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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Witness
Mr A. Yee, Director of Music, King David School, and Vice-president, Association of Directors of Music in Independent Schools.
The CHAIR — Welcome to our inquiry today; we appreciate you taking the time to appear before the committee. We understand that you will be presenting to us, obviously, from the work that you do at King David School but also as Vice-president of the Association of Directors of Music in Independent Schools to give us an understanding from that perspective. What we might do is give you an opportunity for some brief comments and then we will go into Q and A.

There are two things I need to point out, which is the normal process of these hearings. Firstly, the evidence you give will be covered under parliamentary privilege, and that is for the purposes of just the hearing itself, not anything that is said outside of the hearing. Also we are recording today through Hansard. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and, if there are any typographical errors, have them corrected. Over to you in terms of the opening statement, and then we will get onto some questions.

Mr YEE — I initially thought I would prepare an opening statement about best practice in music, but given this is day three of the hearings I imagine you have heard a lot of best-practice statements about music. It is something I will definitely having to speak to later. I thought it might be more useful if I just gave over a brief biography of my own experiences as a music student and as a music teacher. Hopefully that will facilitate your questioning of me as an active practitioner.

I went to Black Rock Primary School. I started there in 1979. There was no real, systematic music education at Black Rock in those days, but I was very fortunate in having a Year 5 teacher, Mrs Chana Mrocki, with whom I am still in close contact. She was an inspirational music teacher within her classroom practice. Two of her adult children were professional musicians, and she would often bring them in to perform with us. One was a clarinettist, another a singer, so when I started in Year 7 at Beaumaris High School and there was the offer of learning an instrument I leapt at it straight away, largely as a result of the groundwork she had established.

I was at Beaumaris High School for two years. I have to say that the music program there was excellent in those days. There was a comprehensive band program, there was a stage band, a junior wind band, a senior wind band and lots of popular ensembles as well. It was a really well-run program with lots of passionate music teachers. I moved onto the saxophone. The music staff there introduced me to the Southern Area Concert Band, which was then running at McKinnon High School, and suggested I go on to audition for Melbourne Youth Music. All of these parallel activities came as a result of those two years at Beaumaris High School.

I was at Melbourne High School from 1988 to 1991. The Melbourne High School program is an exemplary program, and there I got the opportunity to learn the oboe, which is a bit of a specialist instrument — the instrument I was eventually to go on to do as my major at tertiary level. There were marching bands, orchestras and the opportunity to compose incidental music for the school plays. They were running very small classes in Years 11 and 12, and it is interesting, because of the five students in my music B class in 1991 four have gone on to careers in the arts in which they use their music practice — not necessarily musicians, but they are certainly using the instruction they received there.

I was then at the VCA for three years, studying orchestral performance, although I realised fairly early in that I was not going to be an orchestral oboe player and devoted most of my energies in those three years to composition. VCA was really the best place to be a composition student, notwithstanding the fact that there was no composition teaching going on in the course I was doing. Because there were so many performers in the institution I could just grab them and force them to perform my work, so it was really an ideal apprenticeship for a composer. I then worked as a freelance composer for a number of years and was successful to the extent that everything I was writing was being performed and performed professionally, although I realised fairly early on that I would probably never be able to have a family and a comfortable life and eke out an existence and have the dream home in east St Kilda if I continued working as a freelance composer. So I thought, ‘Why not? I will start teaching’.

I went back to Melbourne High School, where my Music Director, Pamela Coad, suggested I should come in and teach and work with the VCE students on composition. I enjoyed it immensely. They encouraged
me to do a Dip. Ed., and they allowed me to teach my own instruments — my double reeds — as well as
direct an ensemble. I had, really, a dream apprenticeship at Melbourne High School. They let me have a lot
of responsibility early on, and I was mentored by the whole team of music teachers at Melbourne High
School.

