EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools

Melbourne — 15 April 2013

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Mr T. Brinkman, Executive, Performing Arts,
Mr H. Berger, Programming Manager, Access and Community, and
Mr D. Rogers, Team Leader, Digital Learning, Arts Centre Melbourne.
The CHAIR — I welcome you to this hearing of the Education and Training Committee. As you know, we are looking at music education in schools. There are couple of things I need to point out. Firstly, these lovely microphones in front of you are not for singing purposes; although feel free to have a go if you wish to lighten up the afternoon with a bit of karaoke! Hansard will be recording what you say today as part of the evidence. You will have an opportunity to review the transcript and, if there are any typographical errors, have those fixed. Also, the evidence you give is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That only applies to the hearing proper and not to anything that is said outside of these four walls. I will throw over to you for a brief opening statement, and then we have a number of questions that we would like to ask you.

Mr BRINKMAN — Thank you, Chair, and thank you for this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry. I am hoping the team from Arts Centre Melbourne I have brought along today will be able to address all your questions. We really do welcome the opportunity to contribute to your parliamentary inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools. As a major public institution for the performing arts in Victoria we understand the value of and advocate for the benefits that exceptional arts experiences bring to the many facets of our lives. At Arts Centre Melbourne we strive to provide distinct programs that are underpinned by an ethos of creative learning and participation. So this is a great opportunity for us.

While we are not an organisation that is uniquely dedicated to supporting music education, our commitment to delivering high-quality programs for and with the education sector reflect the importance we place on providing opportunities for young people to explore, access, learn from and apply the Arts.

In terms specifically of music education, however, we have been delivering programs in music, music technology, performances and multimedia that support Victorian government and non-government school education for more than 20 years. Our programs continue to deliver against key goals of AusVELS, and we reach approximately 22,000 primary and secondary school students in music-related programs and performances each year. Our theatres and Hamer Hall also host the significant education and community programs of our major and regular presenting partners, such as the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Opera Australia and the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

I will give an overview of our school music programs. First of all, there is an area which is access for students to main stage school music performances. That is through both programs by major and regular presenters — the MSO, the ACO and Opera Australia, as I have just mentioned — as well as performances programmed by Arts Centre Melbourne itself, with special disciplinary or cross-curricular learning outcomes. Often those performances can be associated with all sorts of other experiences and learning opportunities.

There are opportunities for ancillary music learning programs around our main stage offer. Often that is access to professional artists. An example recently would be Kutcha Edwards leading songwriting workshops, and Gene Peterson doing body percussion workshops. We have a Digital Learning Hub, which is an excellent, unique resource at Arts Centre Melbourne. It offers a range of generalist and specialist courses in music technology — music composition, music production and sound design. Increasingly it is a great facility for opportunities for practical application. An example of that would be a project we are currently doing with the City of Melbourne, which is a compositional project for young people to work on for the Federation Bells.

We have online resources such as the CC sMASH music mash-up website. There is a focus on Creative Commons licensing with that; so it is an open source. There is collaboration and there is contents sharing. An example is the Revolutions: Australian Music History Timeline. We participate in conferences, we deliver innovations in programming, particularly relating to digital technologies, and we receive referrals from the education sector into our community music programs, such as our Dig Deep program, which we have mentioned in the submission. They often come from schools with marginalised students. That is my opening gambit.
The CHAIR — That is comprehensive. Just on that, what is the uptake of those programs by schools in terms of numbers and all that sort of thing? Maybe answer that question and I will ask another one after that.

Mr BERGER — I can answer that one. In terms of the full breadth of our schools programs, which are not just about music programs but actually relate across the Arts, I think we are around the 60 000 to 70 000 a year attendance mark. In terms of the music component of that and the Digital Learning Hub music component, it is probably down to around 20 000 to 25 000, I think, a year.

Mr BRINKMAN — About a third.

Mr BERGER — Yes.

