CORRECTED VERSION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE
Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education in Victorian schools
Mildura — 2 May 2013

Members
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Mr D. Southwick
Ms G. Tierney

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Witnesses
Mr T. Robbins, Band President,
Mr B. Warren, Member, and
Mr L. Penna, Member, Mildura District Brass Band and Mildura District Orchestra.
The CHAIR — Thank you for joining us this morning. I just need to point out a few things. Firstly, today we will be gathering information and these microphones are for Hansard to do that. You will have an opportunity to read the transcript afterwards and if there are any errors you will be able to make changes. Also, the information that is being gathered and your evidence today is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which means that you can say whatever you like without fear or favour, just like any member of Parliament in terms of the process here, but that applies only to the hearing proper.

All that sounds very formal, but from here on it is very much a discussion. As you are aware, we are really keen to find out more about what is happening in our schools in terms of music and how we can improve what is currently on offer. We know that you are certainly a very important part of the community locally and we are really keen to find out more about that. We have a number of questions for you. I will kick it off and my colleagues will then ask some other questions and then at the end if there is anything you have not covered and would like to add, feel free to do so.

Could you provide a bit of an overview of the brass band program, how many members there are with the band and how many are currently studying at school?

Mr ROBBINS — If everybody turns up on the night, I suppose we would have 30 members, approximately. We used to have a good inflow from the schools. We would get a couple come in each year and that just kicked over. They would stay for probably three or maybe four years, until they got to Year 12. We have had one who stayed locally, but usually they would head off to university and better themselves down there and virtually never come home. That was all right. It kept the band going. But in the last couple of years, the inflow from the schools seems to have dropped, because music has dropped off in the schools, it appears. So we have been struggling a bit.

We had a come-and-try session about a month ago. Two started out of that and we started them a fortnight ago. Bill has one junior also, and Len Krause, who Peter knows quite well, has a couple of juniors. It just takes time. We just build them up in time for them to disappear down to the city and that is the last we see of them. But that is all right. We do not mind that. We still need the mainstay, an older player, in each section, and that is where the numbers have gone down a little bit. Before, like I say, when the juniors came through, they would get to be reasonable sort of players before they disappeared to the city. If one of the better players disappeared for holidays or something, they could nearly take their place, but at the moment we are sort of struggling a little bit.

The CHAIR — You would have had a number of people go through over the long period that you have been incorporated, from 1890 or something?

Mr ROBBINS — Yes, coming up to 125 years the year after next, in 2015.

Mr PENNA — I find a lot of the kids who come through, though, continue on with their music in the capital cities. I know most of them have actually continued with it through community or in the university system, either studying music or actually still playing at some level.

The CHAIR — Would you have a fairly high visibility within the schools? Would the kids studying music — instrument music — know of the band?

Mr PENNA — Depending on the teacher who is in the school and their push into the community. My other role is as a schoolteacher, and a lot of the students who have come into the band over the last couple of years have come from me. It is through that direct involvement in the community band that those students come through, and that is a benefit. If the other schools are not pushing that or putting it out there we tend to not get it. I suppose the other area we have drawn a couple of students from over the last few years is out at Red Cliffs — a similar sort of situation where a brass musician is one of the teachers out there and can support that and say, ‘Here is a good spot for you to go in the community and still learn your craft’.

Ms TIERNEY — Can you give us an overview of the orchestra program?
Mr WARREN — Yes, that is my department. I have been conducting the orchestra for about the last 18 months. It was pretty well defunct before I put my hand up to take it, and in the 18 months we have built it up to 25 players in the orchestra. Half of them would be schoolchildren — not children, but you know what I mean.

Ms TIERNEY — Students?

Mr WARREN — Yes, students, mostly playing violins, and we do have a leader of the string assembly, which is a part of the orchestra. We are growing, which is great. We have got a couple of play-outs. We are playing on Mother’s Day at one of the churches for a pleasant Sunday afternoon, to bring our practice to fruition and to get the orchestra to play out. On 11 May, the day before, we are playing down at Deutschfest, which is a big thing at the Lutheran school. We are playing there too.

I have come to realise that music is a universal language, and I believe that with the kids coming up through the orchestra it comes back to the leaders of the orchestra to select music which is in their favour. It is no good me picking music that the players do not like. I ask them what they would like to play, and when they get that and we practise what they want the enthusiasm is there all the time and they are raring to go, because they are playing something that they wanted, not what I wanted. I believe that we are on a learning curve, but fortunately we are growing, because of the different instruments in the orchestra, compared to the brass in the band, which is just a little different.

