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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Mr Mark O’Leary, Victorian Branch President, and
Ms Susan Searle, Head of Junior School Music, Scotch College and member, Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia
The CHAIR — I would like to officially welcome the Kodály Music Education Institute of Australia, and particularly to Mark and Susan.

As you know, we are investigating music in schools and what’s currently an offer and what we can do to improve our support, encouragement and programs for our young people. So, thank you for coming along this afternoon.

If I could introduce Gayle Tierney, who is the Deputy Chair, and Elizabeth will be joining us shortly. We have Kerryn Riseley and Anita Madden assisting the committee.

There are a couple of other things I need to point out. The evidence that you give today will be recorded via Hansard, and you will have the opportunity to review that and make any changes. We also need to point out that the information you give, the evidence, is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament so you can say whatever you like without fear or favour, but that only applies to the hearing itself not in any press conference you might once you leave the hearing room, not that you will do that.

So, thank you. This is a really important area. We’re very, very keen to hear about what you’re doing. So, I might start with the first question. If you could, maybe explain the philosophy of the Kodály method and how this approach has influenced teaching of music in Australian schools.

Ms SEARLE — Well, the Kodály method is a voice-based curriculum and it comes from Zoltan Kodály, a Hungarian composer. He became concerned in Hungary in the late 1940s, that the standards of music had dropped in Hungary, and so he started to go around and investigate how to raise it.

Over the years, the method has kind of gathered tools from various countries and things to what it is now. And what it is is basically using voice to teach children to sing in tune beautifully, to read and write music and to develop their inner musicians basically is how it works.

Mr O’LEARY — What makes it probably fairly — well, not unique but important is that it’s not about any particular instrument, it’s not about any particular style of music, it’s about creating musicians out of everybody. You may express that then through playing in a band. You may express that through singing in a choir, through playing in a string quartet, but is the education of your ear and your understanding of music that’s preparation for all music.

Ms TIERNEY — So, why is singing considered to be so important?

Ms SEARLE — Probably because if you can sing you are internalising the music, and the other reason, of course, is that everybody has a singing voice and it’s right there and built in and it’s accessible immediately.

Mr O’LEARY — And it’s inexpensive.

Ms SEARLE — That’s right. If you can sing you can understand the concepts you’re experiencing because you are actually doing it on the inside and not just pressing some pianos keys and things, which has some musical thinking obviously as well, but to be able to sing and understand what you’re singing and find out where those sounds are in your body means you are actually developing your musical inner self as well.

Ms TIERNEY — Okay. So, we have received some submissions that have suggested that all primary schools should actually offer your program.

Do you agree, and if so, what resources and expertise would schools need to deliver this program?

Ms SEARLE — Well, I definitely agree, partly because it would be applicable to any school in any
circumstance. It’s not as expensive program at all. The greatest expense would be training teachers to be able to deliver it, and that’s what our Association does, offers professional development for teachers. There isn’t a great deal of equipment to singing. That’s pretty much what it is.

At the minute, the training for teachers as far as we can tell in the tertiary institutions isn’t meeting a direct musical need for the students in primary schools at all, but we know that actually it’s very possible to train teachers to teach this system quite easily. I mean, the greatest expense is actually just that, training teachers, and then having opportunities for schools to employ a well-trained music teacher.

Mr O’LEARY — There is an issue, of course, in regards to generally music education in primary schools, should it be a music specialist engaged to do this, or is the general classroom teacher able to do that. I guess our view would be that a music specialist is preferable, but a general classroom teacher with appropriate training can certainly do a very good job of teaching in this way.

But, there are certain skills required that is a certain base mark of musical skills that you need to have. At the moment, there a lot people teaching in primary schools who don’t have those skills, which is pretty concerning.

Ms MILLER — Could you provide the committee with an overview of the teacher training offered by the Institute, in particular the Australian Kodály Certificate?

Mr O’LEARY — The Kodály Certificate basically involves 180 hours of training, that is done in a part-time capacity and there are various ways that can be done. In Victoria, we run it as short courses, generally about 30 hours. Teachers and students will generally do that after hours.

There are other ways to do it. There is a national programme in Brisbane where you can go for three summer schools, two weeks at a time. If you do those three years then you will have fulfilled the requirements for the Australian Kodály Certificate.

Ms MILLER — And how many people on average complete the Australian Kodály Certificate each year in Victoria, if you can tell us, and where is it offered and how much does it cost?

Mr O’LEARY — As far as the number of people who completed in Victoria, it’s not a huge number. There are a lot of people in Victoria who do the training but are actually not interested in the certificate itself. They just like to do the courses that we run because they help them with their teaching.

At the moment you don’t need qualifications to be a music teacher. Anyone can be a music teacher, so having the Australian Kodály Certificate in the Victorian context is not particularly helpful or useful.

