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 C. Clark, General Manager,
Mr P. Garnick, Board Member, and
Ms S. Meehan, Vice-president, Melbourne Youth Music.
The CHAIR — Firstly, I welcome Melbourne Youth Music to the inquiry. I have had the good fortune of going along to one of the performances and being absolutely blown away by it, so congratulations on your work. We look forward to hearing a little bit more as part of the hearing today.

In terms of the process today, there are just a couple of things I need to point out. Firstly, these lovely microphones are not for singing in, but for recording — sorry! — by Hansard; the evidence is being recorded today. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and if there are any typographical errors that need to be fixed, then we will have those corrected.

Also, the evidence that you present today is covered under parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. Unfortunately, that does not apply to comments made outside of the room, but only the hearing proper.

What we might do is just hand over to you now for a brief opening statement. Then we will have some questions for you. Over to you.

Mr CLARK — Firstly, we are very grateful for the opportunity to present today, so thank you for the invitation. I will introduce the representatives of Melbourne Youth Music. Sharon Meehan is the Vice-president of our board of management. She is a longstanding board member of MYM. She is also head of music at Caulfield Grammar School and is a long-time advocate of the MYM program.

Mr Peter Garnick is a past president of our board of management and is still a sitting member of the board. He is also a very experienced arts executive and musician and currently Managing Director of the Dame Nellie Melba Opera Trust.

My name is Chris Clark. I am General Manager of Melbourne Youth Music. I guess today we are here just to give you a little bit of an insight into what we do and from our perspective how we fit into the kind of broader education sphere. Both Sharon and Peter will add some of their thoughts from their perspective as well.

I am not sure how familiar you are with our programs but I brought a little selection of collateral which just tells you about what we do. I am happy to hand that over and you can have a look through when you have time.

Our program is working specifically in ensemble music, so this differs from individual instrumental training. We call ourselves the team sport of music. Our students come together every Saturday of the school term and we have about 1000 participants each year. It is an elective program. It is obviously outside of their regular education providers, and we work in large ensembles like symphony orchestras, concert bands, string groups, jazz groups and those kinds of programs.

We bring together around 65 freelance educators who work for our program, and they are drawn from all over the state. We have some of the best people from tertiary and professional music sectors and also leading primary and secondary school music programs.

Our students work through a range of tiered ensembles. They are between the ages of 7 and 25, and the idea of our program is that it is music education, but we also think a lot about the broader skills that they develop by participating specifically in an ensemble as opposed to individual music tuition. We think very much about teamwork and communication and leadership skills and we start to apply those a little bit more to broader participation in the community, in business and in future career prospects.

As I said, our students come in every week and it is a tiered program so that theoretically they could come in as a seven-year-old violinist, work their way all the way up through our program, and at different levels we have pathways into other areas — entry and exit points from our programs. We pick up students in the very early days of their learning, and they can follow their pathway through our music program and go into careers as professional musicians. We have collaborative projects with organisations like the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and the Australian National Academy of Music. But we also have very good
relationships with community orchestras. Many people will go on and study something other than music, and we provide an opportunity for them to meet and network with other musicians.

Maybe Sharon might like to say a few words about how ensemble music and music in her school actually impact the students.

The CHAIR — I was going to ask about that.

Ms MEEHAN — I am fortunate to work in a school of 3000 students, and we employ 65 music staff alone. It is like a mini-school within a larger school. Our school, like other schools, provides many unique musical performances and opportunities for our students. Every day I feel very privileged to work with musicians and am reminded of the immense value of music and why it is important that it is accessible to students.

I have made a few dot points here for the committee to consider. We teach music to students because of its intrinsic value and its immeasurable capacity and potency to act on the heart, mind, spirit and soul of humanity. As singers and instrumentalists we connect and we create together what is not possible on our own.

Musicians have a really special place in our school. They tend to be the ones who are fully immersed in all areas of our school. They take on the leadership roles; they are often the dux; they are on the school committee; they achieve high academic results; they give wonderful community service to our school; they play multiple instruments; and we always find they are our best sportsmen and sportswomen as well. It is something about music that just makes them commit themselves with enthusiasm and dedication to achieve their best in all areas.

It is the energy and talent of our musicians which drives much of the creativity of our music events and lifts the performance standard and value of music in our school to greater heights. Musicians generate a special spirit in our school. We come to realise that that will always be a very important part of their lives. Much research has been done to support the view that the involvement of students in arts and music programs increases academic achievement, attendance, attitude to attendance, performance on reading and verbal tests, and literacy.