Mr PENNA — I think the important thing to note about the orchestra is that it started five years ago. It is only a new ensemble, and the brass band has supported it in that time. But it came about because there was a lack of somewhere for the string players to play. There is no string education or anything in the public school up here. Private teachers are the only people they can go to. So one of the private teachers, Alison MacGregor, approached another player in the band and we sort of got our heads together and commenced the orchestra again after some recess. I do not know how many years it was since Mildura had had an orchestra. But that came out of a shortfall, that there was nowhere for the string players to play. They had a string ensemble but no bigger ensemble. So that is where the orchestra came from. It would be about four or five years ago since we commenced that in Mildura again.

Mr ELASMAR — Could you outline the importance of the brass band and orchestra to the Mildura district, and can you provide an overview of the musical expertise and experience that members of the band have and how they use these skills to contribute to music in the local community?

Mr ROBBINS — First of all the band plays out at a number of community events. We have a concert coming up on the 25th of this month actually, at the arts centre. We charge a small entry fee. We are not looking at making any money out of it, just as long as we cover our costs. But quite often public organisations and community organisations, ask the band to play at their events, openings et cetera.

There is a smaller group that is part of the brass band that plays around — I think we did 30-something play-outs last year, the smaller group — 35 play-outs I think at old people’s homes and smaller areas where the band cannot play out. I think the band did 15, was it — something like that — play-outs around the district at various events and so forth. The biggest hassle of course when you have 25 people from diverse areas is getting them all together on the same day at the same time. But if you have enough numbers, when you have a few missing you can cover them. As to the age range of the players, I think the youngest, Nicholas, would be 11 and Lenny Krause, our oldest, is 85.

Mr ELASMAR — How does the community learn from your experience and skills?

Mr PENNA — There are a few among us who can obviously teach the instruments too, so through the recruitment program we have got them. Tony has actually just taken on a teaching role himself, through his experience. He has got the stage and he has asked me a few things about it. I hand the ball over to him. Within that group we have quite a few people who can actually teach those students who come through — and adults. We also provide an avenue for adults to come back. Tony himself was taught as a student — what, until the age of about 14, 15 or something like that?
Mr ROBBINS — I did two years, and then I gave it away for 39½.

Mr PENNA — So, yes, he has come back into that community role. Another member has also done that — learnt at school up to a certain stage, then gone away for quite some time and come back. We provide, I suppose, that avenue for them to come back at a future date if they want to.

Ms MILLER — Following on from that, what are the benefits of the brass band and orchestra program for the young people who participate in it? What do you see is in it for them?

Mr WARREN — I think the younger ones gain experience, so they can pass that on. I find the problem with Mildura is that we are isolated. Again, I come back to music selection because it is very easy for someone to get unhappy and say, ‘I can’t do this; I don’t want to do this anymore’. It is very difficult in a place like this, as Tony has said, to try to get recruits in. Sometimes, as has already been said, we are going through the schools and we do get past players who have got the interest again to come in.

I guess it is for the leaders of each organisation to keep that going for the experienced ones nurturing the younger ones in the band and the orchestra, and that happens. I just think that again it comes back to us as leaders to keep their minds positive on what we are here for. We try to get out amongst the community as much as we possibly can, and I think every time we go out there is another experience for the younger ones who come through, to say, ‘We’ve done that’.

Ms MILLER — You talked about positivity. Do the younger ones see the benefit of participating in the band as a positive thing that helps them, either in their education or life learning?

Mr WARREN — Absolutely.

Mr ROBBINS — The young ones really enjoy the play-outs. You look at the local young sportsmen — they get their photos in the paper; the schools get lauded and so forth. But the top musicians, they do not get any recognition at all; it is just, ‘He plays the trumpet’, ‘He plays the violin’ or something like that. By getting the chance to play out — they really look forward to and enjoy the play-outs I think.

Ms MILLER — Do you think if there were more recognition, from what you have just said, that that might encourage more young people to participate and showcase — —

Mr ROBBINS — Yes, definitely.

Mr PENNA — I think the other thing they get out of it is self-confidence and all those personal attributes of learning instruments — turning up on time and the commitment they put into it. We have been away a couple of times to national competitions, for example, where you have to work on pieces in-depth, and there is the commitment they have to put into that — and also trying things differently, like kids marching. When they first started, they turned their noses up, but we have a couple of 17 and 18-year-olds — they are the ones who are actually driving us to get more marching practice so that they can become better at it. Marching is a thing that has gone to the side, but I notice that those two students are driving us to make sure we get extra marching practice and that sort of thing. We are in the process of changing the way we do things to suit those young people and their demands.

It is the same with music selection. They also have a fairly active say in the organisation; they are free to come up to us at any stage. Some of the music selections for the band and probably the orchestra too have come from suggestions from those students.

