EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 27 March 2013

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Ms C. Aebersold, Chief Executive Officer, and
Ms A. Hill, Director of External Relations, The Song Room.
The CHAIR — Thank you for joining us.

Ms AEBERSOLD — Thank you very much for having us.

The CHAIR — There are just a couple of things to point out. Firstly, today everything is being recorded by Hansard. You cannot sing in these, but who knows? There will be the opportunity for you to look at the Hansard transcript when it is sent to you, and if there is anything typographically that has been recorded incorrectly, you will have the opportunity to fix that.

It is also important to mention that the evidence you give is part of what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to MPs. So you can say whatever you like and you will not be held to account, in terms of what is said here, but if you go out and give a press conference about something, that does not apply in terms of parliamentary privilege.

Thank you for your submission. We have all had the opportunity to read that. We will give you the opportunity to make an introductory statement and then get into questions.

Ms AEBERSOLD — Great; thank you. We are very pleased to be here. We are very pleased to see music education as the focus of a parliamentary inquiry and also really appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission and speak at the hearing. So thank you very much for having us.

I just want to give a brief context to our submission regarding the key issues in music education and the solutions that The Song Room has been delivering and would propose around that. I will highlight some of the key messages out of the submission. First of all, the vision of The Song Room is that all Australian children have the opportunity to participate in music and the arts to enhance their education, personal development and community involvement. Obviously the focus of the parliamentary inquiry is very close to our hearts at The Song Room, and our work.

The reason we exist as a not-for-profit organisation is to address two key areas of need in education. They focus around access and equity. In terms of access, that relates to the large gaps in specialist music and arts education in schools — specialist teachers in music and the arts — which were shown in the National Review of School Music Education, and prior to that the Stevens report, indicating that less than a quarter of government primary schools have access to a specialist teacher in music nationally. Our experience in working in schools — and have worked in approximately 600 schools in Victoria delivering a minimum of six-month programs — would certainly reinforce that need and that gap. These students are therefore missing out on the intrinsic value and cultural benefits of the arts, and we are also missing out on the development of artists and the audiences of the future. That is the key need in terms of access.

In terms of equity, that relates to the significant gaps in educational and social outcomes for disadvantaged and marginalised young people. So the gaps in educational performance between disadvantaged young people and more advantaged young people are very large and they are growing, as I am sure you are aware. There is substantial evidence, though, on the ability of music and the arts to level the playing field — as was spoken about in the Champions of Change research many years ago now — for the disadvantaged through music and the arts.

Most notable is the internationally significant evidence on The Song Room’s program, showing improvements compared to matched non-participating schools and students. It indicated those students who had The Song Room’s program over 6 months, or 12 to 18 months, compared to those who did not have the program had reduced absenteeism by 65%; improved school grades across the whole curriculum — English, maths, science, technology, et cetera — improved NAPLAN results, with the equivalent of a one-year gain in NAPLAN results as a result of having the program; and also enhanced social and emotional wellbeing outcomes — improved confidence, self-esteem and engagement in learning and reduced stress, depression, anxiety, et cetera.

These results show a way to address educational improvements for the disadvantaged. Yet most often it is those disadvantaged students who are most likely to miss out on music and arts education in schools. That is the second need — around equity.
To address these needs around access and equity, The Song Room is providing effective solutions, as we spoke about in our submission. Firstly, regarding access I think the main issue there is that it is important to be able to address the scale of the need, and so to use a very innovative approach. There are very large numbers of schools, teachers and students who do not have specialist teaching resources in the arts. It is on a large scale; we need innovation to be able to address that large gap.

Based on a Victorian rural pilot project that The Song Room led in partnership with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Orchestra Victoria, Victorian Opera, the Country Education Project and 3MBS of delivering online music education, and amongst our experience over the years in delivering our programs in schools, we have now developed an interactive online education platform, in partnership with other arts organisations. Very shortly that will be launched. It will have over 400 music and arts educational resources for generalist teachers and students across all year bands, from Foundation to 10, and be aligned to the new Australian Curriculum across all five art forms. That will be a really fantastic base in supporting schools without specialist teachers, to give them the resources to deliver arts education, particularly music education.