I work in a school where we are fortunate to have a team of outstanding specialist music staff, dedicated and passionate music educators who create rich musical experiences and opportunities for our students every day. They are committed to working with students to support, nurture and guide them through providing quality music tuition and experiences for every student every day.

I also witness the terrific support of parents, continuing to support and nurture their children’s musical development, and they will then be enriched musically and emotionally; and hopefully in turn music will become an indispensable part of them and the thirst will last a lifetime.

The CHAIR — I would like to direct a question to you, Sharon. In terms of teaching music in your school at the primary school level, can you elaborate for us how many hours a week kids are taught; and further to that, we have been hearing a lot that one of the issues of incorporating more teaching in schools has been because of the crowded curriculum and trying to fit it in amongst everything else. What are your views about that?

Ms MEEHAN — It is a crowded curriculum. We are fortunate in that we have specialist primary music educators. We run a singing-based program where children from pre-prep — four years old — to Year 6 have compulsory music classes at least two times a week. Younger children have it three times a week. Then as an extension to that they are also involved in choirs, bands and orchestras.

It is difficult; it is a crowded curriculum. We often find that music is moved to the last period of the day, especially Friday afternoons or Monday afternoons, because literacy and numeracy take priority in the mornings. What does that do to your music program? We do not have the children at their best, and I guess it is a constant fight even in a school where music is highly valued. Does that answer your question?
The CHAIR — Yes. So would you advocate that even though it is a crowded curriculum, it is imperative to fit the sorts of things that you are doing in your school in a broader public system?

Ms MEEHAN — Absolutely.

The CHAIR — Because you are finding the way to do it in your school, and obviously it works there. Would you suggest that the benefits outweigh any problems of not having it?

Ms MEEHAN — Yes. In an ideal world every child should have music every day, 30 minutes a day, for all the reasons that music exists — great social development, self-esteem, self-expression — and we see that the lives of the students who are involved in the music program are enhanced and their academic performance is enhanced in so many other ways.

Ms TIERNEY — How do you select students to take part in your program?

Mr CLARK — We have two different tiers to our program. We run a January summer school, and that is by application only. People allocate their preferences for a number of different ensembles and we allocate them based on the information they have provided in their application. Those people come from all over Victoria. They travel quite substantial distances to take part, because it is a one-week intensive program. It is non-residential, but many people come to Melbourne and stay during the week to take part. We have a lot of people who travel from interstate and growing international attendance as well in our summer school.

The other major part of our program is the Saturday ensemble program, and we run auditions in November and December each year. We engage a third-party professional audition panel to hear all the students individually, and they are allocated to one of the ensembles in the tiered structure. Obviously as we get to the higher tiered structure it becomes more competitive for some of the positions, but the majority of people who apply take up a position somewhere in the program. We run the annual auditions very much as they would happen in the professional world. At the senior level we provide set works that they prepare and the panel hears them individually all play the same work so that like instruments are compared against like pieces. It is much more relaxed at the junior level, where they come and present something of their own choice, and it is a very informal and more social kind of audition, if you like.

Ms TIERNEY — The committee has heard from quite a few witnesses that children from rural and regional backgrounds and low socioeconomic backgrounds often have difficulties in accessing music. In relation to the auditions that you have in particular is any weighting given for those groups of students so that there is some equity in the process?

Mr CLARK — Yes. We run quite a number of different programs throughout the year, mostly in conjunction with different philanthropic organisations. To give you a couple of examples of the types of programs we run, one of the programs with the Invergowrie Foundation is targeted at girls and young women from outer metropolitan and regional Victoria. Through the audition process they are identified as one of the potential sets of people to fit that particular category. We cover the tuition fees entirely, and we also provide a bursary towards travel to and from Melbourne each week for rehearsals. We also set them up with a female member of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and we have a mentoring program with women mentoring women. That is an example of one of the programs we have.

We run quite an extensive program with the Newsboys Foundation, which actually subsidises or entirely covers the fees of anyone who comes from a disadvantaged background, particularly a financially disadvantaged background. We run programs for tertiary students who are studying music, because we find that a lot of the tertiary students struggle. They put all of their money into music lessons, instruments and insurance and those kinds of things, and to get an extension of educational opportunities like those we provide is just another cost. Another foundation actually subsidises or pays the fees for those people. We have probably 10 to 15 different categories of support for regional and disadvantaged students to take part in the program.

