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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Ms M. J. Kelly, Assistant Head of Music,
Ms A. van Veldhuisen, alumna and current staff member, and
Robert, Year 10 student, Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School.
The CHAIR — I would like to begin by welcoming representatives from the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School to the committee. We are very excited to hear from you and about the great work that you do in this particular area. In terms of the parliamentary process, firstly, these microphones are not for singing into — although if you want to lift up our spirits at the end of the day, we are happy for you to do that — but for recording purposes for Hansard. We are recording the information that you present to us today, and a transcript will be made available for you to go through and, if there are any typographical errors, to fix those. Secondly, the evidence that you give is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. It applies only to the hearing proper and not do anything said outside of these four walls.

Thank you for appearing before the committee. We are really keen to look at what strategies we can use to improve our music programs in schools and improve access to those programs. What we might do is throw it over to you for an initial opening statement, and then we have a number of questions that we would like to ask.

Mr SIMPSON — I will not spend a lot of time doing introductions, because you are aware of the work we are doing. The Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School is one of our gifted and talented schools. It is a selective entry schools for dancers and musicians, so we have a very keen interest in music education on a number of different levels. I said on a previous occasion that the first thing we are interested in of course is giftedness in terms of our students, and we are very interested in specialism. I think when you spoke to us about the gifted and talented area, I spoke about big ‘S’ specialism and small ‘s’ specialism, and that will form part of the conversation I would like to have today about how that might work in terms of music education. Also, we have a very keen interest in the provision of music education at the secondary and primary levels not only to feed into the work we do but to improve music education opportunities broadly for children in the state. We have a keen interest in those three areas.

The people I have brought along with me today have something to add to that conversation. We have our Head of Music and our Assistant Head of Music here. We have a current staff member who is a former student of our school and who is from a regional area of Victoria, and we have Robbie with us, who is a current Year 10 student. We think we can offer you some insight into our experience and how we might be able to support the process of supporting music education in general in the state.

The CHAIR — If no-one wants to add to that, I will get straight into questions. Your submission talks about the importance of identifying and training children who show promise from an early age. At what age do you think children need to be identified if they are to reach their potential as musicians? Do you believe musically gifted students are being adequately identified? If not, what needs to be done to address this issue?

Mr SIMPSON — I will start off answering that question, and then I will hand over to my colleagues, who can speak more specifically about the music experience. One of the reasons our school exists is that the ability to get the required level of technical training in certain disciplines — and music and dance are certainly two of them — is imperative in terms of developing those students. Obviously the younger you can get students in terms of music and dance education the better, and typically students start from a young age in the cycle of instrumental lessons and connectedness with music in their communities and schools at a primary school age.

In terms of the type of provision we provide, connecting students with the ability to work with like-minded students in a specialist framework interest us, and we are of course an advocate for specialism in schools. To reiterate my thinking on that — and I have spent a lot of time framing this view — there are effectively two types of specialisms. There is big ‘S’ specialism, which would be gifted and talented schools like ours and Maribyrnong College, which hand-pick students to come in to work in a hothouse environment of like-minded students. The second level of specialism that I have been talking about in terms of the work we do in the state is what I call small ‘s’ specialism, and that is the provision of schools with a focus within our communities that children can access, particularly in the areas that they might be interested in.
With the model that we have had in the state, where we talk about music schools like Blackburn High School or University High School and many other schools that we can speak about today, we like the idea that there should be the ability for students to connect with provision even if they do not want to be a big ‘S’ specialist music student. The example I gave in the submission is the Wells Cathedral School in the UK, which has a big ‘S’ specialist music program designed for students who want to be musicians and will study and have careers in music, but is also for students who just want a really interesting broad curriculum that has a rich music component as well. Some of the evidence that is coming through, which I have quoted here and which I saw in the submissions that have been put forward to you, is on how a student’s general educational capacity is improved by an immersion in some sort of music activity as well.

Mr SARGEANT — I suppose the gifted and talented thing is interesting, whether they get into VCASS to go on and do music later as a career and embed themselves in a career, or they do it via another pathway. Independent schools build their identity, or their school, around, if you like, these extracurricular programs. Music is a strong part of these very fine schools, like Scotch and Caulfield Grammar. People will go to those sorts of schools for their big ‘S’ specialization, whereas what I am keen on and as a teacher in the government system I would like to be saying that the small ‘s’ specialization schools could do the same thing. You should be able to get a well-rounded, good music education in the government sector.