This site and the resources form a hub to support schools without specialists. However, there is more work required to ensure that we have the best arts education resources on there. We are working in partnership with other music and arts educators in Victoria and elsewhere to get the best resources on there to be accessible to schools. We are really keen on and have been developing a sector and a partnership approach in the delivery of that. The last one is in terms of our core purpose around addressing that need of equity. As you would have seen in our submission, we have a cost-effective, scalable and evidence-based model of delivering teaching artist programs in schools and capacity-building programs for generalist teachers that has been shown to improve educational and social outcomes in disadvantaged schools, and for disadvantaged children in those schools, using music and arts as the medium to do that and providing schools with the resources to enable them to self-sustain arts education in their school beyond our program. That is my brief intro and we welcome questions.

**The CHAIR** — Excellent. In terms of the schools that are involved in your program, how many primary schools do you cover?

**Ms AEBERSOLD** — In Victoria we have worked, as I think I have mentioned, in around 600 six-month programs over the last several years, nearly a decade now. The majority of those schools are primary schools. We do do some complementary programs in early years — 0 to 5-years-old — and we provide some support in secondary schools, in particularly higher risk communities such as English language schools, but the vast majority of our programs are in primary schools.

**The CHAIR** — How are they geographically spread? How do you choose who gets the program?

**Ms AEBERSOLD** — We try to balance a number of those factors. With the geographical spread in Victoria we have programs in inner metro areas, in outer metro areas but also in a number of different regional areas over the years such as Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong, the Goulburn Valley, the Western District, East Gippsland and the Mallee — they are some of the rural areas we have worked in. We have worked in most of the areas in metropolitan Melbourne that have pockets of disadvantage, for example, the south-east corridor, the west and some of the north. We have worked in quite a diverse geographic spread. Because the model we deliver is not a one-off program and it operates over a minimum of six months on a weekly basis, we have to focus on clusters of schools to make it viable to deliver and because we employ our teaching artists within those regions, so we would identify areas of need.

We have a program that is currently free of charge for schools and we do not market our program broadly because we would just create a need that we cannot meet. In terms of how we identify schools and regions, we mostly base it on their level of disadvantage using the ICSEA score, or other measures of disadvantage, such as the percentage of English-as-a-second-language students within the school, for example. Then we would identify particular regions and clusters of schools of need. We also therefore need to go and source funding. The majority of our funding nationally and in Victoria is non-government funding, so we would
have to source the funds to deliver a program in a particular region as well. There are a number of factors that would help us identify a particular school and cluster of schools to deliver to.

**The CHAIR** — Are there particular areas that you would identify as having a real need at the moment that are not currently being serviced?

**Ms AEBERSOLD** — Whilst there are needs in terms of access that are very broad, our online programs are accessible to any school so there is that kind of reach. In terms of the sorts of areas that we would identify as very high need areas, it would be those areas of highest disadvantage and the social and educational outcomes of those equity gaps that we would be focusing on.

**Ms HILL** — A new area that we are looking at going into is the city of Casey. There are a lot of statistics available about the level of need and disengagement in the city of Casey and there are 208 primary schools, the majority of which are under-resourced or struggling with various issues. We are actually taking a different approach with Casey. Because we have grown relatively organically over the past decade, as Caroline said, it is much more effective and efficient for us to work in clusters. Instead of going directly to the principals we are speaking to Casey City Council and saying, ‘This is what our program is and does; do you think it would be of value to your community?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘How do we work together to select the schools over a three to five-year period and ensure that we can leverage the benefits across the community as well?’

**The CHAIR** — Just on that, do you have any numbers available as to how many primary schools are actually running music programs?

**Ms HILL** — I thought you were going to say ‘with our program’.

**The CHAIR** — No, just generally in terms of where you are going. I suppose that over a period of time you discover it, but we have found that the department does not have that information at the moment. Do you have access to anything?