The CHAIR — Just on that, what percentage of your students would be on some form of support?
Mr CLARK — I think we would be looking probably at around 30 to 40 per cent of people who are getting some level of support for our program. The theory is that we have a category to cover everyone who needs help. We would never turn someone away based on financial need or disadvantage, or even, increasingly, geographical disadvantage as well.

Ms TIERNEY — How do students and teachers find out about that in order to access the scholarships?

Mr CLARK — We have a pretty extensive network because we use so many music educators in our program. They are all freelance musicians and teachers in their own careers, and they come and work with us on a Saturday. We have a very large database, and we are very lucky with technology. We are blessed with Facebook; it is so perfect for our demographic. We have about 35 000 people a week through our Facebook page. We disseminate a lot of information through teacher mailing lists, Association of Musical Educators and past students and, given we are now 45 years old, we have generational change as well with a lot of past participants bringing their students or their children to the programs well.

Ms MILLER — Can you explain how external music programs such Melbourne Youth Music complement and build on music education that students receive at school?

Mr CLARK — I guess Sharon might want to add something as well, but from my perspective we are offering something quite different to an individual music lesson. If you think of a one-on-one private instrumental lesson, what they are really getting through participating in an orchestra is working with a large group of 100 people all working together towards the same goal. There are great musical benefits, but also social benefits of course from working in those kinds of groups. Also, in terms of complementing other schools that have existing ensemble programs, it is very difficult for any one school to bring together the critical mass of students it needs to form a full symphony orchestra, for example, or a full concert band. Because we bring together people from all over the state we have a full complement of musicians taking part in those ensembles. Also in the very advanced stages we have the best students from all over Victoria coming together, and we can put together something that any individual school, or even a conglomerate of schools, would not be able to achieve. We are very lucky in that sense that that is the way we are able to enhance music. I do not know if Sharon wants to talk about this.

Ms MEEHAN — Melbourne Youth Music also provides a standard for students, whereas that standard often cannot be achieved within a school. We can put together a symphony orchestra at school, but we will not have any double basses and we will have one bassoon. But they go to MYM and they can be playing with like-minded students all at level 7 or level 8 AMEB and perform a repertoire that is just not possible within a school setting.

Ms MILLER — Earlier you mentioned that within your music faculty there are 65 teachers. How many of them are specialists rather than generalists?

Ms MEEHAN — About 25 are on salary and are in the classroom and teaching in instrumental programs. The rest are specialist visiting music tutors.

Ms TIERNEY — How many hours would the specialist tutors be employed for?

Ms MEEHAN — Some are five days working as itinerant staff, and some come in at times. The bassoon teacher might come in for two hours. It is varied.

Ms TIERNEY — Do you think there are adequate pathways and support for musically gifted students?

Mr CLARK — I think it is quite challenging in a school environment. Programs like ours provide those opportunities to really stretch students at that elite level. We work very hard to build structures and pathways in the upper level to allow those advanced students to network with the professional music sector and the tertiary music sector. An example of the programs we run would be what we call Share the Chair. It is with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. We sit our most advanced students in the Melbourne Youth Orchestra side-by-side with a professional member of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. We run it like a professional week. They come together on Monday, they get their music, they rehearse and they present
a free public concert at the town hall on the Saturday night. That very much replicates the professional music scene, and they build very good relationships with those individual people who they are sitting with.

We also run collaborative projects with places like the Australian National Academy of Music that has very high level international visiting artists, and we get access to those people. It is through collaborative projects that we are able to access some of the very best people and, again, because we have drawn on the very best people in the state at the elite level there is a mentality that they are all pushing each other as well; they are working alongside very advanced students, which accelerates their learning.

Ms TIERNEY — In terms of musically gifted students, are they being adequately identified, and if not, what are some of the strategies that you would propose for identification?

Mr CLARK — For selection in our program, I think the audition process works very well for us and, again, replicates that professional sense of comparing like musicians on the same pieces works very well for us. We are able to find those people. I think in a school they generally stand out as well, and often teachers will recommend that they come to our program. They will suggest that they come to an audition for the following year or join during the year. From our perspective I think those people are being identified quite easily.

Mr CRISP — Do you believe there should be a minimum qualification level or a professional accreditation scheme that applies to instrumental music teachers? If so, what should it be, and if not, why not?