After my Dip. Ed., which I did at the University of Melbourne, I started working at my first music director
position, which was at Beth Rivkah Ladies College. My second music director position was at the King
David School. I have been involved in the Association of Directors of Music in Independent Schools since
about 2008. This is my third year as the Vice-president of that group. In terms of tertiary study, I have a
masters in industrial design from the RMIT SIAL laboratories. That was in music composition, but I did it
with a sort of technology focus, and I have just started my Ph.D., which will be in music education.

Forgive that lengthy introduction, but hopefully it will be an opportunity for you to find the context for
questions.

The CHAIR — That is excellent. Could you provide the committee with an overview of the program at
King David that you currently run and indicate what the benefits of music are to schoolkids? We have
obviously heard a lot, as you say, in the last few days, but could you comment particularly on what you
have done at King David and the time you have been there.

Mr YEE — I will try and highlight some of the points of difference within the program we are running
at King David and many other schools. I guess what we have aimed for from the start is that the program
would be comprehensive and would be authentic. I will just unpack one of those terms. An authentic music
education is one that involves the students in sequential learning activities and also involves students in
listening to music and making music but tries to downplay those activities that are peripheral to actual
direct engagement with music.

Let me give you an example of that. Knowing that Beethoven composed nine symphonies is what I would
call a peripheral factor in music. It is an important historical fact, but it is not a direct engagement fact. At
some point during the kids’ education at King David I hope they will come to the realisation that yes,
Beethoven did write nine symphonies, but that would not be the focal, core experience of their learning.
That would be a more listening or a performative experience.

At King David we have cohorts within the school. There is a P–2 cohort which functions as a campus
choir, and they rehearse every week. They perform at least twice a year. The 3–6 program also functions as
a cohort. Students from 3–6 will elect to join either the orchestra or the vocal ensemble, or both. In
classroom music the 3–4s learn a string instrument for two years, and in 5–6 they learn a wind
instrument — either woodwind or brass — for those two years.

Any student who is involved in the instrumental music program, no matter how inexperienced, is
automatically involved in the ensemble program, so it is not just a one-off, 30-minute, one-on-one lesson
with an instrumental teacher; they also become part of the bigger picture program of the school. The
ensemble program, just like the instrumental lessons, runs all year, and it is structured around focal events.
In term 1 we have an exchange with our sister school in Sydney. In term 2 there is a large-scale winter
concert. In term 3 we do a musical — actually we do two separate musicals with each cohort — and in
term 4 we come together for our school presentation speech night.

The classroom music program is supportive of the ensemble program and the instrumental program in that
it focuses on the listening and the theory and the analytical skills that support the kids who are involved in
those other activities. What we are aiming for is synergies between those three programs — instrumental,
ensemble and classroom. It is actually a unique feature of musical life at the King David School. We
accept any kid into the orchestra regardless of what instrument they play and regardless of their ability.
The reason we are able to do that is that I arrange all the music for the school ensembles. We have lots of
piano students, who are normally sidelined, and lots of guitar students — also normally sidelined —
coming into our orchestra and playing parts I especially write for them.
This concept of large-scale chamber music is actually an idea I got from the Australian composer, Percy Grainger, who used to like to compose his music in sort of what he called ‘elastic scorings’ — versions of music that could be adapted to any ensemble and any instruments that would come in. Another Graingerism that appears at King David is the extensive use of tuned percussion. You cannot have 12 pianos in the orchestra, but we can have 12 kids playing glockenspiels, tubular bells, marimbas and vibraphones. We have many kids playing melodeons. A melodeon is sort of like the keyboard part of a piano accordion with a tube coming out of it, and the junior kids will sit there — piano kids — playing on a melodeon in the context of the orchestra. It is almost like a junkyard orchestra concept, but the music they are playing is highly varied and highly flexible as a result of my ability to write for the forces that I have at hand.

Another strong aspect of our program is that we have lots of staff involved in all our groups. I think most schools most of the time tend to have just one teacher at the front and 30 or 40 or 50 students in front of them. I really like to integrate at least four or five staff into each group so that they can break out and run tutorials, so that they can exemplify practice for the students in the ensemble but also so that the staff themselves are equally engaged in the process of preparing for and delivering performances. That is a basic overview of what is happening at King David.