The CHAIR — We have had several submissions that have suggested that a one-off music experience — a tour or visit — effectively equates to the music program that schools may do. Have you found this to be the case?

Mr BERGER — Yes, I would agree with that. I think that is quite common actually for schools. They might be issued to us to see a show, or they might not. It might be something completely different. It might be bringing a group into the school. But I have seen it in the past for many years that they only have a budget to do one arts event — and it might be music, it might be drama, it might be a combination, if they are lucky — and that is their budget and their quota for the year. I have seen a lot of teachers trying to be very imaginative and inventive with that to see how they can make the most of that by combining it to align with other areas of study, or curriculum areas — particularly in primary school, where there is that flexibility, I think, for a unit of study. That might be civics and citizenship, it might be social studies, it might be any range of things. The most common example would be, ‘We’ll do a play about it’, so they can incorporate their drama or their music or elements of all that into the design, but at the same time they are aligning it to other areas of their curriculum as well. I have seen that quite a bit.

The CHAIR — Extending from that point, that many of those schools may do that, are they regulars? Would you say you have a particular school that would come year in, year out, as their one excursion or incursion, and that is it? And effectively, if we wanted to, we could identify them, and if so, could you see there being an opportunity of leveraging that initial one-time experience to then further that experience in some way, shape or form, almost utilising what you do as a bit of a kick-starter?

Mr BERGER — Yes. We have schools that come back to our programs each year. Whether we are their sole arts program for the year, I have no idea. Certainly in the last few years we have made a big effort to try to forge relationships with new schools that have not been to our centre before, particularly schools that may not be able to afford to and that have other barriers that stop them from coming. We are starting to develop relationships with those schools. But yes, I think an approach that we are always striving to achieve with our program, with varying degrees of success, is that while the one-off thing has intrinsic value in itself in terms of a school and learning capacity, it is so much greater when it can be built upon, and we look for that. Whether that is providing resources to a performance that a teacher can utilise before they come and most certainly after they come, whether they are links to other resources on the web, whether they are opportunities to stay on and do a workshop or something and meet the artists while they are on site, there are a range of ways we try to do that. We firmly believe that to leverage off a one-off event like that is of high importance.

The CHAIR — Great.

Ms TIERNEY — Your submission emphasises the need for and importance of community partnerships. For the purposes of the transcript can you outline the reasons why you believe they are so important, and also what areas in those partnerships could be improved?

Mr BERGER — Sure. A lot of our experience in partnering with schools stems from a program called the Strategic Partnership Program, which is a Department of Education and Early Childhood Development initiative. We have been a member of that for several years now, and we have been funded to go into
schools to work on projects. From what we have observed and learnt in doing so, the benefits are that there is usually a more extended engagement, whether that is in schools or with us, and therefore an opportunity for fuller learning, and the whole range of depth is much greater. Student engagement is stronger and therefore there is more potential for better learning outcomes. More particularly there are opportunities for building teacher capacity as well. We get feedback from teachers when we get a chance to work with schools on an ongoing basis. They say at the end of it, ‘I didn’t realise how easily I could have done this myself’, and the lack of confidence they had experienced before working with us has been waived by the time they get to the end of the project and they feel empowered to continue, perhaps not with the same level of expertise that we might be able to offer them, but they are certainly able to go further and implement that beyond our visit.

The other thing we have seen as a result of that is the ability for the whole of the school to get involved at some level. In order for us to partner with a school we require the principal to sign off on it. Once we have the principal onside there is the opportunity for a school to implement a whole different range of approaches to learning and different ways of engaging with other areas of the school that we might not be working with specifically, but that might be able to support the project. Certainly we are encouraging them to work with other partners in the community as well. I am thinking of a project we did for three years called the DocU project, which is not music related, so I probably should not go into great detail, but it involved going out into the community and interviewing people and that kind of thing.

The benefits beyond the school gates of the school engaging with its community and the parent community especially were enormous. The other part of your question was?

Ms TIERNEY — What areas of improvements can be looked at in terms of partnership?