**Ms AEBERSOLD** — We do not have aggregated data. The last substantial report that was delivered around specialist teachers in schools that we are aware of was the National Review of School Music Education. For us, one of the base criterion for delivering a program is that the school does not have a specialist teacher in music. It is very rare that we would approach a region or a cluster of schools in a particularly marginalised community that has specialist teachers in music or any art form. It is anecdotal, I guess, but as we are investigating particular regions it is reinforcing those statistics.

**Ms HILL** — Just using those figures based on Steven’s report — the roughly three-quarter figure — we estimate there are 390 schools that we believe would meet our criterion of being disadvantaged schools without specialist music and arts teachers.

**The CHAIR** — Okay. That is useful information.

**Ms TIERNEY** — What are some of the challenges that low-SES schools have in wanting to deliver music education?

**Ms AEBERSOLD** — That is a good question. I think any school that does not have a specialist teacher in the arts does have significant challenges in the confidence and skills of a generalist teacher to deliver. There are probably two issues. One is around the challenges of a more disadvantaged region’s school having a specialist teacher in music or the arts, and that is a greater challenge for schools in disadvantaged areas because they are struggling with such fundamental issues around literacy and school engagement, and the resources they have would often be put elsewhere. Often schools are focusing on their numeracy and literacy skills in educational terms, and they do that with direct resources in that area perhaps without being aware of the impact that a program like a music program can have on improving numeracy and literacy and school engagement.
We certainly find in schools that do not have a specialist teacher in the arts that once they have had a program and have seen the impact of that, they often see the greater value in the arts and they will look to find a way to employ a specialist teacher in music themselves directly. We have had many examples where we have employed a teaching artist that we have delivered in a school and at the end of the program we have talked about sustainability measures with that school and the school has actually decided to employ our teaching artist, which is a great outcome.

On the other side there are then the schools that perhaps cannot have a specialist teacher in music. The challenge for generalist teachers to deliver an effective program are significant, but we have found as well that the ability to instil confidence and skills in generalist teachers to continue a program is quite feasible, even within a relatively short period of time — perhaps a 6 to 12-month program, delivering it in the school, working in partnership with a generalist teacher in the classroom, delivering capacity-building resources like professional development and mentoring for teachers and providing them with the physical and learning resources to deliver a program themselves. Many of the schools that we have worked with have managed to sustain that beyond the program.

Ms TIERNEY — I think that is a nice segue into your question.

Mr CRISP — Yes, which is to look at some sustainability issues with your programs. You go into to those schools that need a music program and you develop the capacity of classroom teachers. I know you have talked a lot about this already, but can you condense that into just how you achieve that sustainability and capacity in the classroom, and then can you add anything about how it is maintained when you have withdrawn? What can you tell us about the long-term effects of that program?

Ms AEBERSOLD — Yes, Absolutely. One of the key ingredients of why our program is effective, that has been reinforced through our own experience in delivering programs and our evaluation with schools but also through the independent research, is that it is a tailored program. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach to delivery. That is equally true for sustainability approaches, so we have a range of models of sustainability and capacity building within the school to create a self-sustainable outcome. One of those is, as I mentioned, that sometimes, having had the program, the school will see the wide benefits of the program and then decide, ‘We cannot live without this’, and they will find a way. Sometimes we will support them in sourcing other funds — for example, from philanthropic sources — to employ either our teaching artist or a specialist teacher in the school. We have seen many examples of that. That is in some ways a simple sustainability measure. It means we need to find new teaching artists, but that is not such a bad outcome. That is one model.

Another model of sustainability is looking at building the skills, confidence and capacity of the generalist teachers, that is, through informal mentoring, formal mentoring, professional development and providing those curriculum-aligned resources that are delivered at a level so that generalist teachers feel confident to utilise them. Often what happens is that it may be that you do not necessarily have every generalist teacher in a primary school who feels confident to deliver the program to the same level. You might have teachers who want to be a champion within that school to continue a music program or an arts program within the school.

