EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Mildura — 2 May 2013

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Dr J. Bowditch, President, Mildura Eisteddfod Society.
The CHAIR — I will, firstly, thank you for coming to appear before the committee today. Hansard is recording the evidence today, and you will have an opportunity to review that transcript and make any changes that need to be made. Also I have to point out that the evidence you give is covered by what we call parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. That applies to the information you give in the hearing proper, not outside the hearing. We are very keen to hear about the program, the eisteddfod society and some of your own experiences. We have a number of questions for you today. Then if we have not covered something that you wish to cover, we will give you that opportunity at the end.

If I may, I will kick off with the first question. Could you provide an overview of the Mildura Eisteddfod and indicate approximately how many schools and students participate in the component of the eisteddfod each year? Could you add a little bit about how long it has been going?

Dr BOWDITCH — The eisteddfod has been going continuously for 35 years. This is the 35th year. It was started originally by music teachers wanting a performance opportunity for their students. This is my fourth year as President of that all-volunteer management. We run in July. It started off as a three-day competition. We are up to about 23 days now. With various pressures, I do not see any sign of that getting smaller but a continuing expansion gradually as we expand to cope with issues of equity and access for, shall we say, non-elitist forms of the performing arts. We are trying to be inclusive in our performance. We cover disciplines of vocal music. We split that last year for the first time into a classical component and a contemporary component, and ran them separately. We will be doing that again this year. We have instrumental music, pianoforte as a separate discipline, speech and drama, and a dance and a choral program for both schools and adult choirs. That is the program. Growth areas undoubtedly are vocal competition and dance in this town. In this town little girls want to sing and dance.

The CHAIR — Why do you think that is?

Dr BOWDITCH — Partly because we have had a tradition of it and we have had the teachers here. There has been a strong tradition of producing singers who perform locally but also a stream of singers going out to have careers both nationally and internationally. I will not bore you with reciting their names. Some of them are up-and-coming stars in Melbourne at the moment. But I think locally it has been a bit of a powerhouse in that area. A couple of adjudicators, particularly in the vocal area, have commented on that. Perhaps we are not even capitalising on that enough to make this area a hub for vocal education in the younger age groups. There is plenty of vocal education once they get to tertiary level outside of this town, but there are not good hubs for vocal education.

The CHAIR — Do you think some of the focus it has had on television with reality programs — —

Dr BOWDITCH — Undoubtedly. That has made a huge difference, particularly in the contemporary vocal genre. Originally our program was a classical vocal program with a bit of country and western thrown in as an add-on. Now the trend is the reverse of that. The classical program will always be maintained, but it will not be the dominant feature now because of the features you have spoken about — the popularity of these programs and the many little girls wanting to do that. This is a growing area, this contemporary genre, and it is really expanding. Currently it is about 50-50 on the numbers going into those two sections. We anticipate it will be about 30-60 in the future.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the benefits in your eyes in terms of young people going through this program and the benefits for the wider manager of community?

Dr BOWDITCH — This is personal belief. I believe this is a strong bit of social glue in the fabric of a community that has had the school of hard knocks in the last couple of years with the drought, downsizing and water issues. This is one of the iconic community events that holds the community together a bit through its children, as well as the participation of adults to some degree. That is what I feel its benefit is. Certainly for the individual student we try to seek two things out of it. It is a performance opportunity for them and it allows them to overcome the demons of performing on the stage. Many of these kids who
come with their school, for example, have never appeared on a stage before and that is reflected in the audience that we get.

For some events like primary school choirs we can calculate our audience numbers. For each child there will be two parents and one grandparent so we going to get an audience of three for that. We work out how much money we are going to take on the day just from knowing the choir numbers. The community does come and support those sorts of things.

Mr CRISP — The committee understands your son’s benefit from his involvement in music. Can you tell the committee about your son’s experience with music?

Dr BOWDITCH — From my second marriage I have a son and a daughter; the son is 15. This child went to a very good school for music, the Mildura South Primary School, which is the one primary school that has an excellent music program in this district. He was struggling at the bottom of his class, but at home I had bought a tin whistle for him and a CD and we did half an hour a day. In Year 4 suddenly the recorder came out, which has the same fingering, and instead of being rock bottom as he was expected to be he was suddenly the top of the class because he had done six months on this tin whistle. With that his self-esteem went straight up.

However, he struggled on through primary school and started to resent learning and got the usual response that you get for his problem. He has the problem of dysgraphia, meaning inability to write. It has a specific symptom pattern and he also has a mixed learning disability which essentially from what we can work out is associated with poor working memory. His memory is so bad that he cannot remember the fact that he got first prize in the eisteddfod for reading and speech and drama last year. I will tell this child to go down to his room, pick up his breakfast drink and bring it back to me and he will have forgotten what he went there for by the time he gets down the corridor. He has a terrible memory.