What we do, even though we would call it at a high level, a gifted level, and what our program is, is really just a higher energy-type program which should exist in other schools. It should not just be in a school like VCASS, where you get the sort of program that we provide; you should be able to get that at any number of government schools, both in primary and secondary.

The CHAIR — If I could ask Robert and Anna: at what age did you see that music was your thing, and was that catered for in the schools that you both went to?

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — Do you want to go first, Robbie?

ROBERT — Yes. I am not sure. I had always sort of been around music when I was growing up, and my dad bought me a guitar when I was in prep or something. I was sort of playing for a few years and did not enjoy it particularly much, and then after a few more years I started playing more seriously and started playing in a band with some friends and picked it up more and more. Then eventually I heard about VCASS through people I play in a band with, and started taking it more seriously. With that I went to another teacher and had piano and music theory lessons for the year or so leading up to it. I am not sure, but I was probably aged 10 or 11 when I started really striving. It was mainly VCASS, auditioning for that. I tried to prepare for the audition as best I could. That was what made me really start taking it seriously.

The CHAIR — And did your school have — without necessarily mentioning the school you went to prior — a sort of music program on offer in the earlier years? Do you recall?

ROBERT — We had a music lesson a week which went for about an hour, and it was pretty broad; not much was really covered. They had a guitar program but it was group lessons — because I play guitar — with about six kids that went for half an hour. So when I really started trying to take it more seriously I went outside the school.

Ms KELLY — I think, just to jump in with Robbie, it is almost pot luck that he took this path. It was lucky that he grew up in a musical family.

The CHAIR — Yes, okay.

Ms KELLY — And he was encouraged to play in a band. So he came in it through definitely much family support.

ROBERT — Yes, that is it.

The CHAIR — Right. Anna?
Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — My background is slightly different. I grew up in western Victoria in a regional town. The independent primary school I attended had little to no music education. However, I was blessed that I come from a family that encouraged me to take up piano at a very young age and also do music theory and musicianship-type classes outside of the school at a very good music academy in the town. So it was private lessons all through primary school, and then when I entered the local public school at a secondary level I took up percussion, which became my primary instrument quite quickly.

There was a classroom music program at that school, which I attended to Year 10, and there was a very strong band program, which I thoroughly enjoyed. However, it could be argued that the classroom music components of the program, although they were there — they existed throughout my secondary school education — did not kind of encompass the depth and musicianship skills that I was then confronted with when I entered VCASS in Year 11. I was not trained by a percussionist. I was essentially being taught by a brass teacher, and in Years 8 and 9 I started doing the MYM Saturday program and summer school. Then it became quite clear quite quickly that that was what I wanted to be doing.

MYM really opened my eyes. I then auditioned — actually, in Year 10 I was coming to Melbourne every weekend for percussion lessons, doing the 8-hour commute on a Saturday with my percussion teacher, who then took me all through VCASS and all through university. So I auditioned — for Years 11 and 12 through VCASS and then through the VCA, now Melbourne Uni undergrad. That has kind of been my process. There was no percussion teacher in Horsham; I was learning from a brass player. The school was very supportive and said, ‘You need to see a specialist in your area now if you are taking it seriously’. Luckily I just stumbled upon, through MYM, Eugene Ughetti, who is a very fine percussion player and teacher.

Mr SARGEANT — A former VCASS student.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — Yes.

Ms KELLY — As to your question about how early students should start learning music, we would all say as early as possible and the primary school.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — I was reading sheet music, absolutely, and taking piano lessons, even though it was not necessarily to become my instrument. I was very music literate and was blessed by a very good outside-of-primary-school music program.

Mr SARGEANT — And the importance of primary school music education cannot be overestimated. The level of teaching, the training those teachers need to take students — to get a fantastic classroom program: a literacy-based, aural-based, sequential classroom program at a primary level moving into Years 7 and 8. So it paves the way; you get that pathway through the primary, 7 and 8, into the elective years and into the VCE. Because our experience is that there are students now doing the VCE subjects at Years 11 and 12 who really have not had the foundations.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — And even having had a strong primary music education — I have seen this not only in myself but in many others — because I have been through that classroom music program that was, in secondary school, perhaps not as strong on comprehensive musicianship education, when I got to Year 11 it was quite a culture shock at VCASS, coming into an environment that was very musicianship heavy. It was quite challenging musically for me. I felt that there were skills that had not been delivered in that earlier secondary time.