Mr CRISP — I am going to bring it back a little to our focus, which is music education in schools. What strategies can you suggest to improve the delivery of music education in rural and regional schools?

Mr WARREN — To me it comes back to what Leigh has already said. If you get a music teacher at one of the schools who is not interested in a brass band situation, then he is not going to push it. I do not know how you overcome it. But we are fortunate in this place to have a couple of teachers, as has already been said, who do push the students to the brass band, or they will push them to the orchestra. If we know
that there is someone interested, then we will go to the ends of the earth to get them or contact them to say, ‘Are you interested? We’ll help you’. The band supplies the instrument, so the participant does not have to pay out hundreds of dollars for an instrument. In the orchestra most of the players own their own instruments, which is just a little bit different to the band.

As the committee for the band we have just had a drive; that has already been said. We have sent leaflets out to every school in the area saying, ‘This is the brass band; this is what we do. We’ll teach you for nothing, we’ll supply an instrument and we’ll maintain the instrument’. We just hope that that is going to fall into some of the cracks where we cannot go personally. That is what has happened.

Again, it is also the isolation. I think children are different now to what they were years ago with brass bands and orchestras. I can see in some places brass bands are dying out because it is the old school; it is not the modern thing. But Leigh selects music that is modern, and that keeps the younger ones in the band and the orchestra interested in staying there. I think once you have them, you have to keep them there. That is the way I sort of look at it.

**Mr PENNA** — The key is the personnel who are teaching them. We can fund all that sort of stuff. I know through experience of other areas, like, for example, a place called Gunnedah in New South Wales, where they have this massive junior band that would blow your socks off — they actually competed and won this year’s Australian B-grade championships, which meant competing against basically the best bands in Australia. They are an under-18 band. It came from the drive within the schools — this community had this massive and great-sounding band. The importance of the community bands comes from the drive within music education. Sadly, it is lacking in this way. I do it myself, along with one other member, but I talk to staff in my role as a teacher also and they say, ‘Yeah, we’ll give them that’, and that is about all the effort they put into it, even though they know the outcomes they can get by participating in those community bands. They have all been through it themselves in some form. They tend to be quite busy within their roles in the schools, and it is just an add-on, on top of their roles instead of part of it.

**Mr ROBBINS** — The way I see it in schools with students is that some kids are good at sport, some kids are good at maths, some kids are good at English, some kids are good at music and some kids are good at art. The music part of it in the last few years just seems to have dropped off completely. I do not know why. I have asked around the district over the last year or so, and every parent says, ‘Oh, we would love to have more music in schools’, but it is not happening.

**The CHAIR** — You cannot put that down to any one thing?

**Mr ROBBINS** — I would say it is just a gradual decline over the last seven or eight years — just a gradual thing.

**The CHAIR** — Leigh, you are more in touch with what is happening in the actual schools themselves.

**Mr PENNA** — I think schools are becoming so busy with everything, such as new initiatives. I had one come across the desk this morning. They are just spread so thinly. The resources and the manpower is just spread thinly across everything — drug education, driver education, whatever other education you have. It is just getting so broad that things narrow down and perhaps are not done as well as they used to be. I went through a system, when I learnt, that was a lot narrower. There was not as broad a spectrum within the education department or the education setting, and as it has got broader, things have narrowed down.

**The CHAIR** — Tony, are you saying that has happened at the secondary level or the primary level, or both? Because you recruit at all levels.

**Mr ROBBINS** — Both, really, but mainly primary, because if you are going to start music, the younger you get them the better. It will show out quicker at a younger age, and that is the trend that they go down. It is the same with anything they do, like sports, for instance, the kids that are going to be good runners show out in primary school. It is the same with music. This young bloke I have just started teaching — I teach both brother and sister — is just ‘wow’. He just naturally plays the instrument and
grabs hold of it and looks like he is going to be a good player. His sister is two years younger, and I do not know yet, but she does not seem quite up to it. He just seems the natural.

**The CHAIR** — Just in terms of community bands in general, do you have an informal network or do you chat with other community bands around the region or around Victoria in a broader sense? Do you have a sense of how they are going and whether they are facing the same sort of issues?

**Mr PENNA** — Definitely all community bands and community music organisations, even some of the musical societies, are dropping off in numbers. Teenage students are now working a lot more, and that is another factor that has come into the decline of bands in areas around the state. We were in close communication with several bands in the area. We had members come across from Renmark; we used to have a good liaison with Broken Hill. In actual fact we used to travel up to Broken Hill for practice on a Thursday night every now and then, and we have done that with Ouyen also. So we are in communication with those bands all the time. Through the banding league, the VBL, we often get to hear what is going on in other communities, not that there is much there. They are all in the same boat: Renmark is about to fold. They cannot get any juniors there in the South Australian system. It is the same thing. Renmark has a great swing band, but those kids are not getting filtered into other community things. It all depends on the drive of the teacher at the time.