His disability was not picked up until he got to secondary school and the primary school was devastated to know that they had missed it. They are a caring school and they were really upset that they had missed it, but it was fairly typical. They have since picked up another child I have learnt since by looking for the very thing — this dysgraphia — which has the symptom complex of wondering writing, use of upper case letters, inability to use the left-hand margin. It is analogous to a computer with a chip that is faulty. He cannot mechanically put the ideas that are here down there onto the piece of paper. The mechanism is not the same. It is not in his arms; it is in his brain. How to treat it is problematic; nobody really knows. He has had writing therapy but he still cannot write to achieve what you and I would achieve. His output is five words a minute to his peers’ 25 words a minute. He is so concerned with symbols that he forgets the ideas that he is writing about. That is why they get to resent learning.

So I have this child to struggle with. I have to get him through to useful adulthood, and I think music has been an enormous part of that. He is currently doing Grade 6 in two instruments. He plays four or five instruments. He plays standard guitar, classical guitar and clarinet, as well as bagpipes and the tin whistle. At Grade 6 you are starting to get to serious music levels. He does not want a career in music. He could not be a performance musician because he does not have the memory to remember pieces; he has to play by sight reading. He processes his information visually and not through his auditory system.

The occupational therapist we use is a woman based in Adelaide. She is convinced that he would be much worse with his disability than he is if I had not pushed music with him as a younger person. To me music is really important for this kid, particularly for his memory. I do not know if you know or have taken evidence on the neuroscience of music. I have made a few notes here, if you would indulge me.

The CHAIR — Yes, please.

Dr BOWDITCH — You will hear lots of claims about music and brain recognition. The problem is that most of those can be destroyed by a decent sceptic’s argument fairly readily, so the evidence for music’s impact on brain development and learning is tenuous. But I think there is sufficient evidence there if you look for it. There are four papers I would like to draw to your attention. I have a copy if you want it.
The first is an article from 2001 entitled ‘Music and the brain in childhood development’ from a publication, *Childhood Education*. The researchers found:

… there was a strong correlation of musical exposure before the age of seven, and a great increase in the size of the corpus callosum.

Corpus callosum is the structure that joins the two halves of the brain and has connections going from side to side. An increase in the size is code for an increase in the number of connections, so there is more activity between the two halves of the brain in people who learn music. It goes on to say:

This suggests the merging between the spatial-emotional-tonal processing of the right brain and the linguistical processing of the left brain. This large relaying across many different areas of the brain might contribute to music’s ability to aid in memory function.

That is important to me. The connection between music and language is also important, and I will come to that. The child’s reports have tended to be terrible, but he has always had straight As for the Italian he is learning at secondary school. So a language other than English, which unfortunately Mildura South Primary could not provide because there were not enough teachers, is something that he does not struggle with. I suspect that is due to his musical persistence.

The second paper is from *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* in 2009. It concludes that:

Long-term instrumental music training is an intense, multisensory and motor experience that offers an ideal opportunity to study structural brain plasticity …

If I could just explain what brain plasticity is. I am a medical doctor; my specialty was reproductive science. Brain plasticity was something that I was taught did not exist. If you had a stroke, that was it; you could never be fixed. I graduated in 1971. In the last 40 years, the concept of brain plasticity, where if you damage part of the brain or you have an area that is not functioning, you can, by a process of educating other parts of the brain, change the plastic diversion, if you like, and expansion. You can change the brain to function for the areas that are damaged. That is well proven now. That is the current belief. The previous belief was that once you got to, say, age 20, and it was mature, if you damaged it you could not repair it. We now believe you can repair it. It is hard, but it can be done. That is the concept of brain plasticity. So, according to the paper, brain plasticity correlates:

… with behavioural changes induced by training —

and that is music. It goes on to say:

These findings … suggest that structural brain differences in adult experts (whether musicians or experts in other areas) are likely due to training-induced plasticity.

That for all-comers — not just children with a disability — is one of the important reasons that they should be studying practical music, I believe.

In January this year, probably the most important of these three papers was published in *The Journal of Neuroscience* by a reputable university in Canada. The paper suggested that for early musical training and white-matter plasticity in the corpus callosum — that is the structure that joins the two halves of the brain, a really important structure — there is evidence that there is a sensitive period to undertake this training. That sensitive period is from six to eight years of age. That has created a lot of excitement and is good evidence that would be difficult for a sceptic to disprove, I believe.

The other area that I touched on is music and early language acquisition. There was a paper published in September of last year that says:

Language is typically viewed as fundamental to human intelligence.