**The CHAIR** — And the benefits to the kids? What do you see are the benefits specifically to some of the kids that you are engaging with at King David?

**Mr YEE** — The benefits I am seeing are that everything they are doing is part of some larger context. If they are learning an instrument, that instrument has a role in the context of the ensemble. If they are in an ensemble, that ensemble has a context in the events that we are running throughout the year. We do have a very high retention rate of students who join the group. What I would say, though, is that it is quite demanding of students’ time. It is much easier to say, ‘You can just show up to a lesson once a week and that is fine. We can tick the music education box’. To compel students, which is really what we do, to be members of an ensemble sometimes creates friction with parents, but what I say to parents is they are not just learning music to play to themselves in a room by themselves. They are learning music as part of a communal activity, and music’s capacity to build communities is attested to by a lot of research, particularly a lot of new research in the neuroscience field.

Playing music and singing with other people, and dance as well, are fantastic ways to build a lot of the sort of pro-social architecture of the human mind. This has now been confirmed by lots of functional MRI studies. I was at a conference recently with Professor Alan Harvey, who is a neuroscientist from Perth. He is about to publish a book which is bringing together a lot of this research on the pro-social effects of playing as part of an ensemble or singing in a choir.

**The CHAIR** — I have one last question in relation to the school. King David School does quite well academically in terms of its VCE results. Would you attribute some of the music programs to some of that overall learning, do you think? As an addition to that question, how many kids may take up VCE music?

**Mr YEE** — Our VCE music take-up is similar to the take-up in the rest of the state. I believe the average class size for music performance, certainly a year or two ago, was about six students per school. We are a relatively small school. We have about two to three classes per year level through secondary. Our biggest class has been four students so far, and our smallest class has been one. Having said that, running that class of one may seem like a luxury but I believe it is incredibly important, because when the VCE class is the terminus of the program it has trickle-down effects to the rest of the classroom music program. Kids realise it is a serious program and they also realise that the school is committed to delivering it, even if it becomes a very small class. Those VCE students set the time and the expectation for the rest of the school. In many schools the kids in Year 11 or 12 are not necessarily expected to be part of musicals and the like, but I think it is critically important to have Year 11 and 12 kids leading the way at every stage of the program.

**The CHAIR** — And the earlier ones?
Mr YEE — Can I attribute VCE success to music?

The CHAIR — Or the overall success of the students, particularly around the early learning of the music.

Mr YEE — Certainly strong contributions to student wellbeing. When former students come back, it is one of the things that they frequently talk about as being a special part of their school experience. In order to answer this question of musical involvement in academic results, I would probably point towards Professor Brian Caldwell’s and Tanya Vaughan’s research, which you have probably heard about.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr YEE — The Finnish experience. It seems to be that the NAPLAN-led focus on the three Rs has been problematic for results, perhaps counterintuitively. We want the kids to get good at maths and English so we are going to get rid of everything else and just focus on maths and English. In actual fact, allowing the kids to explore and get involved in performing arts is probably a better way to raise those scores; certainly their research points that way.

Ms TIERNEY — With your experience, what are the major differences between independent schools and government schools in the delivery of music education?

Mr YEE — That is a really good question.

Ms TIERNEY — And what can we learn from the independent sector?

Mr YEE — Yes. There is exceptional practice in a lot of government schools. Having said that, I do not see anything in the government sector that can really compare to, say, the symphony orchestra at Scotch College or the music program at Wesley that was around when I was playing a lot of jazz. To say that it is just money is one part of the equation, but it is an important part of the equation. It is also a commitment from principals and a commitment from the school culture to music. It has become a part of the culture of the way independent schools advertise themselves to proclaim that they have a large music program. It has become a sort of form of social badging. Of course I think that is a good thing, because I think music is beneficial. But it does mean that when government schools fail to match that investment, then the disparity can only increase.

