup>, if that is the way to say it in English. That is a specific kind of pedagogical approach. And this is what I found totally opposite when I was abroad, where I have

found a relief. I mean, this is what You underline Aleksandra, safeness, and diversity, to develop towards independent individuals. More about that later. Here in this academy, I sometimes felt honored that I could go to play for my teacher, even if we are actually good friends and I am using the impolite form of talking, we talk on the phone many times etcetera. Abroad, I've had the opposite experience. The teachers made me feel that they wanted to show me that they were honored that I participated in the lesson. They were looking forward to my thoughts of a new piece. It was quite shocking, actually, when someone asked me, after I had played a piece "Great, would You like to start?" or "What did You find good in Your performance?" And I was like "good...?" I had no experience of starting off with good things. In this Academy, they never really said: "This was good". They always start with the bad things. And this is something I, if I will work as a teacher, definitely want to change. I don't think any student would be spoiled if the teacher notes all the good things they have in their performances. How to dare to play, in a double sense, if you only get response on your mistakes? Again, Your philosophical thoughts give me energy Aleksandra.

What if conservatories were organized as societal education and as open systems? Such an organization would challenge both neoliberal political structures, and conservatory Western classical music traditions?<sup>13</sup>

The main reason why I started my doctorate studies, was to broaden my skills and experiences. I prolong my studies at this academy, so I can still be a student at the university and be in contact with the professors, and with other students. In the PhD-program<sup>14</sup> there are a bit more diverse occasions for concerts, and co-play, where I can be me in another way than before. I am also teaching. I have a few students, private students. I really love them, and they are cute children. But I have seven, and I don't want to teach more. It's enough for me. I teach those seven students one day, and the other days, I can practice and try to work on the more theoretical parts of my doctorate. I have got this opportunity to reflect upon my experiences. But I need



help, to create opportunities for others to be creative and playful, and hopefully create their own life plans, with own goals and visions, and do not have to go the same painful way as me. I am so alone with those thoughts, so therefore, I write this letter to You.

Through my visits abroad, and the approach I met there, I'm more of a person of those experiences, of course. I learned a lot and I'm using the lessons and I'm happy for that. On the other hand, an interesting side effect of this quiet strict way of teaching I think is an amazing and positive thing. For example, here at this Academy, the theoretical stuff, not only the doctorate but already the bachelor and master's studies, are on an extremely high level. The teachers are amazing, and they want You to learn everything. That's a part of the tradition in this country. There are quite strict rules when it comes to what repertoire You should play, even if it is possible to trick the system in some ways. But why should we learn to trick this (rather closed) system?

Another thing is, when it comes to opportunities to play in concerts, to act as musicians in society, it is very important who your teacher is. They give opportunities to just a few people, not supportably in relation to their skills or knowledge. The fact is that they had those teachers, who are somehow active in all these different fields, as for example concert organizers, and they are good friends. So, it's just about connections, sometimes. And they can help their students in several ways. Yeah. It's quite known who those teachers are, who are good in this. But these teachers are not always these teachers in their profession, so it's quite tricky. Is that the way conservatories should connect and interplay with society? I don't think so.

But chamber music is in one way more of an open space, in some senses. And chamber music is very important at this Academy. We have regular weekly chamber music lessons. And you can trick this system a bit, when it comes to create what You

Alexandra labels playfields within the closed system; actually, you can have as many chamber music lessons as you want. More about this later.

Something has to be done, and as I read You, Aleksandra, I wonder if (music) educational research could be used to conceptualize ideas on advancing higher music educational practice, beyond the master apprentice model,<sup>15</sup> as You express it: “Within the already given and also the currently latent potentials of local societies?”<sup>16</sup> May be, music educational researchers have to “. . . break out of strictly academic limitations and delve deeper into the educational practice that should help them construct theoretical concepts and methods.” Not least this is important in conservatories, where the master apprentice model and limited views of musicians’ roles in society influence habits and approaches to a great extent.<sup>17</sup> You stress that such holdings can contribute to change. You suggest that scientific research could benefit from educational practice, by:

. . . providing a reason for changing preschool pedagogy from its currently normative nature into a practice based on theoretical and empirical examination. In other words, it could help it shift from a discipline based on (unexamined) rules into a discipline capable of exploring its own objectives and reflecting on its own practice and nature, considering scientific findings.<sup>18</sup>

This is relevant for conservatory education as well, as I understand it. I read about research regarding conservatory cultures, and not least analyses regarding making cultural heritage, tensions in fields of teaching and learning, and becoming musicians, state that change is needed, and that un-reflected rules to a high degree steers how teaching and learning take place, which I clearly recognize.<sup>19</sup> The researchers, Ferm Almqvist & Werner, underline that this in turn influences possibilities of becoming, connections to society and views of possible futures, which they have also related to Randall Allsup’s thinking about open and closed systems.<sup>20</sup> They underline, which I

also recognize, that there is a clear tendency that behaviors are reproduced, which limits learning, creativity, and possible functions in society. Therefore, it continues to be a “closed system.”