We all accept that. Music on the other hand:

… is often treated as an ancillary ability — one dependent on or derivative of language.
This paper turns that on its head. It says:

… existing studies present a compelling case that musical hearing and ability is essential to language acquisition —

not the other way round. Again, I think that relates to my son Karl’s case in handling Italian, when he has difficulty with everything else — a language other than his own. It is because he was musically skilled when he started trying to acquire a language other than English.

The authors of that paper argue that music learning matches the speed and effort of language acquisition and conclude that music merits a central place in our understanding of human development. I do not know whether you want to note those references.

Dr BOWDITCH — The highlights are mine. Thank you for bearing with me on that. I believe they are really important bits of evidence.

Dr BOWDITCH — They encapsulate why I believe music is so important to this child. I have had to basically cease his musical education at school. Most of it is done outside school. He spends three and a half hours in lessons a week doing actual music practice. He also plays in an orchestra and a guitar duet — that is another three hours — and I make him practise for half an hour a day, and on both instruments another hour a day, six days a week.

Dr BOWDITCH — If I give you the figure that I am aware of, it will astound you. It is supposed to be 3 to 8 per cent. Obviously the majority of those are just not detected. I suspect my eldest son from my first marriage, who is 38, had the same disability; it was just not detected. I was too busy running a practice. He just got the typical response that he was letting his team down and not really trying hard enough. These children are trying very, very hard and getting frustrated because they do not get anywhere with this problem of transferring the symbols.

Mr ELASMAR — What strategies can you suggest to improve the delivery of music education in rural and regional schools?

Dr BOWDITCH — You may find my suggestion a bit extreme, but I sent it into Simon Crean’s inquiry on the Arts — that is, I believe it should be mandated that every child studies the practice of music, which means playing or singing, from prep through to Year 12. I believe it is as important as physical education, which we accept as part of the child’s overall education. I believe that would assist in some of the areas that we are deficient in in our education — namely, second languages and mathematics.

Ms MILLER — Dr Bowditch, thank you for sharing your personal experience. It was really very insightful. I have a health-care background myself, so I totally appreciate where you are coming from. My question is: do you believe students in rural and regional Victoria receive adequate opportunities to attend a range of live music and arts performances, and if not, what additional opportunities would you like to see offered?

Dr BOWDITCH — I believe the performances are there. That is the first thing I would say. The second thing is that for a child to attend, the child cannot leave school or leave the home and go into town. There has to be a teacher or a parent with the motivation to take them. That, I think, is the area that needs attention.

Let me give you an example here. We are finding in our instrumental area of the performance in the eisteddfod that brass is failing — brass instruments. This town has a proud tradition of a brass band that...
goes back a long, long way, yet in our brass section we have two, three competitors; the same 10-year-old, 11-year-old or 12-year-old this year will win the Len Krause award, because he is the only one that turns up with a trumpet. He happens to be Len’s pupil, but that is beside the point. Len would willingly give it to anybody else. One teacher offered free brass tuition to any student at the South and got no takers.

There is a strong brass band at a Robinvale school. I personally canvassed that school last year. I got verbal acceptance: ‘Thank you for your interest. We’d be delighted to support you’. I spoke to the head of music, I spoke to the teacher who runs the brass band — he is a Tongan man — and I said, ‘We have a scholarship, and we nominate the instrumental type that it will go to this year. It is $500, and that will go to a student to further their musical education. If you bring your band up, I am happy to make that for brass this year’. I got a ‘Yes, three bags full’.

Ms MILLER — We heard earlier that the instruments and uniforms are quite expensive. Do you think that perhaps the cost may be a barrier to people getting into the brass domain? What is in the yellow envelope?

Dr BOWDITCH — The original name for that instrument — and that is what I started my son on — is penny whistle. That says it all about cost. Its proper name is a flageolet, or tin whistle.

Ms MILLER — Is that instrument in a brass band?

Dr BOWDITCH — That can be to start children off. It has the same fingering as a recorder, and they can make wonderful music with it. Yes, they can play it. The current Mildura District Orchestra, which is a fledgling orchestra, is looking for recorder players to put that haunting little bit in the Lord of the Rings music — you all know that tune, that lilting bit; that is done on a recorder. They have to get a couple of 90-year-olds from the University of the Third Age to do it because there are not enough young recorder players to go along and do it.

Sure, if a child takes sufficient interest in an instrument, some instruments are exceedingly expensive, such as the double-reed instruments; the oboes and the clarinets are very expensive. Not clarinets, I beg your pardon, but bassoons are almost double the cost of a clarinet, which is expensive enough. But we do not have any double-reed instruments in this town. Again, we have a scholarship of $500 waiting to be picked up by any child that will play it. We had a little Aboriginal girl that took it on for two years, but then could not keep the motivation going. So we are still keen to see and promote double-reed playing and get somebody into the orchestra.