One advantage independent schools have over government schools is that many are running P–12 programs. The really important groundwork, particularly for string instruments, is to get kids started in the primary years. If you are looking at your first intake coming in at Year 7 and you are hoping to begin people in music at Years 7 and 8, it is almost leaving it a little bit too late.

Parents are able to pay the $1500 a year for individual lessons at many independent schools. There is of course money to build the auditoriums and the performing arts centres. There is also the ability that independent schools have to attract and retain highly expert staff. Music directors in independent schools tend to have very light or sometimes no teaching responsibilities. That is so that they can dedicate a lot of their time to building up ensembles and to attract, hiring and retaining great staff. I think there are also factors to do with the VIT. I do not know how much the VIT has been discussed at this forum, but independent schools seem to have a lot freer rein in hiring good people regardless of whether or not they fit the VIT’s qualifications. It appears that the VIT has recently said, ‘It is too hard. Let principals decide what is and what is not curriculum’. This has had a very destabilising effect on a lot of people who were considering instrumental music as a career. I am not sure if this has come up before.

Ms TIERNEY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Yes, it has. What are your views on that?

Mr YEE — On the VIT? The position of the Association of Directors of Music in Independent Schools is that they simply need to create a subcategory of instrumental teacher. They are registered as instrumental
teachers and they are qualified in the ways that instrumental teachers need to be qualified, which is basically expertise on their instruments. To force them to re-apply for their jobs every few years, if they have not done a diploma of education, is really not the right way to treat those people, many of whom are highly expert teachers and having been working for many, many years in their fields, particularly when most diploma of education qualifications will equip them for classroom music teaching, which is not an area that they are working in in any case.

**Ms MILLER** — What do you believe are the essential ingredients for a successful school music program?

**Mr YEE** — The number one thing is passionate, expert teachers. Is it Jim Collins who wrote *Good to Great*? He had an aphorism: you get the right people on the bus even before you know where the bus is going. That could not be more true in respect of music education. Not only do you need to have the right people, but you also need to organise the department into ongoing, sequential instruction. You should not be just doing what you did last year. You have to make sure that the kids are doing slightly harder material, whether it is instrumental, classroom or ensemble. That is a surprisingly difficult thing to achieve when you consider the diffuse ways that music programs are delivered and the number of people involved.

The third factor I would say would be to have a synergetic relationship between instrumental music, ensemble programs and classroom music programs so that they support one another. It creates a culture whereby music is a respected discipline but also that music is normalised as an activity within the school. If you are the only child at the school — and this is something that I noticed when teaching at Beth Rivkah Ladies College; there were always one or two outstanding music girls at that school — when they are in such a minority, it is very difficult for them to share their practice within the school. It was not part of the ongoing, normal life of the school to be a highly expert instrumental practitioner.

**Ms MILLER** — Just following on, and sharing your passion for music, you indicated at the beginning of your presentation that you are doing a Ph.D in music. What are you going to focus on?

**Mr YEE** — I am actually focusing on notions of coherence in curriculum design, and I am drawing a lot on the work of an American academic, Neil Postman, and particularly one of Postman’s theories that he called the thermostatic model of schooling. It really goes against the grain of a lot of contemporary thinking in education, but in a nutshell the thermostatic view of teaching proposes that societies can tend towards negative trends and that the only institution within a society capable of really redressing those trends is the school, so schools have this thermostatic relationship with where society is heading in that they are able to say to their students, ‘Maybe what’s going on outside the walls of the school is not such a good idea’, and prepare the next generation of critical thinkers who are able to steer society back on the right path. He constructs an elegant historical argument as to how schools have played this role in the past.

Postman’s main writing on this model was in 1979, and it is interesting to note that he said, prophetically, that we are heading for an era where information will be so prevalent and we will be exposed to so much information that information itself will become fundamentally devalued and that the only thing that schools can do to counteract this is to create a culture wherein a small, manageable, historically validated set of information and values becomes the core business of the school so as to create an area — a sort of solid space — within which the curriculum is coherent and meaningful against the onslaught of what he saw as the oncoming information overload.