Ms MILLER — How much does it cost to do?

Mr O’LEARY — In Victoria I can just tell you that our 30 hour course is about $600.

Ms MILLER — And where do they do that?

Mr O’LEARY — At the moment at Scotch College.

Ms SEARLE — I’m actually teaching a course at the minute. Actually, both of — our Level I and II courses which take us from Prep to about Year 4, happen to both be taught by the Scotch College teachers, so luckily Scotch has said, yes, we can have them on our premises. So, on a Wednesday night we have all those teachers come from their various schools and we have a two and-a-half hour lecture.
Mr O’LEARY — And we also use public facilities, council facilities, church halls.

The CHAIR — So stemming from Elizabeth’s question, a lot of these teachers may not complete the certificates, but how many would undergo courses each year? How many teachers would undergo a course?

Mr O’LEARY — Probably it ranges from perhaps 40 to 80 depending on what courses we’re offering and the numbers in the courses.

The CHAIR — So, you’ve got 700 that would have probably done something at some point in time?

Ms SEARLE — It would be around that, yes.

The CHAIR — And there’s about 40 that would do some form of professional development?

Ms SEARLE — Mm.

Mr O’LEARY — Apart from the courses themselves, we also run conferences. We have a two-day mini conference. It’s a bit of a shot in the arm, some new ideas, a bit of extra enthusiasm, inspiration, as well, which never goes astray. We run one-off workshops and we also have performance events for mostly choirs.

Ms TIERNEY — So, who mainly goes to those sort of workshops and conferences?

Mr O’LEARY — Generally music specialists in both government and independent schools, primary schools.

Ms TIERNEY — So, they get released from work to actually attend a recognised workshop or conference?

Mr O’LEARY — Yes. I mean, the education department doesn’t offer really any professional development for its basic teachers from what we have been able to determine so they are happy to be released to come to things that we run and other events from other organisations.

Ms TIERNEY — Rural and regional areas, particularly the primary schools, find it very difficult to deliver strong music programmes and also to attract specialist music teachers. What sort of strategies can you suggest to improve the state of music education in rural and regional schools?

Ms SEARLE — Well, this has actually become a concern sometimes for us too, and we hear from our members in rural areas. I know that sometimes we have had little groups of teachers come down and actually do our courses. For instance, the year before last we had a little group of four or five teachers from Ballarat that came down every week to do the course. Mark has certainly delivered workshops and courses in the country.

Mr O’LEARY — Yes, we have the program where we can go out, but we can only offer them a day here and a day there. I think what they need is release so that they can come and do some more serious training and get ongoing support. I think a mentoring program where they can be connected with teachers in other places who would be able to support them would be very valuable.

Ms SEARLE — Our Association is actually investigating the whole mentoring thing at the minute. We set up, or put out there, anyway, feelers for people who would like to be linked to an experienced Kodály teacher, especially teachers who are in isolated situations, and that can be in the city as well where you are the only music teacher in your particular area, and we ask them what kind of person they would like to be linked with, and we are trying to find ways that they can have somebody else that they can at least network with.
Mr O’LEARY — It’s about the confidence of the teachers, really. The more confident they are because they’ve had the training and it is good, practical training, that’s really going to help them.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, in your view, how should universities train future primary school teachers in music as part of preservice teaching courses?

Mr O’LEARY — Well, my daughter has actually been through this. At the moment, she’s a fourth year Bachelor of Music/Bachelor of Education student, and the universities seem to have completely copped out, and they don’t teach any practical skills at all. At best, they will give you an overview of what the methods might be in the 12 hours or something in the course that they have towards this, which is not enough time really to do anything worthwhile.

I believe, personally, that they need to at least be teaching something practical, something for the students to actually do in the classroom with children. Teach them how to sing, teach them the basics of musical literacy so they at least feel they have a handle on this and also have a basis for further study if they find that they love this area and they are passionate about it.

Ms MILLER — As part of the courses, teachers used to do, say, teaching rounds, with a bit of theory, and they’d go out into the field and put it into practice. Could you or should you do a similar thing for music?

Ms SEARLE — Oh, definitely, and actually, the practical side of it is part of the courses that we run.

At the minute, how it works is that the students in the classes actually do a lesson as if they are teaching children in our courses, but it would be ideal, and mostly they’re in practice and so they will go out and spend a week, hopefully, trying out the things we’ve done in the course and come back and give feedback the following week.

I’ve actually got two students doing a masters at Melbourne who are 21, 22, who haven’t been able to get music training at uni and so they’re actually doing my Level 1 course on top of learning their masters, ready to become music teachers as well.

Ms MILLER — That’s very commendable, isn’t it?

Ms SEARLE — Oh, they’re wonderful students. They’re going to be terrific teachers.

