EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Mildura — 1 May 2013

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Mr J. Menhennett, Music Teacher,
Ms J. Circosta, Music Teacher, and
Ms P. Fox, Arts Domain Leader, St Joseph’s College.
The CHAIR — Thank you for joining us this afternoon. As you know, we are here to discuss music in schools and to get a bit of an understanding about what is currently happening and on offer at your school. Hansard will be recording the proceedings today and you will have an opportunity to review the transcript and suggest corrections for any errors that appear in the transcript and have them fixed. I also point out that the evidence you give is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That is for the hearing proper today. I know that all sounds very formal and you must be thinking, ‘What have we got ourselves into?’, but it is a conversation. It really is just an opportunity for us to understand more about what you do. We obviously need to do all this because we want to be able to utilise that information to make the recommendations at the very end of the inquiry for improving what currently is on offer.

I will begin with some questions and feel free, anybody, to make comments on those. At the end we will give you an opportunity to elaborate on anything we have not covered in our questions. Firstly, could you provide an overview of how music is delivered as part of the curriculum at the college from Years 7 to 10? Does the college offer VCE music? If so, how many students are typically enrolled in the subject? What types of extracurricular music does the college offer?

Mr MENHENNETT — Perhaps I could start by answering that. Music at our college encompasses a performance program — students learning instruments from Years 7 to 10. Of late we have worked hard on incorporating the ICT element of the curriculum more in our school by upgrading our music facility: one-on-one computers, recording facilities, the latest software for students to engage with and also to enable them to immerse themselves in learning. From Years 7 to 10 it really is a performance program with an ICT element or focus as well. Basically we offer a streamlined music program in Years 7 and 8, and that is to extend students in the path of music. We also offer a general music class, or music elective, in Years 7 and 8. In Years 9 and 10 they start a pathway from Year 9 through to VCE. We offer, obviously, classroom pedagogy along with the curriculum and, as I said before, a large performance base.

The CHAIR — And VCE?

Mr MENHENNETT — Yes. We offer VCE music as well.

The CHAIR — How many kids roughly undertake — —

Mr MENHENNETT — This year we have included a VCE VET program. We have seven students enrolled in that. In the units 3 and 4 program, or Year 12 VCE, we have a total of 11 students enrolled. Since I have been at the college that has grown by about two or three each year.

Mr CRISP — Looking at some of the challenges faced by rural and regional schools, what difficulties or barriers do you see in rural and regional schools in trying to deliver music education? We welcome any thoughts you have on how we can improve that.

Ms FOX — It is a good question. I think it is a fairly contentious one within arts education overall. I think what our music students miss out on is being able to see a broad variety of performances. The students have to pay out of their own pockets to go to Melbourne as part of a school trip every year to make sure they have that connection with those performances and to see those performances so that they can complete their studies. From our point of view, if there were more access to that on a regional level, it certainly would help those parents who are not able to afford that. We need to travel for the week. It takes a day for us to get down there, two or three days to do things and then a day to come back. So that is a whole week when they are not in the classroom doing their other studies. It does put pressure on lots of different areas.

Mr CRISP — I am open to anyone with suggestions of what could be done.

Mr MENHENNETT — I think tertiary education beyond VCE needs to be introduced into this area — beyond the school realm for our students. When we think about the whole thing, yes we teach students from Years 7 to 12. What is the pathway for them after school? Ultimately we are teaching the students to go somewhere and do something with music. It does not stop at the end of Year 12. In the past
there have been notions of introducing further music education in Mildura, but it does not exist, and every
time something is talked about it hits a brick wall. For example, there is a certificate IV in music offered at
Sunraysia TAFE. We are currently finding it very difficult to staff that because there are only three or four
qualified or willing teachers in the area who would teach that. A tertiary institution in Sunraysia would
bring other things with it and attract quality teachers, mentors, musicians, workshops et cetera.

Just to build on what Pam was saying as well, the access to the musical opportunities is what Pam was
talking about, absolutely. Professional development for teachers is something that needs to be addressed in
this area too. As Pam said, we are having to travel a fair bit to access a lot of the stuff. It is great because
we get to go to the city, see what is happening and join in some concerts; and do not get us wrong there,
we actually love doing that. But do we always have to travel, do we always have to do this? There is an
onus on staff and students to have that happen.

