EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — Thursday, 16 May 2013

Members
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Witnesses

Mrs Beverly McAlister
The CHAIR — I will welcome you.

Mrs McALISTER — Thank you.

The CHAIR — The information is being recorded today, and you’ll get an opportunity to review that. And, also, the evidence you give us is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament but it only applies into the hearing proper, and not what’s said outside of the hearing, full stop. And, welcome, and thank you for appearing before the committee. You know what we’re looking at today.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

The CHAIR — We’re very, very interested in hearing from you and what your experiences are and how we can improve music program in schools.

Maybe I could start could you provide the committee with an overview of your involvement in community music in Victoria — a nice, good, general question to start with.

Mrs McALISTER — Okay, I will try to make it really brief.

In my submission, I told you how we had a teacher exchange to Montana in the US with our four children and we experienced a music program to die for — so many opportunities that we were not aware of that children could have. One of our children came back with a clarinet into our community, and there was nothing to do, no bands, no nothing in the schools. You guys are probably a bit young to have been in Parliament with Bill Borthwick, but he was our local Member at the time and I went to see him and I said we need to do something about this because this generation is going to miss out, and he said yep, I’ll give you a hand, and with the help of some people in the community we established the Dandenong Ranges Music Council.

It was never set out to provide music education as such, it was to create opportunities for people to listen to music, to learn music, perform music, and to integrate music into the lifestyle of the community. And, it grew and it grew and it grew. It grew with partnerships, with schools. The schools started to say can we do things together? The Shire started to want to do things together. I brought this along. There’s one each for you.

The CHAIR — So, is it likely made up of volunteers?

Mrs McALISTER — Yes. The volunteers — could I do it another way?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mrs McALISTER — It’s an umbrella organisation with a board under it and their job is to respond to the needs of the community by helping them to start new groups or provide guest artists or address a social need or a well being need. The one that David’s looking at now, that was bushfire education where we used music; many, many schools across the region.

So, the first things we needed to do, that the community wanted was to form kids in bands and choirs and bush bands. All of these people just come out of the woodwork wanting to make music together. And as it grew, we identified the fact that the schools wanted something because they didn’t have music programs, either. So, we learnt about funding through the Australia Council. And, we would apply for funding for projects.

So, we have a layer of ensembles that are all totally sustainable, three orchestras, concert bands, big
bands, choirs, that are still under the umbrella and then out here we’ve got a whole lot of sustainable incorporated groups that we’ve started over the years that are now totally independent. So, we are building that creative community capacity.

And, then, the other layer is the projects. Like, some of the schools said, look, we’ve never done any jazz, so we managed to get some money to bring Don Burrows and Kevin Hunt for a whole week into the Dandenongs and 180 children were introduced to jazz. And then, the following year, Don Burrows chose 40 of the best kids, and we had a thing called Jazz Horizons. And, quite a few of those students are now jazz professionals. We had Richard Gill. Do you all know Richard Gill?

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mrs McALISTER — We’ve had him for three years now, and we’ve introduced 12 schools and their communities to opera. So, we bring the artists from the VO and musicians from the National Academy up into our schools and they play and we talk about the magic flute or whatever they’re going to do, and the children learn about it, and then we take all the kids down to Hamer Hall and they meet the characters again in rehearsal and then about three weeks later, we put them all on the train to Belgrave, and we take them into the Arts Centre to see the show. So, we’ve got 12 entire communities that we’ve worked in partnership with to introduce them to it.

The CHAIR — Fantastic.

Ms TIERNEY — So, my question was about the different types of musical opportunities, and you’ve mentioned opera and jazz.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — What else?

Mrs McALISTER — Well, the bushfire — did I give you one of these?

Ms TIERNEY — No. Thank you.

Mrs McALISTER — We’ve used music extensively for bushfire education and bushfire recovery. Richard Gill worked with us after Black Saturday. He went into 12 schools and used song writing with the school communities to identify what it feels like after a fire. And, then the children formed into a concert.

The booklet you are looking at, that was a fire education one and that grew and grew. Actually, it won an award, that project, but it was the most bizarre sources of funding we had to get. We ended up with Parks Victoria and the National Disaster Mitigation Fund and anybody who would give us money. And, you’ll see the schools at Gladysdale, Warburton and Monbulk. So, there’s bushfire education, jazz. We’ve had six musicians from the MSO come and work on symphonic orchestral music. We had the jazz program. Every year we do a PD for choirs where we have 10 schools, usually 10 schools, and we have a master conductor who comes in and trains the teachers in choosing the repertoire, how to conduct a choir. And, then we teach them about performance and then we have a big concert.

Ms TIERNEY — So, how many schools and how many children participate in the program?