Mr ELASMAR — Is this made from cane?

Dr BOWDITCH — It can be; you can make them from wood. This is a tin whistle. That costs $4. They are called penny whistles because they used to cost a penny a hundred years ago.

Ms TIERNEY — Are there any schools that do not participate in the eisteddfod?

Dr BOWDITCH — Yes.

Ms TIERNEY — What are the reasons?

Dr BOWDITCH — Apathy. You know, I do not want to name names, but in one school that certainly should be in it, the principal of music teaching will not have a bar of the eisteddfod — because it is not on the curriculum, there is nothing in it for him. There is plenty in it for his students, but there is nothing in it for him. Whereas we have very good support from others. Red Cliffs Primary School — I think you will have struck some of the individuals from there — is an excellent supporter, from the principal to the musicians. They bewail the fact that they do not have funding to teach all the instruments that the students would like. They teach brass and they teach some woodwind, but they cannot teach piano, for example; and they teach guitar. They are an excellent supporter. They really try. That is in the public sphere.
In the private sphere, Trinity Lutheran College is an excellent supporter. Like anything, there is a spectrum, ranging from those who really support us, and we really appreciate them. They do it for their students — they do not do it because we say nice things to them — and their students benefit from it.

**Mr CRISP** — What support should schools give to teachers who are preparing our students for the eisteddfod?

**Dr BOWDITCH** — That is a really good question, because a lot of kids get their only performance opportunity by being in a school choir. We have introduced for primary schools a thing called the Big Sing. I do not know if you remember that from last year, when we did it for the first time at the suggestion of the previous year’s adjudicator. She said, ‘Kids need to be having fun when they do this, so why don’t you at the end of your morning’s performance at primary schools give them a song that they’ve had for a few weeks, put all the kids together on the floor, and the adjudicator gets up and conducts it and they have a great time?’. Sure enough, we got 219 kids up the first time, and they had a great time singing the song.

We are doing it again this year, and we have doubled the number of schools that are going to participate, because the others thought, ‘We ought to be in that. We should have made the effort’. That is going to be a growth area. We are trying to turn our school choral day into a fun outing for the kids. We have told them to bring a lunch, and we will go past lunchtime and get them back to school in time to get the 3 o’clock bus. For a vast majority of those children, that will be the only time they will perform anything in front of the public, which includes their mums and dads and grandpas and grandmas, in their primary school career, apart from the school concert, but as a public outing, that will be the only opportunity, I think. It is fantastic for their development. That is an area that we are trying to grow and to promote. I am sorry, was there more to that question?

**Mr CRISP** — No, I think that was it.

**The CHAIR** — Can you just talk us through how the program of the eisteddfod is funded?

**Dr BOWDITCH** — Yes. It is funded by the state government very generously through a grant that is administered through South Street. I think $250 000 went for all Victorian eisteddfods. Victoria is unique in that it has that funding, and we get it on a per capita basis, depending on how many students we have in it. We have about 2500 performers over the whole of our eisteddfod. Then local government funds us; then we have private sponsors — the local paper and the local petrol distributor are major sponsors; and then a whole range of businesses and individuals support us on a smaller scale. That allows us to cope. We have been funded for survival, and we are trying to institute a change to funding for expansion. To that end we successfully got deductible gift recipient status last year, and we are now looking to tap into the philanthropic funds, which will allow us an expansionary role, I believe.

**The CHAIR** — Is there anything that you wanted to say in conclusion that we have not covered already?

**Dr BOWDITCH** — No, I do not think so. I think education and its one-size-fits-all approach works pretty well for students who do not have some form of disability. I was surprised when I read that 3 to 8 per cent statistic for dysgraphia. It simply does not seem to ring true, but the researchers insist that it is, and most are not discovered. Now that is keeping out a whole host of other disabilities. A child with a disability of some sort or other probably sits in about every 10th school seat, or it could be more. The overall pattern of education does not fit that 10 per cent of kids. It really needs tailoring for them.

Music is the one thing that would fit them all. It seems to have these neuro-scientific benefits. You can look at it outside of a scientific perspective, but there seems to be sufficient evidence there to say this should be promoted for the benefit of this group, as well as for ordinary children, and the benefits to society of improving their general learning would be immense. But I believe it requires a powerful initiative to get it in at that early stage. The evidence is there: you need to start by seven years of age and you need to keep it going.
The CHAIR — That is a great place to finish. Thank you very much for coming along. It has been very insightful and very informative certainly for our work. We wanted particularly to wish you well for the competition, which I know is kicking off in a few weeks’ time.

Dr BOWDITCH — Thank you very much indeed. It has been a pleasure to be here.

Witness withdrew.