**Mr ROBBINS** — We go across and support Renmark if they have got a major player. Many of our members go across. It is the same with Ouyen, although we have not been to Ouyen for 12 months, I suppose.

**Mr PENNA** — A little while.

**Mr ROBBINS** — Since the vanilla slice stopped! The isolation means it is only really Broken Hill, Ouyen or Renmark.

**The CHAIR** — That has concluded our questions. Is there anything that you want to add that we have not covered already?

**Mr ROBBINS** — I would just like to mention Jess Rodda. She started off — —

I do not know where she did her schooling. Where did she do it?

**Mr PENNA** — She started off at one of the primary schools, but I cannot remember which one. She went through one of our tutors, Len Krause, and has gone on to bigger and better things, hasn’t she?

**Mr ROBBINS** — Yes, she went to Melbourne, then to New Zealand and now she is in America playing the tuba. For a young lady, she has done very well. It is unusual for a lady to play the tuba.

**Mr PENNA** — There are benefits in being in community bands over time, and I know of about five or six players who have gone on to be professionals and to do even bigger and better things with their music. Then we have other students there. There is a Rhodes scholar from this district. He was involved in everything, but one of his things was the community band. I worked with his mother who said he is constantly talking about his experience in the community band and the stuff he got out of that. He was a student who was going to go onto higher places anyway, but he was prepared to put the time and the commitment in — and they are the things that I think are important out of music education. It is not just the musical side, but everything you get out of it like the enjoyment.

**Mr ROBBINS** — He was one of those fortunate young blokes who was top at sport, he was top at music and he ended up a Rhodes scholar as well.

**Mr WARREN** — I think one of the most rewarding things for me is that when you teach young people, you get them to a standard where they come into the band and there they are, and you can say, ‘Gee, it was worth my time and effort to get them to that standard’ and it is then taken over by the Musical Director. Leigh then takes it over in our band rehearsals. I have been doing it for a lot of years, but it is just
being able to say, ‘I was a little part of that bloke or that little girl or whatever’. It is rewarding for me and it gives me the boost to keep going, because you can see in their education what you have given them is expanding and it is going to explode. It does explode, because they get to a point in their experience when all of a sudden one day it is too hard or something clicks in their mind and bang, they have got it and away they go. To me, it is just a rewarding situation to be in.

The CHAIR — One last quick question to finish: do you think government has a role to play in lifting the image of music, if you like? Governments can do a lot of things and often people say, ‘Funding, more money’; but other than that, does government have a role in lifting the image and the reputation around what the sorts of things that you have on offer provide for young people, whether that be through promoting competition, scholarships, whatever it might be?

Mr PENNA — Yes, definitely. You take the funding instance, for example., I have been down the path of sport and rec. They offer uniform grants. I have been down that path and had discussions with them. We cannot get that uniform grant, so you have a community organisation that requires uniforms — it is not cheap; it costs $250 to outfit someone — but we cannot get them because we are not a sporting or a physical recreation group. However, we are still providing the same things without the physical element. If you take banding, it is physical. There are studies that say that brass instruments and wind instruments improve lung capacity and all that sort of stuff. But we cannot get those grants. There are all these sporting grants, but the arts and culture grants are either directed at professional organisations, not community organisations, or at professional artists. Both through the school and through the band over the years I have got a lot of grants, but there is nothing there that you can really grasp as a community organisation. It is a big hole in the whole grants scheme that is out there. That is my opinion.

Mr WARREN — I would agree with that.

Mr PENNA — We can get equipment — chairs and things like that. That is not a problem. But the nitty-gritty of what we do, we cannot get grants for. You are looking at $18 000 to replace a tuba. A band has four of them, let alone all the other instruments. That has to come out of the goodwill of the community or the council or whoever is supporting us. We are fortunate in this community that someone back in the 1970s was a bright spark and started bingo in town. We just live off the back of that, from that person and his idea of 30 years ago. If we did not have that, we would not survive. We have had grants for things, but I think the government, in terms of that, needs to look at how it can support us a bit better. You have sport over there and you have the professional artists over here. It is just the middle one that is missing.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much. That is a really good place to finish. Thanks for coming along and providing the information today. Good luck with the continuing work you are doing. It is certainly supporting and benefiting the broader community out there. Well done.

Mr PENNA — Thanks for the opportunity.

Witnesses withdrew.