The third area is around the school seeing the benefits around building teacher capacity, but it is also around the cultural change in the school as well. We often hear a lot of feedback from the principals and teachers at the school around the cultural shift that has occurred in embracing the arts and in all the flow-on benefits that come as a result of that. We certainly find that that has a transformative impact on the school as well to create self-sustainable outcomes.

The second part of the question was around — would you remind me?

Mr CRISP — It is okay. Once you have that interest, and you have partially covered that —

Ms AEBERSOLD — The evidence.

Mr CRISP — how long can it be sustained —
Ms AEBERSOLD — Beyond the program?

Mr CRISP — and what is your ability to support that in the longer term, and I think it comes to that.

Ms HILL — We have not evaluated it formally, and we would love to do a longitudinal study. We have just invested — thanks to the Macquarie Group Foundation — approximately $700 000 worth of research into our programs, which is available for everyone using music and the arts. We have not done the longitudinal study, but anecdotally we keep in touch with our schools. We have a schools newsletter and we keep inviting schools to our professional development events. If the Whiffenpoofs are coming to town, the US consulate lets us know and we invite our schools. We keep as much as we can a relationship with them, so we hear anecdotally that the schools are continuing to be engaged in the arts and see a value in it.

Ms AEBERSOLD — One of the other evaluation studies to mention as well on which we did a brief case study in our submission is our Harmony in Strings program at Sacred Heart primary school in Fitzroy, which is a school that has a very high percentage of non-English-speaking background students. We have a strings program — a violin and cello program — there. They have an orchestra that has been conducted by the Year 6 school captain. It has been a fantastic program. What we are doing there is looking at a four-year study or evaluation alongside the program. We are looking at the impact of students having had the instrumental music program for one, two or three years in either Years 4, 5 and 6 in primary school, and then tracking the impact that that has on their likely take-up of music education into secondary school. That is something that we are a couple of years into, so it will give us an indication at a student level rather than a school level in terms of what the longer term impact is of their likely take-up of music.

Mr ELASMAR — On the online learning platform, your submission states that The Song Room will deliver online arts resources to support implementation of the Australian curriculum. How will these online resources assist teachers to deliver music education?

Ms AEBERSOLD — Absolutely. It is very much targeted at the generalist teacher, so it is something that certainly a specialist music or arts teacher could utilise, but we have pitched it at a level so that a generalist teacher who is not currently confident in delivering music education could utilise it. Many of the resources are directed at direct student online learning, but fundamentally they are resources to build capacity of generalist teachers to deliver, so they are quite diverse. It gives teachers the ability to select what resources they feel most confident in utilising. Each of the resources has video content, so they can either decide to watch the video content and then deliver the program themselves or, if they feel somewhat less confident, they can even play the student-directed videos in the class as a stimulus for music education in the classroom as well.

In terms of music education, for example, there are a number of courses on there around composition, where both teachers and students can go on to use those resources to learn basic composition skills. It has Noteflight, which is online composition software, embedded in it so students can write compositions online. It is something that will be a really valuable resource for those teachers who are not sure where to start in terms of delivering music education.

The CHAIR — Are you monitoring the take-up of some of that, and what are the figures looking like?

Ms AEBERSOLD — Yes, absolutely. We have not formally launched it yet. The resources are metadata aligned to ESA’s back end and so to the Ultranet in Victoria. At the moment they are searchable — there are approximately 300 teaching resources available already through that portal — but we will be launching it more widely in the middle of this year. But even just through teachers finding that resource themselves through searching on their own intranet, we are getting quite a high take-up. We have some initial figures, but we are expecting that to really grow as we launch it publicly and start to promote it. The remainder of those resources will be going up and live by the end of May.

Ms MILLER — In terms of talented and gifted students, does The Song Room allow the scope to identify those students?
Ms AEBERSOLD — Yes, absolutely. Talent development is not our primary focus; there are many organisations that provide really good avenues for that. At the base what we are hoping to do is to give young people and children the opportunity to participate and those who have a particular interest or talent can bubble to the surface. We have a discretionary program of scholarships for students who perhaps need music tuition or instrument provision, but it is not our core focus. What we aim to do instead is to provide pathways, avenues and information about where they can get that support.