Ms TIERNEY — Your most recent answers have gone to the heart of my next questions. Obviously the student is key, but the school and the primary years are incredibly important, and you have touched on the role of primary music education. How do you see the role of parents in relation to music education? Obviously a lot of them would have spent a lot of money from a very early age for the child, and then they go into primary school. How much can we engage parents in what is being taught in school? And how much should schools know about the content of the music that is being delivered externally to a student?
Mr SIMPSON — I will start off by answering that I think, in terms of communities building children, there is a repertoire of things that families do for their children, whether it is the Saturday sport or whether it is music lessons, and a whole range of other things. Families and communities have a critical role in those things, in partnership with schools. I think that you are not going to get a musician who is not supported by their parents at some stage. But I think there are two elements of that. You are going to have the child like Robbie, whose parents are interested in buying him an instrument and moving on; and then schools need to have the capacity of also meeting the needs of those children.

In terms of provision in the state sector, we do not want those children to find that that provision is being met better somewhere else, which is why we see independent schools offer such generous scholarships to music students. So we want to be able to cater for them in the state system. But I think, on a second level, we have had a lot of students come through our school who have only had a music connectedness develop because of an experience at school. There was no music education in the family, no means to do that. One of the things our school has done really effectively is pick up these children who against all the odds want to be musicians, as an example in this case. Schools need the capacity of being able to pick up those kids and give them support to do that.

Ms KELLY — What Colin is saying is that in our entry process, audition process select entry, we always have a very keen eye for the student we think is being disadvantaged by not having that foundation and we can see the potential.

Mr SARGEANT — And also picking those students up. There might be a lot of resources thrown behind students instrumentally, so they can play in some ways — I will use the piano as an example — can touch-type very, very well but they may not have that — there is the lack of spark there in terms of their musicianship skills. There may be someone who has not had those resources but who shows through in the aural testing we do and the improvisation — that sort of creative testing we do. We identify a student’s potential or natural abilities in more than one way. But as I said, we have one eye on the resources.

Ms MILLER — You talked about students who are disadvantaged. Your submission notes that between 20 and 30 music students are missing out on a place at VCASS. Are these students able to access appropriate support and music education opportunities outside the specialist system?

Mr SIMPSON — I think it is possible. The model that we would prefer is for a dynamic range of schools scattered around the state that have strong music programs, so that the very many children who miss out on opportunities that schools like ours provide are able to have those needs met through other schools. We think, and this leads back to what we said during the gifted and talented student conversation we had, there is greater capacity for us to take more students, but we are restricted to a certain number. We think we could offer up to 50 more music places in our school if we were given permission to do that.

The other interesting side of that is that we are finding as our school has grown in reputation it is harder to get into, and the students that we see as missing out on to entry to our school at the moment are often from state government schools where they may have had limited music education or they are children from regional Victoria who also may not have the same opportunities as those in the city. We are very keen to have a conversation with the department about making more opportunities available to students. We are also keen to bring in something similar to what Melbourne High and Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School offer, which is a principal’s discretion for entry, because we are finding that those children just outside of opportunity are missing out on our school now, and we are really concerned about that.

Ms KELLY — You do some informal discussions with other schools in the area to try to place a lot of those students who miss out — to University High. But I guess overall what we are feeling is that if the primary school sector could offer a more standard sequential program that was consistent across the state that all students could have access to, and then going into the secondary sector, if we could provide a larger number of the smaller specialist schools to cater for all of those students who show a talent in the music arena after they have gone through the primary school process so they have somewhere to go other than just trying to get into VCASS or trying to get a scholarship to a public school, it would be good. Particularly when we look at the regions, they are so disadvantaged. Anna really could not apply for
VCASS until she was old enough to live away from home. She came in at Year 11; the earliest we normally take kids is at Year 10, and we even find that the Year 10s struggle in being away from home; they are just that little bit immature. We feel there should be more of these specialist schools out in the regions.

Mr CRISP — I would like to explore that a little more. Would you like to elaborate on what government needs to do to achieve the spread you are talking about?

Ms KELLY — The primary school program we think can work, which is actually not an expensive program, is the more aural-based sequential program and through choral training. We use Kodaly, which is one of the best ones for that. We are all trained in it. It is a really sound methodology. Basically, you just need the voice to get started, so it is not an instrument-intensive program. At that age that is all children really need; you can augment it with some Orff percussion instruments et cetera, and perhaps start a string program in the later years of primary.

We know that starting this program earlier is better — even at preschool. You are training the children’s ears. You are training the children’s inner hearing and aural awareness from a really early age, and then sequentially they are also applying that to music literacy. By the time they get to the end of primary school you have got quite musically literate students, whether or not they take music on as a career. They have that amazing foundation to have an appreciation in the arts, which can only benefit society as a whole.