Mr BERGER — It is a good question. I was thinking about that this morning. I can certainly identify the challenges of a partnership arrangement, and I guess working on ways to overcome some of the challenges would be a way to improve them. One of the big ones is building in sufficient planning time. Depending on the length of a partnership in the kind of project we are talking about, there needs to be enough commitment from both parties to deliver on the goals of the project to start with, and support from within the school — both the staff and sometimes the parent community as well — to achieve that. I guess in terms of whichever the organisation is that is coming in as the partner or community organisation, ensuring they have a good grasp on what the curriculum goals are of the school as well is necessary.

I think there would be a lot of very enthusiastic artists or arts companies out there who would love to go and work in schools, but it is not actually about them just going into a school and doing some art; there are actually some very stringent priorities set by the department and the school itself in terms of what their learning outcomes are. I think it is really important that the arts organisation or the partner body has a grasp on that as well.

Funding is a big one, obviously. More and more we are getting feedback from the schools we work with that they have less and less money to participate in our programs. The school does not have the money and they cannot ask the parents for any more money to do these kinds of excursions or to have us come to them, so that is a huge one. Also I guess the opportunity for schools and other community organisations to find each other as well is important. I know that Arts Victoria has a couple of programs to put artists in schools; they also have an artist in residence program. They act as a broker for that kind of relationship. I think schools that are also time poor would not necessarily know where to find organisations that might be able to partner with them.

I guess those are several of the big challenges to be overcome in establishing our partnership. I do not have any firm answers today about how they might be overcome.

Mr BRINKMAN — One thing we were talking about a little bit earlier was the point that Hannes made about empowerment and people imagining it would be very complex and difficult, but once they got into the programs finding they had a natural aptitude to work these kinds of projects. Perhaps there is a
point about either training, facilitating or somehow making it easier for people to take up these kinds of opportunities.

Mr BERGER — I have been aware of a shift in pedagogy in the last decade or so — about the teacher not being the teacher but being the facilitator of the learning. I think that is where access to specialists in any given field, whether it is music or other forms of the Arts, is able to empower the teacher to facilitate that in some way so the teacher does not necessarily feel they need to have the knowledge and be able to master what they are trying to teach so long as they can guide the learning and not be afraid to be seen to be learning with the students. That is what I am picking up from the work I have been doing with schools and with the education department. That is where a partnership arrangement, I think, can help to empower teachers.

Ms MILLER — We have heard a lot about the impact that technology is having on music and learning. From your perspective how do you see technology improving the learning experience for students?

Mr ROGERS — I would like to explain first the way we approach music education — just to set a little bit of context before I answer that. We work in the Digital Learning Hub, which is part of the Arts Centre. We run usually short courses in music, and we do that via music technology, which in our case is laptops, computers and that kind of stuff. The reason we can offer short experiences is because technology for us is a tool that helps to facilitate that. It helps kids to get over that first step and that barrier of creating music. You do not need to learn your scales straightaway, you do not need to learn finger positions straightaway; you can get straight into creating music. For us, technology is about fast-tracking kids to that first step and that first spark where they realise, ‘This is something I can do’. I started my love of music in a very similar situation, except in my case the technology was my music teacher showing us how you could overdub from one cassette to another, and that sparked it for me —

Mr BRINKMAN — Cassette?

Mr ROGERS — That with two tape recorders, one could record across.

It is difficult for us as adults to know what it is that is going to spark that love of music, but I think we would all agree that it is something we want to do — that is, to spark the interest. For us, technology is the way we are doing it now. It is to say, ‘With this, I can show you in five minutes how to start making a song’. Is it going to be the best song in the world? No, it is not, but it might be the first step on the path to creating that song for that person.

Ms MILLER — So the ‘how’ is really just finding that spark — that light switch — that turns on and says, ‘This is something I want to do’.

Mr ROGERS — For us it really is, because our shortest classes are 1½ hours, so in that time I do not want to spend it going, ‘This is a crotchet’.