Ms HILL — As part of the workshop program, we try where possible to organise incursions into schools or schools to have excursions so they can see excellence, but we are about providing access and participation.

The CHAIR — What do you think is the successful ingredient of a school music program? Obviously The Song Room, in terms of what you offer, is working for you, but you have been in enough schools now to see what is working in schools. What would you be suggesting that we could be looking at in addition to the sorts of programs that you offer?

Ms AEBERSOLD — I think the most important thing is giving schools, teachers and students options, and that it is important that there is not — we have certainly found anyway — a one-size-fits-all approach. Depending on the cultural background and diversity of students, the level of numeracy and literacy, the size of the school and the teachers in the school and their confidence to take up and deliver a program, I think it is important that they have a range of options in music education from the more traditional instrumental music education through to more modern forms of music education. I think probably the fundamental ingredient from our perspective is around participation — that is, it is an engaging and inclusive program that students can feel a part of and something that brings them together. For us the primary focus is around a program that is really engaging and inclusive.

Ms TIERNEY — What are your views about at what point in a child’s education journey they should be having instrumental music offered to them? Is it at primary school?

Ms AEBERSOLD — I think absolutely primary school, but we have certainly seen great benefits in using music as a means of early literacy as well, so even in those early years — 0 to 5-year-old young people. With the use of song in developing early literacy skills for any children, particularly children who come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, we have seen significant impacts from the use of music in those early years.

Ms HILL — One of the interesting developments at the beginning of the Harmony in Strings program, which in that school was putting stringed instruments in the hands of largely Sudanese or Vietnamese students, was that the first lesson was not ‘instruments up’. It began with percussion, so the children were learning to feel confident handling the instrument, from body percussion to instrument percussion. Now it is ‘instruments up’ and they play, but we took them on a journey to get there so that they felt comfortable with it and did not feel too pressured by it, and they were engaged and enjoyed it. I think with introducing instruments it is not the age that is the issue, it is the ‘how’.

Mr CRISP — Regarding primary education, should specialist music teachers or primary teachers be teaching music in primary schools?

Ms AEBERSOLD — We need to give schools the capacity for either. If we could have specialist teachers in every school, that would be fantastic. There are some significant barriers to being able to realise that in terms of the availability of specialist teachers, the diversity of the curriculum and the decisions that principals need to make around specialisation in their schools. It is important that principals and schools have autonomy of choice around where they put their specialist teaching resources, so it is important that there is the capacity and the resources for schools to be able to employ specialists where they choose to, where they can and where there is a need, but equally we need to ensure that schools that do not have that ability nevertheless have the capacity, with generalist teachers, to be able to deliver meaningful, quality and engaging music education. That is quite feasible, and we have certainly seen evidence of that.
The CHAIR — You mentioned before, certainly in your submission, that there are approximately 390 low-SES schools that are, if you like, missing out and are prime to take up programs, which I think equates to 200,000 students. This question is more about cost. If we were to say, 'Let’s target those kids', what would it cost to run a Song Room program in every one of those schools, outlining how you structure your programs now?

Ms AEBERSOLD — We have a very cost-effective program model because of the economies of scale of being an organisation that can work across multiple schools. A lot of the teaching resources and infrastructure that we can provide to our teaching artists make it quite cost-effective for an individual school compared to employing a specialist teacher in a school. It also makes it far more viable because we can employ a teaching artist across clusters of multiple schools where, particularly in regional and rural areas, that may not be feasible.

In terms of delivering a workshop program — a teaching artist program — in schools as opposed to online delivery, which is obviously very cost-effective, on average it costs about $80 a child for a full six-month program, including all of the overhead costs. For a student doing a weekly program in a school over six months, it is around $80 a child. The costs go up somewhat in more rural and remote areas, but generally speaking that is about the average cost.

The CHAIR — Are there any economies of scale when you look at bringing groups together in terms of those numbers, if you are working with different schools in that sort of collaborative model approach?