In the line with what You argue Aleksandra, researchers should be invited to and included in higher music educational practice, and why not, in cooperation within education and practice of becoming conservatory teachers, if such an education existed. Maybe, the task of research in the field of music education, could be to explore findings from empirical research, through a philosophical lens, as a base for further reflections and discussions among teachers in conservatories. This is one thing I have been thinking about since I started my doctorate. Your thoughts on encouraging a “mutual field of understanding”<sup>21</sup> are really inspiring.

Aleksandra, You challenge institutional education, which is what I want to do and this is also why I write this letter to You, to reflect upon how Your thoughts can help me in my re-think of conservatory education, and hopefully get Your reflections back. You also underline the importance of defining what an institution is, and in this case, conservatories are very specific institutions, that have run instrumental pedagogy for a very long time. And of course the teaching I have met, and the learning I have experienced, can’t be separated from traditions developed and conserved within them.<sup>22</sup> As You state: “institutional education is a pedagogical form shaped throughout history of civilization by various social processes.”<sup>23</sup> Although pre-school educational institutions, that is Your area of expertise Aleksandra, is a much newer<sup>24</sup> phenomena or societal institution than conservatories, Your critique is, as I see it, not least in relation to my experiences and other research findings, relevant regarding conservatories. You mean, as I understand it, that it is important to grasp hidden aspects of institutional education, factors that determine it, and that the functional values of institutional education, through such insights it could be possible to “. . . conceive a different model of education which would incarnate the proclaimed objectives more

fully.”<sup>25</sup> Your impetus to form education as open systems, where students, as me, are encouraged to create their own independent life-plans is so inspiring. In such open educational programs, play constitute an important approach.

You underline that play is “the main opportunity to practice the capacity for flexibility and the main factor in the development of that capacity and its differentiation”.<sup>26</sup> I suppose then that play in playful ways, where students transform themselves into different roles, could contribute to imaginations of varied future possibilities and situations for becoming musicians. To use and play with musical instruments in varied ways and new arrangements could contribute to increased “capability for flexibility” and prevent “patterns of behaviors, and related psychological functions, from becoming fixed and rigid.”<sup>27</sup> It seems so important, natural, and totally contradictive to the traditional master-apprentice approach. I wonder, how conservatory education could be transformed towards a system that stimulates and cultivates creativity through play?<sup>28</sup> I think that Your suggested structural features of play “Imaginary plane” and “Rules” give good guidelines. To create or imagine playfields as arenas for learning and development where specific patterns are extracted in higher music education shouldn’t be complicated. You suggest that “acts, behaviors, relationships, emotions, perceptions, concepts etc”<sup>29</sup> could be extracted from reality and become content of play in a model of reality, which I immediately could see examples of related to my education. In such activity, we could have the possibility to express our experiences “including feelings, thoughts, phantasies etc”<sup>30</sup> and develop sites of our own as musicians. Then, with help of teachers we could relate to the demands of reality, to the rules. And as You write, we could find novel ways of behaving, through formalizing playful procedures. For example, pianists could learn from percussionists’ “rules” when it comes to what acts and behaviors that are expected from a musician. Of course, this demands that conservatory teachers develop knowledge about

“structural characteristics of play” as it is “of utmost importance for the construction of methods and means for the development of creative abilities”<sup>31</sup> among musicians.

You talk about the importance of feeling safe in the relation between adult and child as a condition in the play situation, which I translate to teacher and student relationship. As I mentioned above, that was not always put in the forefront through my music educational experiences. Secondly, You underline the necessity of having “enough involvement and participation in the events that can provide opportunities to acquire living experience and knowledge and to be exposed to adequate, high quality indirect role models of creative behavior.” I have been thinking about role models Aleksandra. I had a wonderful teacher who just died half a year ago. She was like the mother, grandmother already, of three generations of, not only pianists, she was a pianist, but she taught also chamber music. We all had teachers who grew up with her. She was one of these big teachers. So, an important role model.

Her approach was characterized by infinite curiosity and love towards music and this extreme engagement and happiness. She was always eager to learn a new piece. She was old, but I mean, she loved contemporary music too. She was open to anything. She was a great character. She was living and always full of high emotions, sometimes really, really, big. But she loved interest, she hated ignorance. She was also quite strong in her opinion, and she could also say some really hurting personal stuff sometimes. But she was so lovely. And she worked a lot more than she was paid for. Then again, I thought about this with role-models. What kinds of futures did she offer? That we female pianists should be like mothers and grandmothers, who worked without being paid? Of course, to live for music and engagement was so inspiring and important to take in as a part of who I would like to be as a musician or teacher. But, in this closed system, what did she actually contribute with? When it comes to rethinking and change, I mean? You mention pedagogy as an important aspect of an

open system, but what does that really mean? What can even great individuals do within a closed system?