For the VCE music exams we often have to travel. I see that as a significant disadvantage, and forgive me
if I am getting slightly off the track there but we have to do quite a bit of travel. Our students have to do
quite a bit of travel to present their exams in the city in very uncomfortable circumstances, so we are
having to set the students up in a way where we try and emulate the exam environment that they have no
idea about, so teaching about variables is very important in the classroom. There are the issues of rural
funding and tertiary education, as I have mentioned, support from country parents, the community and
school principals. Funding for beginning teachers as well, and opportunities, is an issue I see.

Ms MILLER — Just following on from that, in terms of availability of specialist music teachers —
and it is open for all of you — are there adequate numbers of specialist classroom music teachers available
in the Mildura region? Are there adequate numbers of instrumental teachers available in the region? Are
there any other issues you face in terms of staffing your instrumental music program?

Ms CIRCOSTA — I am coming from a specialist instrumental teacher as well as a music teacher point
of view. I have found there are quite a lot of specialist instrumental teachers in Mildura. There is definitely
big talent and students wanting to be involved in extracurricular outside school or during school time, and I
think in the funding for that the onus is very much on the parents as it seems to be an outside of school
activity in most cases. I am not sure how the other schools are working. With our school in particular the
parents pay the instrumental teachers on a private basis rather than it being funded through our wages.

Mr CRISP — The instrumental teachers who are parent funded — do they teach at the school or do
they teach outside of the school?

Ms CIRCOSTA — I teach at the school. I have a few days at the school and I am taking students
outside of the classes for half an hour on a rotational basis. That is how that works. But there is also
after-school teaching as well.

The CHAIR — How many kids would you take?

Ms CIRCOSTA — At school or with after-school hours as well?

The CHAIR — Both. Break them down — —

Ms CIRCOSTA — I have about 30 students at the moment.

The CHAIR — In the after school?

Ms CIRCOSTA — No, overall. I have 10 or 12 at school and the rest are after school and weekends.

The CHAIR — Okay.

Ms CIRCOSTA — Sometimes it is hard to be taken out of classes as well; that puts a lot of pressure on
students. But it depends. It is up to each individual student as to how they can cope with catching up with
their classwork and still have instrumental lessons.
Mr MENHENNETT — Having worked in both government and independent sectors, and I have an instrumental background as well, I know there are a number of very talented specialist music teachers in the area. Unfortunately we struggle to keep them in a lot of cases.

Government schools get access to a pool of instruments, a pool of teachers, a pool of money or funding that makes instrumental music at those schools very affordable for students. I guess we offer more of an elitist program rather than the inclusive program that the government schools do, so for us to secure quality teachers is quite important, and I think we do a pretty good job of doing that.

There are teachers from outside of our school who have contracts within our school who do teach on our school grounds, and they obviously obtain permission to do so. It is all on, as Jolene said, a private contractual basis. However, attracting quality music teachers to school, both classroom and instrumental, has been quite an issue in Sunraysia. I am talking mainly in terms of probably power from the principals in what they can offer teachers from the city. Once again, with music institutions or tertiary institutions we can actually start to train teachers on a local basis and keep them here as well.

Mr CRISP — I want to build on that a little bit, John, in regard to the difference between the government and Catholic sectors for delivering music education. Since you have worked in both sectors, what lessons do you think we can learn in the government sector from the Catholic sector?

Mr MENHENNETT — The core values for a start. If we look outside the actual specialist area of music and we talk about what the school has to offer the students or a community, I think the Catholic sector offers a bunch of core values which filter from the principal right down to the instrumental teachers, students and parents and everyone sees that. I think the support from principals and maybe the funding opportunities within the school may make a difference as well. The fact that we can outfit buildings for teaching purposes — they are probably the main things, yes.

Mr CRISP — Thank you.

The CHAIR — Just on that, why do you think there seems to be more of an emphasis on music in independent schools and in Catholic schools than there is in government schools?

Mr MENHENNETT — I think once again we talk about core values. We have major ceremonies within the Catholic sector that bring together communities. I see music as being a communal thing. Music in society is such an important part of learning an instrument. Once again this goes away from the technical and the specialist aspect of what a music teacher does and lets us have a look at why students actually do it.

If we have a look at mass — mass is a very real thing at our school — it brings together a lot of children. Music is a major part of the ceremonies. I think students have a certain connectedness to that and they see people enjoying themselves and it having a common thread at the end of the day and students want to jump on board, so to speak, and actually start to learn instruments.