It is interesting because this is really not the contemporary educational rhetoric. We tend to believe we are the hapless victims of technology and that the information explosion is something we just have to throw the kids into and give them a bit of a life jacket and hope they can fend for themselves, but Postman points in the completely opposite direction to that. I think his theories have profound implications for education generally but specifically for music as well, and that is what I will be investigating in my Ph.D.

**Ms MILLER** — It will be an interesting read.

**Ms TIERNEY** — When is it due?
Mr YEE — It will probably take me about six years to pull together. I have literally just started. I am enrolling this week, so it is very fresh. It will probably completely transform in the course of the next few years, but I am looking forward to trying to get some of my ideas into a more academic framework.

Ms TIERNEY — We know the benefits of strong music and arts education programs in schools. Why is it that it just really has not translated to most schools in terms of having strong music and arts education programs?

Mr YEE — So the question is: knowing the benefits of music education as we do, why is it that music is not universal? Why is it not happening everywhere?

Ms TIERNEY — Yes.

Mr YEE — I think it comes down to the school culture that is established by principals. A recently published book, Contemporary Issues in Curriculum, includes an article where a group of researchers in the US went looking for a school that had turned itself around but that did not have a strong visionary principal. They looked at basically every single school in the US, and as a result of their years of searching they found exactly zero schools that had managed to affect a culture change without a strong principal in charge.

I think most teacher practitioners you will see will say the same thing. You are able to build the program that the principal will support and allow, particularly because music is happening after hours and because it is expensive, because it does not add up in the way that other subject areas add up at the school. Most schools crunch the numbers in terms of face-time delivery of lessons between a qualified teacher and a group of 28 kids. Music does not really fit that model well, so I believe the main factor is the principal. The next main factor is whether that principal can hire and retain great music staff. It takes 6 to 12 years to create a strong functioning music department and about that many weeks to ruin one.

Ms MILLER — I would support that view because I have two schools in my electorate, one of which is McKinnon Secondary College, which many years ago did not have a great reputation, but the principal — credit to her — is very supportive of music. They have created a really strong music area. The second government school I have is Bentleigh Secondary College, and we have another new principal there, and she is really turning that school around and pushing the music factor. It is interesting to see that the results are slowly increasing overall in the school, and I think it is because of what you just said: if the principal is driving the music area, then the students will be beneficiaries of that.

Mr YEE — But it is incredibly fragile. I have seen schools where, as a response to national testing programs, they have decided to cut back or severely limit instrumental programs in the primary school. It seems like there has been no change — the orchestras and choirs keep playing — but in five to six years time suddenly those groups will dwindle to almost nothing because the groundwork that is so vital in primary school just will not be there anymore.

The CHAIR — What is your view on the new national curriculum and the role that music will play in that curriculum development?

Mr YEE — My understanding is that it will now be mandated to Year 8 but will not go through to Year 10. Looking at the current amended draft of the curriculum, I think it is okay. It is a huge improvement on the first draft that was released, which would have been absolutely disastrous. I hope this does not sound too cynical, but I question the impact that centrally produced documentation has on practice at the coalface. I think great teaching will happen if you have a great teacher in the room who loves their subject, enjoys teaching and gets on with kids, regardless of what documents are promulgated in Canberra. It seems to be an attribute of high-performing systems that they devolve a lot of responsibility onto individual schools or small clusters of schools.