Mr O’LEARY — I mean, there’s a lot they need to know before they can get to that position. Well, they can learn it in the schools, but it’s so much better to go out with a repertoire of activities and songs and games and understandings of the procedures so then when they get to the school it means so much more to them than having to learn everything.

Ms SEARLE — We get the idea — I’ve got a daughter in first year doing music performance at Melbourne and I get the idea from talking to her and to other students that there doesn’t seem to be a cohesive idea of what music education should be in unis and whoever’s lecture you end up in will go in a direction. There doesn’t seem to be a thought of what are our outcomes that we want for all of our students and therefore what do we want for our education students as well.

Mr O’LEARY — And that’s partially, I think, our fault as the music education community. No doubt you will heard that there’s the Kodály method, there’s the Orff approach, there’s Daleroze, there’s various approaches to music, and we don’t really seem to be able to agree amongst ourselves as to what is the best way forward.

Ms TIERNEY — So what do the critics say about your approach?
Mr O'LEARY — The biggest problem for our approach is that you actually need to know what you’re doing. You need to have basic teacher competency, whereas some of the approaches which are slightly more commercially driven, there may be a product behind them or a desire for you to buy musical instruments. They make it very easy. You don’t need any background, you don’t need any skills.

We would be criticised because if you can’t read music to a basic level you can’t really be a Kodály teacher. We make no apology for that, and say if you can’t read music you have no business teaching music. The same as if you can’t spell you have no business teaching spelling, or if you can’t add up you have no business teaching maths. That makes us not as popular as perhaps we could be because there are people who are teaching music who love music and think they have something to offer but perhaps really don’t have quite what they need.

Ms SEARLE — What we would like to think is that the skills we’re giving to students are transferable to any musical situation. If you’re going to learn to play the ukulele, that’s the skill that you have, whereas the way that we develop is that you can play that to any of your work as a musician or, you know, as an audience member or whatever you’re going to do in your life in music. And, once upon a time, everybody had those skills. It’s just that we’ve accepted now that it’s a precious little closed-door for everybody, whereas we know it actually doesn’t have to be. In the long term, everybody should be able to read music. It’s not that hard. But because not enough people do know that it because narrower and narrower and narrower, the amount of people who can actually live in that world that’s a closed-door to everybody else.

The CHAIR — I was just interested in your views on how to incorporate music in the syllabus, in programs in schools for all kids, effectively, particularly when the evidence that we’ve had has said that there’s pressures on curriculum, and the biggest issue is how do we fit another thing in if we are told we have to do all of these other things. That’s probably a big push back we’ve been hearing thus far. What are your views on that?

Ms SEARLE — Well, it’s interesting that some schools seem to be able to manage to fit music in and still get the good results, though. I’ve only just come to Scotch this year and taught in state systems as well and always had fantastic music programs, well supported by the parent community and by the school. There was time for music in there and still the NAPLAN results or whatever else the measure was, were coming out well, so I’m not quite sure whether chopping music out really allows for any improvement in other areas. I’d probably say the reverse is true, really.

Mr O'LEARY — There’s a lot of research that shows good teaching in music actually does help with developing literacy skills, developing mathematical skills. We would never really want that to be used as an argument for music education because that’s not what it’s for. Music is unique, and that’s why you teach music, not because it makes you a better at maths and spelling.

The CHAIR — But can I give you another side of that. If we’re struggling for some of those schools to actually take up the challenge —

Mr O'LEARY — Yes —

The CHAIR — Do we need to be pushing more of that side of the coin to suggest that if you want the sort of results from your —

Mr O'LEARY — It doesn’t hurt, does it?

The CHAIR — From your schools and from your kids, you need to be incorporating these sorts of programs, and obviously we want them to do it for all of the reasons you’ve suggested. But, do we need to sell music better into schools to our leadership groups within schools, to our parent bodies within schools to demand that we get more programming?
Ms SEARLE — Probably.

Mr O’LEARY — We probably do. I have a friend who runs an indigenous choir program in New South Wales, and it really is a hobby. She went into a school in Glebe, which has a high indigenous population, and through the very part-time work, I think a once a week visit with music there, their NAPLAN results went through the ceiling. And, of course, the school was delighted, and none of us were surprised at all, because the way you teach music makes you think and makes you listen and makes you question, and they’re all the things you have to do in any education.

The CHAIR — No other questions.

Ms MILLER — No.

The CHAIR — Well you have been able to answer all of our questions. Is there anything we haven’t covered that you might want to add?

Mr O’LEARY — Could I ask you a question.

The CHAIR — Sure.

Mr O’LEARY — Are you planning to get out and to visit some schools and see what’s going on?

The CHAIR — We have been doing that.

Ms TIERNEY — Even this morning.

Ms MILLER — Yes, that’s right.

Mr O’LEARY — Because that’s where you will see I guess —

Ms MILLER — I noted in your submission you had down there’s some schools, and Blackburn High was one of them. That’s where we were this morning.