I think staff collaborate as well to identify appropriate theme music for these matters, and it is once again a community effort.

Ms CIRCOSTA — Just on that, they are also offered high-quality performance opportunities. They have a theatre to perform in — many students do not have that opportunity unless they are in a competition, an eisteddfod or something like that, whereas at our school they have those opportunities to perform in semiprofessional settings and they are offered quite a lot of that. That helps us with our music programs and keeping kids involved and inspired and wanting to be part of our programs.

Mr ELASMAR — What is your view on the opportunities technology offers to enhance the delivery of music education in rural and regional Victoria?

Ms CIRCOSTA — That is what we are doing at the moment.
Mr MENHENNETT — Technology to enhance the outcomes of students is the question?

Mr ELASMAR — Yes.

Mr MENHENNETT — Sorry, can you repeat the question?

Mr ELASMAR — What is your view of the opportunity that technology offers to enhance the delivery of music education in rural and regional Victoria?

Mr MENHENNETT — Whether it be rural or not, I think technology — the biggest advancement in any sort of industry or teaching or anything is the technology. If we start to follow that, I think students are totally engaged in what they are doing in the use of technology, obviously facilitated by experience and knowledgeable teachers. I think the learning opportunities are far greater than the traditional ways of learning music. For example, we have a program, an aural program called Auralia, in which the students can actually start to immerse themselves in music and learn at their own level. I was observing one of my classes the other day and how that would actually work. Even the students who came in with absolutely no knowledge of music whatsoever, in their first music class — and let me say that students must receive a very positive musical experience to start with, and that will set us up for our VCE years as well — were totally engaged in what they were doing. They were writing things down. They were exploring and responding to things in a way that I have never seen before through the use of interactive programs. I think it is just such a way that we need to be supported and well funded enough to at least explore these possibilities of other ways of learning music.

Ms CIRCOSTA — I think it just makes it more accessible for everybody.

Mr MENHENNETT — Absolutely, yes.

Mr CRISP — I would like to explore your thoughts on community partnerships and whether the college partners with any organisations in order to deliver either musical education or other benefits. I know you have a theatre; I have been there many times. That is part of the performance partnership you obviously have with some organisations. How do you see the benefits of those partnerships for your education programs?

Ms FOX — We have a connection with the Mildura Eisteddfod and our students perform in that. I think for a performance-based level that is a really good opportunity to have someone other than a teacher tell you how you are going; I think that works quite well. Other than that, I am not sure what other — —

The CHAIR — Industry as well — so community, industry, other stakeholders.

Ms CIRCOSTA — I take students all the time to aged citizens homes to have a sing. It just gives them another opportunity for that performance value and that experience. The enjoyment that it gives others I think is also a driving factor rather than just kind of an isolated practice room or one-on-one with their teacher. It is nice to get out into the community and perform at all the local events, so I encourage that and have a few partnerships with different people.

Mr MENHENNETT — I think the school has a number of supported corporate sponsors in terms of what we require as well. I know we have a partnership with a company, music, a new partnership with COSAMP, which helps us deliver our technology units and music. They have been fantastic.

Ms FOX — There is also the jazz band — the St Joseph’s College jazz band plays at community events. We played at the St Paul’s community event — —

Mr MENHENNETT — Art show.

Ms FOX — Art show, that is right, the community art show. So if people come to us and ask whether we can be involved in something that they are doing, more likely than not we would be involved in that.
Mr MENHENNETT — Once again, community involvement is one of our core values as a school. It means a lot.

Ms MILLER — In terms of professional learning, is there adequate access to professional learning opportunities in music and ways to improve that access locally?

Ms FOX — For teachers?

Ms MILLER — Yes.

Mr MENHENNETT — Red Cliffs Secondary College has a sound house which was built — I was speaking to Don last night — I think it is the 10th or 11th year or something since that was built. I was an instrumental teacher at that time and part of the negotiation for that process. One of the points of having that building was for it to be for communal use. Part of the deal was to offer PD to teachers. That probably has not happened over the last few years for whatever reason. But, yes, there is a facility at Red Cliffs that is affiliated with Brashs, which became Allans and so forth. That sound house deal is there, offering PDs in programs like Sibelius and Auralia, which I mentioned before, and so forth. That is actually local. But we are finding ourselves having to travel a lot. For example, we have Keith Huxtable from Music Education Network coming down on Friday to do little bit of PD on our music software. That is costing us as well obviously. COSAMP, which I mentioned before, is offering some PD in pro-tools. But it is a large process. We do have to travel, but musically that is probably the only — —

Ms CIRCOSTA — Being a new teacher, for me that is something. Usually they are all in Melbourne — they are Melbourne-based PDs. I am used to travelling.