Ms MEEHAN — From my experience, I have many staff members who do not have a tertiary qualification in my team of instrumental staff at school, but I have staff who have been masters of their craft for 40 years and are some of the finest composers, writers, arrangers and masters on the instruments and beautiful conductors. They bring so much to their instrumental lesson with their student, but they are not formally qualified. We respect everything else they have to bring to that lesson or to that rehearsal, so I do have staff now who are still working within our school but are working on working-with-children qualifications, basically, because there is no minimum standard for them to have a tertiary qualification. I know I would lose them all if it were mandated for them to go back to university. I do not know how many of them would do that, because we are so privileged to have fantastic instrumental staff working in our state and in our schools. They bring so many more rich experiences from their backgrounds.

Mr GARNICK — Having had the privilege of over 30 years working with professional musicians and orchestras in Australia and abroad, virtually every musician I have met carries a debt from their time in the formative youth orchestra movement, and one of the ways they repay this debt is actually to teach the next generation. As you say, they have honed their craft. They are specialists, and they are able to pass that on with real passion and invite them into the Melbourne symphony or Orchestra Victoria to see this in action. I think if there were a formal qualification required, there is no doubt the musicians would find that a real challenge. I guess it would be interesting to turn it around and ask what is broken about the current set-up and that sort of ecosystem for professional musicians who pass on their skills that a qualification would improve or enhance. Certainly for the classroom teachers who are working at that coalface there is a different set of skills, but for the performing musicians teaching their instrument, that is a different set of skills.

The CHAIR — Your submission talks about the need for knowledge sharing amongst music teachers. Could you elaborate a bit further on that?

Mr CLARK — I think our summer school is a good example. We bring together a critical mass of music educators from all over the state, and they find that particularly enriching. It is the last week before school goes back at the start of the year, and they get together in that situation quite informally and talk about what they are doing with their students. It could be specifically around repertoire or teaching techniques, opportunities for professional development — those kinds of things. I just know how much the individual teachers value coming together and getting to work together. I think they feel they work quite a bit in isolation in their individual schools, and by coming together where there are all those other music
teachers the large piece of feedback we get is that they love working with us because that is what they get. They find it a professional development opportunity for them, and also they get to work with such driven and enthusiastic students in our program because it is an elective activity for those who take part in our program. The students are there because they want to be there and they are gifted and talented students, and they are all working very hard. I think the interchange, while it is quite informal on many levels in our program, is really valued by the staff.

The CHAIR — You have been going now since 1967, so you have had a number of students — 30 000 students — through. You have probably seen many peaks and troughs in terms of where music is at, particularly coming from the schools into your organisation. Where do you see we are currently at in Victoria compared to back when you started and all the way through, and what do you think we should be doing to really support and encourage more activity within the schools? What would be your magic bullet? Do not say money.

Mr CLARK — I think in terms of where we have been and where we are now my perception is that we were very much fulfilling a need in the past of schools who had no ensembles whatsoever, and there is still a sense of that in our program, depending on what level of our program — —

You have different senses, but many people used to participate in Melbourne Youth Music back in the 1970s, for example, because there was no other ensemble music opportunity at all and this was their only outlet. For some people in some schools we are still in that role, but for many we are more of an extension opportunity for people. If they are participating in a school music program, even if it is a very advanced music program — —

Perhaps I could give a specific example of a student at an independent school with a very extensive music program. It is a girls’ school, and parents say to me that they put their daughter into the junior strings program at Melbourne Youth Music because she meets boys and she meets people from the western suburbs and regional Victoria and from disadvantaged backgrounds and different cultural backgrounds, and that is fulfilled there. So it is not only for people who have no music education opportunities, it is a social extension; and also in some of the ensembles it is that elite, gifted music level they can access and the very finest music educators, even if the school has a lower-tier music program.

The CHAIR — Just taking it a little further, we have heard that at the other end of music provision it has been suggested that, particularly at the primary school level, we have really reduced our activity and have sort of been in decline since, say, the 1980s. Would you suggest that at the other end, the end you play in, we have come a fair way? Would there be activity and good support to say, yes, at the high-performance area Victoria is doing really well, but at the other end we are not necessarily doing as well? Would that be a fair statement?

Mr CLARK — I think the challenge for schools is actually that critical mass of instruments — physical instruments — and students to participate. While I think there are some very good examples of school music programs at that upper level, they still cannot put together what we will put together by drawing on statewide resources and students. I think there is still not anything really at that elite level. As to Melbourne Youth Orchestra, for example, there is not another opportunity like that for young people, and certainly in terms of developing professional skills for those who do want become professional musicians there is not anything else like that in Victoria. I think in those intermediate levels there probably are other opportunities for students, so that is where we start to fulfil for those students who do not have access to music in their existing institution.