Ms MILLER — Looking at the other side, what do you see as the barriers schools face in trying to provide up-to-date music and technology for students, and how can we ensure that interested students gain access?

Mr ROGERS — The barrier used to be the cost. The barrier used to be the hardware and the software. Now everyone carries a phone — mobile technology is out there. We are carrying in our pockets incredibly powerful pieces of technology. The barrier now is the empowerment of teachers; that is the way I see it. We work with a number of different universities, and we have their generalist teacher population come through. We spend half a day teaching them about music technology. When I say teaching them about music technology, we show them how to use it, but the message that we are really trying to get across is it is okay not to know everything. It is okay for them to learn with their students. The biggest barrier that we see with music teachers is the fear that they need to know everything before the student does. That is the biggest barrier.
Mr BERGER — We were talking about this earlier this morning too, Dave. We thought it was worth pointing out that we refer to this as music technology, but a student never would. They would not know what that meant. For them phones are just part of daily life, so it is an interesting distinction that we keep talking about how we can use this technology, but they for the most part already are. I think that is a shift that has already been happening and needs to happen more across all of education really, incorporating that. As you say, the immediacy of being able to achieve something straightaway is a hook when it comes to music.

The CHAIR — Just the flip side of that, we have heard some people suggest that by the kids effectively skipping those steps and going straight into music technology they are missing the basics. What are your thoughts about that?

Mr ROGERS — I am really glad you asked that question, because that is the question I would ask myself as well. When I said fast-track, what I see as the really important thing to instil in a young person is the love of music and the feeling that it is possible, then teaching the technical becomes easy, because the love is already there. There is a legitimate path to make music where you do not know anything about it, but we really still believe in traditional music education as well. The way we run our music programs — they are very, very short — is about igniting that passion and the creativity.

Mr BERGER — As Tim mentioned in our opening statement, we are not a dedicated music education organisation. Music companies — symphony orchestras and so on — will put a lot more time into instilling that instrumentalist discipline. We see our approach to be across all the Arts, as well as music, about igniting that passion and providing access to a range of incredible experiences they would not get elsewhere to facilitate some art making as well and support the teachers back in schools to be able to follow that up to some degree as best we can.

Mr CRISP — Some submissions suggest that schools struggle to deliver all the Arts learning — being drama, music, visual arts, media and dance — in their curriculum and that music misses out as a result of this. What are your views on whether they should be trying to deliver all of these or just pick one or two forms?

Mr BRINKMAN — That is a good question. I think the way that we approach it is we tend to see the individual. The individuals often come to us with an interest, be it somebody from a school who wants to bring a party or be it a referral — somebody who has been referred to one of our evening courses, for example, from a school. It might well be a music referral, for example, or a theatre experience and so on. They are quite often coming along. Once that happens we find that the individual does get interested in other art forms. They do not stick in one channel, they get inquisitive, because the art forms themselves do not sit neatly in channels anymore. Music is quite often a key component of film, moving images and dance and so on. People are often very interested in dance and what have you, and they are quite quickly finding themselves playing and exploring in the art forms. To our way of thinking, schools being able to give students access to the range of art forms is an important principle.

Mr BERGER — I absolutely understand and appreciate the challenges and the difficulties in trying to incorporate all of the Arts especially into a small school, but I would advocate for at some level trying to approach all of the Arts, especially at a junior level. It has been documented that if a young person has never had an artistic experience — or any experience for that matter, I guess — by the end of the middle years, then they are very unlikely to pursue an appreciation or activity in the Arts beyond that in their lives. Aside from that, there are also all those arguments and evidence to support the fact that music and other art forms support a whole range of learning and development — social, personal, critical thinking, et cetera. I think it is crucial in the junior years to be able to find experience in a range of art forms.