The CHAIR — Is there anything that we have not covered off that you would like to add in terms of what you are currently doing or what we could be doing to improve music in our schools?

Ms FOX — I don’t know. Is there anything else you can think of?

Mr ELASMAR — You don’t have to answer.

The CHAIR — Can I ask about your backgrounds, particularly of the music teachers? What were your professional development and your pathways to where you are currently?

Ms CIRCOSTA — I did a Bachelor of Music at Melbourne University and then a Masters in teaching afterwards.

The CHAIR — You are based here?

Ms CIRCOSTA — Yes.

The CHAIR — You went to school here?

Ms CIRCOSTA — I did. I went to Red Cliffs Secondary College.

The CHAIR — So that had a music program?

Ms CIRCOSTA — Yes. I grew up here.

Mr CRISP — And your instrumental speciality?

Ms CIRCOSTA — Singing.

Ms MILLER — Will we hear you on *The Voice*?

Ms CIRCOSTA — No, but my students are auditioning for that.

Ms MILLER — Is that right?
Ms CIRCOSTA — Yes, they got through to the second round, but, no, they are a bit young. The Voice is more for amateur professionals.

Ms MILLER — It is a great experience, though.

Ms CIRCOSTA — It is. It was a great experience for them.

The CHAIR — John?

Mr MENHENNETT — I am from South Australia. I am a bit of a ring-in, one of the ones I was talking about before. I spent most of my life in Adelaide doing the music scene throughout South Australia. I was involved in many, many musical genres, in particular touring with rock bands, setting up sound. I eventually did a classical music degree, specialising in orchestral percussion, and I did the ACME new music scene for many years in Adelaide, Melbourne and a lot of places like that. I started instrumental teaching in about 1995, and I have done that ever since. I have hardly ever missed a day since 1995 with my drum students — that is, drum not drama. Then I came to Sunraysia; my parents only live about an hour and a half away from here so it was ideal. I set up the percussion program that exists in the government schools here. I was the Music Coordinator for 12 months here whilst I finished my Graduate Diploma of Education through Charles Darwin University, and I was employed at Merbein Secondary College. I did their music program for about four or five years and then I have been at St Joseph’s for a while. I have had my hand in instrumental music, which I am very passionate about, plus classroom music as well.

The CHAIR — I have one quick question for Pam. We have seen in the evidence so far that in the government schools, particularly in the 80s, there was a specific music program and a move towards having music within the Arts and essentially being 25 per cent or thereabouts of overall programs. Do you think that has been one of the reasons for the decline in music over the years? Do you think music should effectively have its own place or do you think it still should sit alongside everything else?

Ms FOX — Ideally, I would like all the Arts to have their own place. I think it becomes quite difficult when you place them altogether in one domain, as happens now, because the focus then drifts from one to another and it makes it difficult to coordinate all those things. As the Arts domain leader, you have to keep your finger on the pulse of everything that is going on. Having said that, I think the interest in our music program with students is very strong and probably stronger than the visual arts at the moment.

The CHAIR — Everyone will have a passionate interest in pushing different components in the Arts. We have heard evidence to suggest that the music component helps in a whole range of different areas — literacy and numeracy being examples of that. Would that be a good enough reason to suggest that, although they are all important and in an ideal world we would give them all equal billing, there should be particular attention given to music? Would that be a fair thing to say for someone who is in an area that obviously —

Ms FOX — I guess it is difficult for me to say because I am not a music teacher, I suppose, I am a visual arts teacher, and I see the benefits that has within that area. I think that there are students within the visual arts who cannot do music and students within music who cannot do the visual arts. So those students who have literacy problems or have emotional needs and need to do a subject within the Arts to go on and become confident and resilient I think then choose which one suits them, definitely. I am not sure that you would just need music to be able to do that, if that is what you are asking.

The CHAIR — We are done. Thank you very much for coming in today and presenting in front of the committee. Good luck with the areas that you are all working in.

Witnesses withdrew.