The CHAIR — If you were us, what would you recommend as something we could do to get the best change in terms of increased participation in music in schools?
Mr YEE — I think the bedrock that allows everything else to happen is students with instrumental and vocal expertise. If you can have a wave of kids coming through primary schools who are able to play instruments to a high level, that is what will build the choirs and orchestras and the profession in the future. The other factor — and this is something that Professor Gary McPherson has researched extensively — is the Years 7 and 8 drop-off point, when kids are reaching biological adulthood and ask themselves, ‘Is music something I want to do?’ If they are part of a large cohort, it is something they will continue with. If they have had that commitment drilled into them from very early years, they will continue with it. But this notion of starting kids in instrumental music in Years 7 and 8 is too late. The horse has kind of bolted by then. Professor Edwin Gordon in the US says that basically you have until age seven to get the fundamental music patterns established in a child’s thinking. After that you are playing a game of catch-up.

The CHAIR — Do you use technology in your music teaching, and how important is that? Extending to things like GarageBand and those types of programs and apps that are available, do you see a role for those?

Mr YEE — I have to explicitly state that I am speaking here as Adam Yee, private citizen, and not as a representative of directors of music when I answer this question, because I am highly sceptical about technology in music programs. I think more often than not it constitutes a photo opportunity and lazy teaching, and I have seen this in school after school. I think it is a fundamentally inauthentic engagement with music to sit with a pair of headphones on, to click a few buttons on a screen and to rearrange other people’s music — scare quote — ‘original’ compositions.

I do not want to talk about technology as one thing. There have been many aspects of technology that have been beneficial to music. One obvious one is the International Music Score Library Project, IMSLP. Basically every piece of public domain sheet music ever printed anywhere is starting to appear online, and this is an incredible resource for musicians and music departments. In terms of technology as being a sort of cybernetic arm to enable the unmusical — —

The CHAIR — Sorry; what was that called?

Mr YEE — The International Music Score Library Project, IMSLP, an amazing website. In terms of using technology to facilitate children’s creation of music, I think it is deeply problematic.

The CHAIR — Just finally, have you ensured that the cost of participation in instrumental music programs does not create a barrier for accessing these programs, particularly around parent contribution?

Mr YEE — At King David, we are very fortunate in that we are able to offer quite a few scholarships at each year level, to attract students both to the school and also within the school. We do not charge anything for students’ participation in musicals, in concerts or in ensembles. So that is a very extensive cost that is borne completely by the school. But there is no getting around the fact that individual instrumental lessons are very, very expensive. One thing that we are able to do is provide the string program and the wind program in the primary school at no additional cost to parents. So it is one way of identifying students who are highly proficient and highly motivated on those instruments and who, maybe for financial reasons, might not be able to participate.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the costs in terms of smaller group or individual tuition?

Mr YEE — We do not actually offer group tuition, in the main. It is out of a philosophical commitment, really, to individual instruction, which is kind of the gold standard for getting students to advance on their instrument. If you have a group of four violin students you can spend most of the lesson just tuning the instruments, just making sure they are set up correctly, and the learning really trails off dramatically when you have two or three kids in the room.

The other strong case I believe for personally delivered one-on-one instruction is that for many students in many schools — again, it sounds like a bit of a negative comment — that individual music lesson is the only undivided 30 minutes of adult attention those students might receive in a week. Talking to instrumental teachers over the years, it is incredible, some of the things they have found out about students

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as a result of that close level of contact — diagnosing students with stress disorders, with anxiety or with a
crippling postural problem that a singing teacher will pick up in about 30 seconds but that kid can be sitting
at the back of the biology class for three years and it just will not be noticed.

There are many reasons for continuing with this model of one-on-one delivery in person, as opposed to via
a screen or over YouTube, and that is because so much of what music is about is interpersonal exchange,
building personal relationships and building communities. I do not believe that you can do that through a
screen, at least not yet.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for appearing before this committee.

Mr YEE — It was a pleasure.

The CHAIR — I can vouch for the work you have done. Being a supporter of King David and Beth
Rivkah and knowing the work you have done there, I know that you have been — pardon the pun —
instrumental concerning things around the programs you offer. I think that it is probably significant, in
saying that it is important for us to have passionate music teachers in schools. That is the thing that makes
the big difference, having people who are passionate and committed, so keep up the good work.

Mr YEE — Thank you very much.

Witness withdrew.