Ms TIERNEY — And we were at Mildura last week or the week before.

Ms SEARLE — One thing that I think would be great for us to do going on — I just mentioned this to Mark before — is to actually gather our evidence a little bit more — in a more tactile way and perhaps show students progressing through the program and seeing what actually is possible because I think still in people’s minds you may accidentally be good at music or you may not. What we want to show is that actually it’s not an accident at all, it’s a taught skill and we can show you how that actually happens.

If that’s the case, then we know that surely every school would want that. I’m sure parent groups and school leaders are going to want that. Music gets people excited. A musical concert is more exciting than anything else I can think of that you would go to look at a school.

Mr O’LEARY — Unless it goes for three and-a-half hours, in which case —

Ms SEARLE — Yes, but that’s going to get your parent community, your children excited about coming to school as well. You would not want to have a school that didn’t have a great music program.

The CHAIR — And I asked this of the last group: how important is parental influence in encouraging young people and peers to pursue music?
Mr O’LEARY — It’s more important than it should be because music should be for every child. At the moment I run a — my job is not in schools — I run a community children’s choir. So, kids come from different schools and participate in our program after school. Most of the kids in my choir have parents who are musicians, either amateur or professional, and that’s great for me but it’s become very elitist. What about all the other kids? They deserve music, too, they need music too. The worse music education becomes in schools you can have less of these parents to then inspire their children. So, we can’t rely on that, it’s got to be teachers.

The CHAIR — What about the industry? What role does the industry play in encouraging more young people to participate, and also, for that matter, television programs? We’ve seen Glee and things sort of thing pop up. There are a whole lot of kids that weren’t singing before now taking up singing.

Ms SEARLE — There was a bit of a spike when that all started coming and people wanted to be in choirs and things. There is a little bit of a feeling in some of those programs there’s an end result that you suddenly became a singer overnight, and, you know, that’s not life really.

The CHAIR — That’s not what happened.

Ms SEARLE — The reality is in a lot of the schools that I’ve taught at you will have an intake at one year level. At Scotch it happens to be in Year 4. The boys that have come in from other schools are absolute beginners in music, and I’m having to run a beginner’s program as if they were preps. That’s not right, so their parents for whatever reasons haven’t sent them there in the beginning and so they have been compromised.

We know music training has to be done at an early age, and if you missed that boat, you can’t not get on it but you are going to be behind really, aren’t you?

Mr O’LEARY — Yes.

Ms MILLER — What age group would you recommend?

Ms SEARLE — For beginning music?

Ms MILLER — Yes.

Ms SEARLE — Well, nine months before the child is born is what we think, but, you know, it’s in infancy surely that you should be surrounded by music. Formal music education doesn’t need to happen really until the preschool, and that’s not that formal, sitting down reading and writing, but certainly a good model of singing and good musical activities with a repertoire that’s suitable for the developmental stage of children should be happening now.

The CHAIR — Can I ask just one last question in regards to the original part of this coming from Hungary. So, I assume that that’s continued on and developed over there?

Mr O’LEARY — Yes.

The CHAIR — Do have a relationship still?

Mr O’LEARY — Yes, we do.

The CHAIR — Could you briefly talk about that, and to your knowledge, you know, has that shaped, because you see a lot of great composers and what have you come out of Hungary. Is that largely due to the sort of program, the Kodály program that’s being offered?
Ms SEARLE — You would know more about that.

Mr O'LEARY — That’s an interesting question. I would be very tempted to say yes, of course it is. Hungary has always been a part of that culturally rich and interesting part of Europe where there has been lots of activity.

We keep in touch with what’s going on. It has changed, of course. It’s not the same as the program that was set up by the Kodály students. The principles are the same but we recognise in every — it’s very much about culture and part of Kodály’s interest was that he was concerned if their children were singing songs in German at the end of the Austria Hungarian Empire, he said, ‘This is Hungary. They should be singing Hungarian songs.’ It’s very much about exploring your own musical culture through song and through music. So, we would do that. We wouldn’t be exploring Hungarian music culture. That would be a misunderstanding of what it was all about.

But, the Hungarians are still very well trained as far as teaching goes, and are developing the sort of skills we want our music teachers to have, so we will invite Hungarian teachers out to work at our conferences. We won’t get them to lecture our students about how to teach children in Year 3 in Australia, but we will get them to teach us how to listen better to music, how to understand what we’re hearing, perhaps conducting skills and those sort of things.

The CHAIR — Great. Thank you very much for coming along.

Mr O'LEARY — It was a pleasure.

The CHAIR — You have introduced us to a whole new dimension we were not aware of. Thank you very much, and good luck with the program.

Mr O'LEARY — Thank you.

Ms SEARLE — Thank you.

(Witnesses withdrew)