You could take it back to the Bloom and Gardner models that there are different ways people can process, learn and synthesise knowledge. Some of that might be kinaesthetic, some of that might be through literacy, some of that might be through other things; you would know what I am talking about. The Arts only support those different ways of learning and development, so I would say there is a strong argument for schools to try and adopt an approach to all the Arts, not just specialise. When we are talking about
secondary school and disciplined instrumental-based music, that is probably a bit different. I do not have a firm opinion on that — it is not really something that we do — but I suspect that is where schools will start to decide more. It will be easier to put on a play every year than to try and have a school band or something like that. That is where music would suffer.

The CHAIR — My question is leading on from that. We have had this diminishing activity of music in schools at the primary level over a period of time, and there has been a good argument to suggest that when it was incorporated as part of the Arts as opposed to sitting out on its own that was the period that caused that, if you like, from the 1980s onwards. Apart from again having music sit on its own, firstly, would you suggest that that is a strategy that we could look at doing, having music as a stand-alone? Yes or no, and then I will go into the next part.

Mr BERGER — I think so. I think music is particularly important for all the evidence around its support for literacy, numeracy and language. So that would be yes.

The CHAIR — In terms of furthering equitable provision of music and the awareness of all of the great things that music does, and improving the status of music in schools, what do you think we could do as a committee? What do you think policy-makers should be looking at doing to improve all of those sorts of things — access, equity, awareness and better programs? Sorry to give you the big question to finish.

Mr BERGER — That is a big question. Let me think about that for a second.

Mr BRINKMAN — I was thinking about when I was a student. I was fortunate in that music was a core component of the curriculum. We all did it up to a certain age, and then we could choose and specialise. But not until the age of 13 or 14, so I was given the opportunity to experience things. To me, the secret is the teacher and the individual and the individual’s enthusiasms. My feeling is that schools having access to resources is an extremely important component part of that. If the inquiry is able to provide a framework wherein all schools are able to access excellent teaching resources that deal with the different art forms, and music in particular, I think that would help both in order to set people alight with these opportunities within the schools and try and deal with some of the inequity between the provision in different schools. I would not want to try and teach the committee how on earth to achieve that, but it does seem to me that some kind of framework that provides the right expertise that is available across all the schools would be important. What do you think, Hannes?

Mr BERGER — I think it actually goes beyond the school as well. There is the education of parents and family and the wider community as well about the need and importance of that. I do not have any examples, but when parents are seen to be having to fork out more money for what may be seen as a non-important part of study then they are resistant to that, so there is probably a wider learning campaign needed to broaden the message beyond the school as well.

The CHAIR — Just on that, obviously music is a huge industry and there are many beneficiaries of that, particularly in Victoria, as a result of what it provides. You are obviously in essence a beneficiary of that, too, in what you do, so what role do you think the industry needs to play when it comes to educating our future leaders in the music arena and our future performers?

Mr BERGER — Being available, for one thing. I have been thrilled and astounded over the years when we have worked with some quite established artists, musicians especially. When we are working in the participation area of the Arts and we say, ‘We want you to come in and do a show or do a program’, we are not asking them to come and do a big main stage performance in Hamer Hall. We actually want them to do a gig, work with students, talk about what they do and break down their practice, and they are quite ready to do that. They actually get back from that as well. When you start teaching about what you do, as an artist it makes you understand more about what you do. I think there is a real role for the industry to be available as community liaisons at that level, particularly at an education level as well. That is something we have done in the past with our programs, but you still have to pay them, so it comes down to money at the end of the day.
Mr ROGERS — If we think about education as trying to prepare students for the future, and if we are really serious about preparing students for life in the music industry, we need to look at a very well-rounded music education. It used to be that a composer could just compose, but now a composer needs to compose, arrange, record and produce, and that is really where the music technology side comes in. You need to be literate in music technology to be able to survive in the industry these days. Learning to play an instrument to a high level is one part of that, but learning then how to create your own work is another part that cannot be ignored.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for appearing before the committee and for the work you have done, and good luck with what you continue to do. We look forward to seeing the great work you do and also coming along and experiencing it firsthand. You always put on some great shows.

Witnesses withdrew.