Mr SIMPSON — I saw that The Song Room had given you information as well. Some of it is very compelling around the research about how this music understanding actually benefits other types of learning and the broad strength of the student as well.

Mr SARGEANT — I read through a lot of those submissions too, and there is overwhelming evidence of the value of all of this. I suppose what we are saying, and as a program in itself it is not expensive, is that the key to it — and I am sure you read our submission — is teacher training. Teacher training is something that really needs to be addressed for music provision.

ROBERT — Can I just chime in and say that I totally agree with everything they are saying, because at least in my experience of playing an instrument purely at an instrumental level, most of your improvement in playing your instrument does not come from a school education; it comes from a one-on-one session with the teacher, because in a classroom setting it is pretty much impossible to give students the information they need to improve on a specialist instrument. With an aural-based, musicianship-based program it gives people a foundation to do that. Even at VCASS we have specialist instrumental teachers. There are no classes where everybody tries to improve on their instrument. I just want to say that I totally agree.

Mr SARGEANT — What we would say with someone like Rob is that in our musicianship programs we are aiming to develop his skills aurally around a whole range of activities. He therefore plugs into that and he is able to lift his guitar performances to a higher level than they would be if he did not have that. You can rattle away on your guitar, or you can rattle away with understanding.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — It is also about developing the full musician. Robbie might decide to be a music teacher one day or to be a conductor or to be a composer, and all of those comprehensive music careers that are possible, and it is not necessarily about the mechanics of becoming a guitarist; Robbie continues to develop. It is more about developing the musician as a comprehensive multisilled person.

Mr SARGEANT — And the understanding of the process of that is the key around teacher training. What can government do? I think the government needs to address teacher training for the delivery of music education.

Ms MILLER — The committee heard from Dr Julie Haskell, who teaches at VCASS, and who spoke about the recent difficulties she faced in getting teacher registration. Is the issue of teacher registration impacting on the ability of VCASS to employ music experts and, if so, what changes do you believe need to happen?
Mr SIMPSON — I think the Victorian Institute of Teaching’s restrictions on permission to teach, and a requirement that people who receive permission to teach have to start a formal teaching qualification within a defined period, are too restrictive. We have a situation in Victoria where principals manage the hiring of their staff, and it would be my view that the restrictions for formal teaching qualifications in all areas are overly restrictive and that those responsibilities should be put back onto schools.

As an example, if I were to hire Julie to do the terrific things she does in the school, as the principal of the school I assume responsibility for that, whereas what the Victorian Institute of Teaching has said to me is that I can only hire her for two years. This is somebody who teaches in masters programs in universities and who the VIT is saying is not suitable to teach.

Mr SARGEANT — She has a PhD in 18th century music. She is a specialist in all those areas. She is an outstanding and highly respected musician.

Mr SIMPSON — I give the example, and it is not a music example, of one of our ballet teachers who is a retired principal dancer of the Australian Ballet. She is a simply outstanding ballet teacher — part of their craft is that they learn to teach as well. She is never going to do a formal teaching qualification, and if I require it of her, she will take her amazing ability and go somewhere else that does not require that. I think we have to be very careful of getting the statutory elements right in the Victorian Institute of Teaching without making it restrictive.

I also have a personal view that allowing instrumental music teachers to only have permission to teach was a bad step. It made it easier to hire them, but actually what we required —

Ms KELLY — You mean working with children.

Mr SIMPSON — Sorry, with only having a working-with-children check, not needing to have permission to teach. I have the view that permission to teach should be generated through the school; the school should justify why they are hiring that person. They should create the framework for hiring that person. To say that instrumental teachers do not need permission to teach and can just get by with a working-with-children check devalues them and also devalues the range of things that they can do for you.

In the contemporary education environment we may need more than one-on-one teaching from instrumental music teachers. We might want some classroom work or group activities that they would typically require permission to teach. My view is that in hard-to-staff areas, like quality music and dance education, we should be allowed to structure that ourselves within schools, and Julie is a great example of that.

Mr SARGEANT — We want outstanding artists into schools like ours. We want outstanding artists in schools where Anna came from, all the way over in Horsham. If there is someone in a place like Horsham who has gone there for whatever reasons and does not have teacher training, you should be able to access that expertise that the principal will identify and be able to support. From our point of view it is really important to have that sort of standard of teacher, because what VCASS has achieved is around the level of instrumental teaching and the level of ensemble tutoring that our students get that no-one else is able to deliver, and that has traditionally come through the VCA itself, the tertiary arm of our name. We are now no longer linked to it. That sort of level of teaching, and overwhelmingly those teachers — Mary Jo has a longer view of this than I do in terms of time — would not have had a Dip.Ed.