Mrs McALISTER — Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds. In kids’ songs it would be 300. In the jazz it would be 180. The Centenary of Federation is another good example. We commissioned new music for orchestras and bands and choirs. We performed locally in Lilydale; nine hundred performers, adults and children. And then — I’ve got a bee in my bonnet, to be honest, and went to the Pratt Foundation and they supported us for the most wonderful concert at the Melbourne Concert Hall; 917 performers.
The CHAIR — So, just before you ask your question, Elizabeth, can I ask how you’re funded?

Mrs McALISTER — We’re funded at the moment by local government, $37 000 a year. Over the years we’ve had Australia Council funding. We’ve had Arts Victoria funding only because we got a pre-election promise. This is for the core operations.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mrs McALISTER — It is very difficult to get that funding for the kind of work that we do.

The CHAIR — Yes. The bushfire stuff, how did you get — did you get funding for that?

Mrs McALISTER — I got — the last one was through the — oh, what’s it called, you know, the bushfire recovery, where people donated money.

The CHAIR — Okay.

Mrs McALISTER — That was $21 000. That was actually another project I haven’t mentioned.

They discovered — we worked with Ranges Community Health. They discovered that there were a lot of older people disengaged from their communities after the fires, so we used music and song writing to get them back in. And, that was $21 000 for that. But, you know, the fire one, if you look at the back of the one that’s got the little possum on it, that was just — I mean, I’m a volunteer, but all of those logos provided money of some kind. But, it’s really hard, you know. It’s worth doing and that’s why people like me do it. But, to have a future, it’s quite problematic because the volunteers will support all the performing ensembles if their children are in it, but they’re so busy now with young families that they don’t have the time that my generation had to work, you know, pretty well — well, I myself and a lot of others have worked extensively to support this organisation.

Ms MILLER — Beverley, I wanted to just touch on community partnerships.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

Ms MILLER — I understand that the Dandenong Ranges Music Council works closely with a number of local schools.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

Ms MILLER — So a two-part question: the first is what are the benefits of these partnerships and what do you think are the essential ingredients for building successful partnerships between community organisations and the schools?

Mrs McALISTER — I think you have got to — you have to know what the schools need. You don’t impose anything on — or we don’t, on anyone. You know, if they — the jazz came out of people saying our kids don’t hear jazz. Could we get Don Burrows? I said, well, I don’t know. But, we went to the Australia Council and we got in touch with him and said that’s the kind of stuff I do and we got the money, and all of those students came because the schools wanted to do it.

We have a recorder. The schools want to raise the profile of the recorder because it’s a cheap instrument. So, we bring in a recorder specialist every year.

Ms MILLER — Is it successful?

Mrs McALISTER — Oh, yes, of course. And the kids’ songs — although we’re reviewing the
kids’ songs at the moment because I think it’s — after 18 years — when we started the schools hardly had any choirs and there was a really, really, desperate need for the teachers and to start the choirs. Now, pretty well every school has a choir. And, that’s wonderful for us. So, we’re looking at changing how we do that, because, to answer the question, the need has shifted.

When you’re a community organisation like this, you would never try to impose anything that people didn’t want. And, we don’t do marketing or research or anything like that because people tell us. I guess it’s easier for us because we have lots of small communities. So, we have a lot of connection with our communities. So, a lot of people ask about the model or whether it would work somewhere else, and I say well, I don’t really know because — like Don Burrows walked down the main street of Monbulk in the project, and was astounded that kids ran up to him and said, ‘Hello, Mr Burrows. This is my mum’ or, ‘This is my dad.’ You know, it’s that beautiful connection. What was the other part of that question?

Ms MILLER — It was about the relationship or the benefits of the partnerships between the organisation and schools. So, you talked about what you could offer the schools.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

Ms MILLER — Do you see as a benefit in having a partnership with the schools?

Mrs McALISTER — Oh, for the schools, well, they certainly do because many wouldn’t be able to do these big projects. They can’t hire a big venue. But, we can hire a big venue and have six schools in it, so it’s economically viable for them, but they get — now there’s a thing in there. Next week, it’s Education Week. You guys would know that. The theme is language. So, we’re doing something called Music Speaks. And we’ve got three schools who are joining together in a whole afternoon of sectional rehearsals and they’re going to form a mass band and they’re going to form a clarinet choir, a flute choir, a saxophone choir. Now, these kids have never met each other and we have Brian Hogg, who’s one of the preeminent conductors who actually works for the Music Council. We’ve got a band of people that’s part of lifelong learning. I could just go on forever. He’s going to take that day and that band of adult beginners — which is modelled on a program in North America which we saw when we were there — are going to join with 100 musicians of all ages with the music speaking to them and their audience.

Ms MILLER — Could I ask a final question following on from that.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms MILLER — I noted that you lived in the US for a year.

Mrs McALISTER — Yes.

The CHAIR — And your children attended the school there. Just in the light of what you were talking about are there lessons you learned over there that could be transferred over here?

Mrs McALISTER — Oh, they have been.

Ms MILLER — They have been, great.