Ms AEBERSOLD — There are additional benefits. There are not any additional economies of scale in working in a cluster because the cluster is really what enables us to have the teaching artist there.

The CHAIR — You need the minimum numbers anyway.

Ms AEBERSOLD — They would be at any particular school for a minimum of one day a week over a six-month period.

The CHAIR — What are the minimum numbers to deliver a program for $80 over six months, working with how many kids as a minimum?

Ms HILL — That is just one school.

Ms AEBERSOLD — In one particular school they would work across at least, say, six classes across the day. Most of our teaching artists would work, say, two or three days a week as a minimum, so it is more around being able to engage a teaching artist in a region who we can employ. If the resource of a school in a regional area is to be able to enable a music teacher for one day a week, it is very hard for a school to employ someone for just that one day a week who is a very highly paid specialist teacher doing one-on-one instrumental tuition, generally speaking. What we deliver is a program that can be a teaching artist program over a day, and normally you would need a cluster of at least two or three schools in an area to be able to find someone to employ to deliver that.

The CHAIR — How many kids would that mean?

Ms AEBERSOLD — We would work with around 150 children on any particular day. If it is a larger school, we might work two days in a week. It depends.

Ms HILL — We count a program unit as one day, and on that one day there might be six classes, but in a big school we might be there for three days, so we would count that as three programs.

The CHAIR — I know we have mentioned this before, but at the end of six months, when effectively you have done the work, you are out and you have done some teacher training at the same time, what is the take-up ultimately of those schools?

Ms AEBERSOLD — To self-sustain a program?
The CHAIR — Yes.

Ms AEBERSOLD — We do not have any complete data; we have ad hoc data and anecdotal data from our schools that we get feedback from. We could not say what percentage of schools take up the program themselves, because they are taking it up in different sorts of ways. We deliver a sustainability plan that we develop in partnership with the school at the end of every program. We develop that tailored plan with them, providing them with resources, capacity, ongoing support, connection and that sustainability plan to self-sustain the program, but we simply do not have the resources to then go back and follow up every school. We would love to do that, but thus far we have not had the resources to do that longitudinal study six months, a year or two years after the program to say how many are still delivering what kind of program.

The CHAIR — Because of the way you are funded, is it that at the end of six months you are pretty much out and onto the next school, or do you roll over programs into schools if the need is there?

Ms AEBERSOLD — Yes, absolutely. Probably the majority of our programs are longer than six months. We have tried, when we have looked at what the need is and what the capacity is to deliver over the next five years in our current strategic plan, to put schools into tiers. With our tier 1 and tier 2 schools for workshop programs — this is based on the outcomes from the research where we compared the schools without a program to those who had it for 6 months and those who had it for 12 to 18 months — we found there was a real stepped increase. There was an improvement after 6 months, but there was another stepped increase after 12 to 18 months. What we have looked at is the level of disadvantage, so for the most disadvantaged schools we would provide a 12-month to 18-month program, and the next tier of disadvantage would be a 6-month program plus capacity building.

In effect the teaching artist program of that weekly workshop program runs over the 6 months or the 12 to 18 months and sometimes longer in very high-need areas. The work that we do prior to that in planning and developing the partnership with the school and preparing for capacity building, and then the work we do post the workshop program in providing capacity building support, means the program runs over a longer period than that as well.

Ms HILL — It would be great to have some partnerships in place. We take a school on a journey of introducing music and arts through our program, getting a certain level of confidence, proficiency and culture change within the school, and it would be wonderful to then be able to have a pathway to that school to say, ‘Look, here is your next step. Here is the waiting music specialist teacher ready to come in’.

The CHAIR — That is an interesting place to finish from my perspective. Is there anything we have not covered that you want to add?

Ms AEBERSOLD — I cannot think of anything. Thank you very much for your time.

The CHAIR — Thank you. Well done on your work. We are all very impressed with what you are doing, so keep up the good work. Thanks for coming today and contributing to the inquiry.

Witnesses withdrew.