The CHAIR — But in relation to those kids coming out of schools into your program, have you seen a vast improvement over the years in the kids who are actually coming out and that the schools are actually fulfilling a need, like in Sharon’s school, for instance? Where would you see that sit? For kids or the alumni, are we seeing an improvement, or are we seeing a plateau and that organisations like yours really need to work on those kids and an understanding as to where we are?
Mr GARNICK — I have been thinking about some earlier questions. One of the things that has changed is the level of engagement and the fact that music is delivered so anonymously and ubiquitously. Probably more kids have access to more music today than they did 40 years or 45 years ago when MYM started, but what has changed — and I think degraded as a consequence of reducing at the earlier levels — is the actual active engagement, whether it is singing the times tables or in the de-emphasising of music as the active engagement. I think that has changed, and also families getting together, sitting around the piano — that does not happen. They might sing around an iPad, if you are lucky, but what happened in the past is not happening. I was thinking about singing my times tables. I can still sing to you my nine times tables.

David, I wanted to have a go at a another question.

The CHAIR — Yes, please do.

Mr GARNICK — You asked the previous person about all these benefits, and it was of comfort that we did not have to tell you and remind you about all the other ancillary benefits of music education and the longitudinal studies about maths and spatial relations. You understand that, and you had a very good question about, ‘If it is so good, why is there a committee that needs to investigate this?’. I think one of the answers is that it is in our species. It is the same reason we smoked on aeroplanes so much longer than we should have and the same reason we have to educate people about fast food and the benefits of exercise. It is clearly good for us, but why is it that we do not do it as a species? We tend to take a path of less resistance and less engagement. In music that has certainly been an issue. There is a much lower level of engagement than there used to be when we were growing up. That is one possible answer, but it is a good question.

The CHAIR — Thank you for that answer.

Ms MILLER — Just on that, would you see a realistic barrier as being the lack of engagement?

Mr GARNICK — Yes.

Ms MILLER — Would you see that as the only barrier?

Mr GARNICK — I do not know. That strikes me as I think about 45 years ago and the fact that we grew out of the education system. We were an arm of the education system. We were providing something the schools were unable to. I think, ‘Well, why today then?’; that is one of the significant barriers. Obviously we can talk about money.

Ms MILLER — Yes, as an aside.

Mr GARNICK — That is important, but not very interesting. I think it is about engagement. I see kids and the way they listen to music. I pay attention to this, and it is self-directed. On the one hand that is great; they get to listen to whatever they want when they want to. But sometimes there is music that perhaps would be challenging and interesting and they would be engaging with it in a different way. I think that is what has changed. We tend to see the kids who are still keenly engaging in it. What is interesting is we have looked at the numbers in the organisation as they have gone up and down, and we seem to have hit a critical mass. We have facilities that are constraining us at the moment. As someone said, ‘If we had double the space, we’d get double the kids’. I do not know that we could look someone in the eye and say, ‘Yes, we’ll do that tomorrow’. There need to be in place some other systems that are wider than that ecosystem so that the kids would come to us.

Mr CRISP — My last question is: what is the value of live musical performance for students? We will probably be here for the rest of the day!

Mr CLARK — Sharon, you can equally speak to this, but I meet all the students who come through our program and their parents, and the students are absolutely glowing when they come off stage. They are different people from the ones who walked on stage. That sounds like a broad-sweeping comment, but
they really are: they come off as different people. They have a sense of confidence and achievement. They have been working hard for 10 weeks of rehearsals to put this on, they have been able to present it to their friends and family and the community, and it really does something quite amazing. Again, talking in that ensemble context, 100 of them have worked together; they have put in numerous hours in their spare time, they have dedicated their spare time and given a commitment to putting this on. The fact that they have finally had the opportunity to present it to the public is really something very special in terms of their confidence and their expression.

Mr GARNICK — I think it is true about delayed gratification, which is something that is a rarer and rarer quality in our society — the chance that they work hard and they get something big at the end. There may be not so many opportunities for that.

The CHAIR — I think that is a great place for us to finish. I want to thank you very much for appearing before the committee, the submission you provided us and the great work that you are doing. Keep up the good work.

Witnesses withdrew.