Mrs McALISTER — What we do now with the Dandenong Ranges Music Council would never have happened because I and my husband, who was very committed too, would not have been aware of the potential and what children can do if they have the opportunities and how it can flow into the community and build the culture.

It was the Bicentennial Year, 1976. Because I’m Australian, I have another passion, which is about
children growing up and learning to be Australian, and to celebrate their own culture. A great way to do it is through music. And, the lesson we learned there was that’s what the Americans and the Canadians do well. And, they really do it well, you know. I admired that. I mean, trust me, there were things there that we wouldn’t want to see here, but that was the great thing. And since we’ve — I mean, this is 30 years ago, but since we’ve been back we’ve visited more schools and programs.

I visited — there’s a couple — there’s another way of delivering music education that’s really interesting that they do in the US and the Dandenong Ranges Music Council does it in a tiny way. There’s a program called Merit Music which is in Chicago and there’s another one in New York called the Eastman Community Music School and they have these community music schools all around the country. And, they’re often set up when the programs in schools collapse. Chicago — you know what Chicago is like. It’s a city of great wealth but of great poverty.

I wondered whether I could send to Anita or Kerryn, the websites. I don’t know how much time you guys have to look at these things.

The CHAIR — That would be great.

Mrs McALISTER — Nothing will ever take the place of music in the classroom, you know. And, I was really pleased that these guys here stressed the difference between classroom music and instrumental music, and how important each one is and how they complement each other. But, this was predominantly a secondary model. Primary music is just so important and so valuable, you know. Do you know that Monbulk Primary School has got a music specialist grant?

The CHAIR — No.

Mrs McALISTER — Yeah. That’s pretty exciting, right now. And what they have identified is the fact it’s really hard to get music teachers, even if you want them, you know, because of the training or the lack of availability. So, what they’ve done is the generalist teachers are wanting to have a music program in their classrooms and because of the research that tells us how music education helps learning across the curriculum, they’re trialling a kit which has been produced by a curriculum expert that provides PD for the generalist teacher in the normal school classroom timetable.

Ms TIERNEY — And where did they get this funding from?

Mrs McALISTER — This is from the government.

Ms TIERNEY — Victorian Government?

Mrs McALISTER — Yep, yep.

The CHAIR — Specialist musical program —

Mrs McALISTER — Yes. Running parallel with it is the research, so we hope to be able to measure the difference in the learning —

The CHAIR — And, it’s the first time that they’ve got access to this money?

Mrs McALISTER — Yes, and it’s a very exciting, you know.

The CHAIR — Beverley, we have concluded our questions. Is there anything we haven’t covered that you would like to add?

Mrs McALISTER — I have a couple of CDs that I’ll give you, which is another example of the
kind of work. We got a grant from the Australia Council to put a composer in the community. And, we invited schools and ensembles to work with the composer and we commissioned new work. Now, that stimulated a whole lot of interest in composition. Now, in the perspective of Australia, we have got to start to build our own, you know, musical culture and if we don’t start it with our children we never will anywhere. I feel like a salesperson here.

This is the Annual Report that the centre does, and there’s lots of photos in there with lots of children. And, I know you’re really busy and got a lot of people to talk to.

**The CHAIR** — That’s great. We will certainly incorporate that as part of the evidence.

**Mrs McALISTER** — I suppose you’re — you know, it was really interesting listening to these guys here. That commitment that that school has is to be admired. That Principal knows what he’s doing. Those staff know what they’re doing and they’re totally committed.

I can say this, because my husband was a high school principal and he nearly went crazy trying to educate people because he saw what happened in the US, you know — a lot of the principals don’t yet have an understanding of the value. They understand the choir singing at Anzac Day and they understand the band playing, dah, dah, dah, but they can’t make that next commitment, and that’s sad.

**The CHAIR** — It would probably be fair to say also your area has a lot of creative families, if you like, that would absolutely embellish this sort of stuff, and strong communities as well. Coming back to the point you said earlier about whether this could be replicated in other areas, the ranges is a very much —

**Mrs McALISTER** — I think it was fertile. I think one of the things is that we were part of the community when we came back, and people said what did you learn, and then we had the help of Bill Borthwick.

But those models, there are many different models. This thing you need to know, too. You need to know this. These guys — this is the university at Griffith. They did case histories on the links between community music and music education. And, we were a case history.

**Ms TIERNEY** — When was that?

**Mrs McALISTER** — It was a couple of years’ ago now. But, it was very, very interesting. There’s a whole great book they published. It’s online on the Music Council of Australia site.

**The CHAIR** — There’s a report. Terrific. Beverley, thank you very much and well done. Really, the passion that you obviously have for the area and what you have been able to do over the years, it sounds terrific, it really does.

**Mrs McALISTER** — It’s a very worthwhile thing to do, it really is, you know. You’re lucky, you get what you — you know what goes around, comes around, doesn’t it?

**The CHAIR** — Absolutely. Thank you.

(Witness withdrew)