Ms KELLY — Yes. They do not have the teaching qualification.

Ms TIERNEY — Robbie, a couple of questions. What is the best thing about being a student at VCASS? How has the specialist program benefited your development and performance in your music studies?

Anna, from your experience what can government do to assist and make sure that we have got more regional students who have a passion for and excellence for music to get in the system?
Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — Can I ask what you mean by get in the system? Become professional musicians?

Ms TIERNEY — Find pathways to become musicians or — —

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — Or excellent musical people?

Ms TIERNEY — Yes, generally.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — You go first, Robbie.

ROBERT — For me the best thing about being at VCASS is the people around you — the teachers. Some of the instrumental teachers and ensemble tutors are fantastic, and other kids are also very interested in what you are doing. Not only do you learn from teachers and staff, you also learn from other kids who are interested in similar things and take ideas off them. For me, the access to staff and access to other kids who are interested has benefited me the most. What was the second part of the question?

Ms TIERNEY — It was in relation to how the specialist program has benefited your development and performance in your music studies.

ROBERT — Just taking it really seriously. Having it at the forefront. We spend a lot of time on music. Spending half a day really makes you see it as a very serious thing to do in your life. At another school you do music once a week or what not. While we do focus on academic studies and all the rest of it, music really does become the important thing. When it is an important thing, you start to think of it in a professional way, if you know what I mean. At least with people outside of school, I notice that kids at VCASS have a more professional attitude to learning and performing.

Mr SARGEANT — It is great as a teacher at the school to hear where Robbie was when he entered the school and where he is now, having just been in that environment. Hearing the development in his playing is wonderful.

Ms VAN VELDHUISEN — In terms of regional Victoria I am going to hammer the point on teacher training, and it is true for anywhere in the state, whether you are in Nhill or in the city. I think having strong music teachers is the most important thing and I would say that is probably lacking in a lot of regional schools.

I think a lot of regional centres — particularly places like Bendigo and Wangaratta — have very strong instrumental programs and band programs, but support for those students who want to specialise and be able to have access to instrumental teachers who specialise in your instrument is still lacking. Obviously you cannot have an orchestral percussion specialist in every public school in the state, but I do not know whether grants or funding for young people to come and find those people is very important.

Another thing slightly outside the school sector is support for those arts organisations that are going out and doing excellent work in regional areas. The formative kinds of musical experiences in regional Victoria for me were things like the MSO tour that happened once a year for a while and then stopped, Orchestra Victoria’s mOVe workshops when the Orchestra Victoria musicians would go out and work with young people, and getting a little scholarship to be able to go to MYM on Saturdays — all these things. If a school cannot provide a percussion specialist for a young percussionist, how are they going to access them? It is things like that, as well as high-quality performing arts experience as an audience member, and that goes to things like Arts Victoria and obviously other sectors of government.

Arts appreciation in regional areas could be better, obviously. There are different priorities in sport in the area that I came from. It is mostly teacher training for me, and I am hammering that home.

Mr SARGEANT — There is no doubt about that.

Mr SIMPSON — One short point I want to get across is that one of the things I liked out of all of the submissions I read was from the Queensland Government, where they said:
Music education in Queensland state schools is highly valued.

I would like to see us get to the point where we could say that music education in Victoria is highly valued. That would be a great start; then we could build these other things upon it. I think as principals my colleagues have a role to play in this.

When I went to my last school it had an active music program, a beautiful music room, and when I left that school it had been shut down by the principal of the school, because other priorities had taken over. I think we need to get our heads around what we actually want to achieve in terms of value adding in state government schools, and public schools in particular, and not give away things that really do add to the value of a child’s experience when they are growing up and let other sectors — —

I think we have some very fine music schools in Victoria, but many of them are not public schools, because we have allowed our system to maybe not value music as highly as we could have. If we at least started that conversation about valuing it, my colleagues could actually make decisions to prosper that. To my staff I give the example that I wanted our school to be bilingual. We had very small French classes. I had to wear very small French classes for five years, and we now have an active French program in the school. School principals in this state can make the judgments to prosper these things, and I think more of my colleagues need to do that in the schools.

The CHAIR — A great place to finish. Thank you very much for appearing before the committee and for your submission. Certainly we were very impressed when we got to visit the school, so keep up the great work in what you are doing. Good luck, Robbie, in whatever you end up doing, and the same to you, Anna.

Witnesses withdrew.