Thirdly, concerning the conditions for play, You underline that they shall content “rich and diverse contacts with peers on the one hand, and on the other opportunities to be alone, shielded from the public and given space for non-shriveled personal, imitate needs, feelings, and thoughts.”<sup>32</sup> I think that conservatories have a lot of work to do, to create such conditions for play, which according to You is a prerequisite for cultivating play, if I look back at my experiences, which I described to You Aleksandra in the beginning of the letter. It seems so important that this is done, to be able to let music students develop and use imagination in conservatory education. You talk about elements of play as “rhythm, balance, harmonization, exchange, contrast, connecting and disconnecting”<sup>33</sup> which are also elements of music. So, music education should be easy to view and use as a playfield, where creativity is re-activated and developed, and where musical knowledge could be reworked and transformed, if I understand You rightly. But You also underline that this can’t happen in a vacuum, it must be related in and towards communities and society to have permanent and developmental consequences.

If I understand you correctly educational institutions, as the conservatory, could be a place where creativity is stimulated and cultivated, if it is transformed radically into a societal rather than strictly an educational practice. I assume, this would require essential changes in the relationship between school and society and the social reorganization with the school as an institution.<sup>34</sup> I also recognize such demands from other studies I have taken part of during my doctorate, for example Small’s concept of musicking and Veblen’s thoughts regarding community music.<sup>35</sup>

Your three crucial features of institutional education are easy to recognize in my conservatory. For example, that it is a historical phenomenon, which I already men-

tioned earlier. Other similarities between pre-school education and conservatory education is, as I see it, that it is decontextualized, separated from a living context, and that it segregates students. You claim that to understand educational issues one must study consequences of these prerequisites in relation to musicians, musicianship, and education, and to both former and future experiences. Otherwise, education hinders students to master life problems, instead of the opposite, which is highly recognizable.<sup>36</sup>

Also, I agree that conservatories are artificial environments, that “... reanimates already established (scientific) knowledge and its misconceptions, pedagogical principles and dogma, implicit life philosophies, and prejudice”.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, we as students, if I transfer Your ideas to conservatories, miss the chance to become persons for whom learning becomes meaningful. To challenge the artificial dogma would be needed to help us become independent and capable of taking control of our own life. Of course, as I think, this differs between instrumental departments, and also on teachers’ relations to the conservatory tradition. As You write about the need of posing existential questions:

If education doesn’t pose these questions but primarily defines itself as technology, it deprives itself of dealing with crucial existential questions. But suppose the task of education – and, of course, of all those who practically or theoretically deal with education – is to conceive education as a means of human’s liberation.<sup>38</sup>

This, again, is relevant to conservatories of today according to my experiences which I wrote about earlier. Also, Your claim regarding closed systems, that they build upon one-way directed interaction between teachers and learners, instead of offering all involved mutual participation, where both learners and teachers are actively and equally involved, can be recognized in conservatories as well.

Finally, Your argument that modern studies of education, not least the ones who want to expand the boundaries of personhood development, must constitute themselves as critical theory of society. Following You, the task for music educational research would be to encourage awareness in the field of conservatory education, not to rationalize existing policies. At the same time pedagogical theories must take students' actual social circumstances into account, and from there transform institutional education to societal education. This is labelled by You as a purpose of education as an open system.<sup>39</sup>

Hence, such an educational system would have to be entirely open to the immediate social environment, to the cultural forms that shape contemporary sensibilities, and to the life problematics of music students, including exchange of knowledge between teachers and students – shared life living – as I interpret Your writings Aleksandra. I think it would be fantastic if conservatories could change from master-apprenticeship traditions and competitiveness, “into the discovery of the world”<sup>40</sup> where music students lived and grew, and developed life plans, through play, creativity, and imagination. Your suggestion that establishing own ways of “comprehending and communicating with the world”<sup>41</sup> is the goal of education, so relevant for conservatory education, to be encouraged and equipped to create own life plans as musicians through “positive and supportive relationships” with teachers. You underline the importance of that students' lived life are protected, respected, and enhanced, in such processes aiming to cultivate self-conscious beings. This in turn, You continue, demands partner-like relations between teachers and students. In addition, educational practices must happen in a variety of places, in encounter with different people, where students can observe and take part in many aspects of musicians' life and work, if I transfer Your thoughts to conservatory education. Another aspect You bring up of an open system is that students are encouraged to interact with each other, aiming to develop towards autonomous democratic individuals and musicians.



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As You also accentuate, such holdings demand “change of many concepts that regulate today’s educational practice.”<sup>42</sup> What is a musician? What characterize musicians’ working life? How could flexible musicianship be cultivated? Hence, this shows relevant problematics for music educational philosophy and research, that would be important for leaders and teachers in conservatories to take part of and reflect upon as I see it, and which seems to be asked for in the research field as well.<sup>43</sup> Thank You so much, for opening my eyes for these critical possibilities.

I look forward to Your response.

Yours sincerely,

Piano student

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