EDUCATION AND TRAINING COMMITTEE

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

Melbourne — 9 April 2013

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Mr R. Burke, Head of School, and
Professor T. Gould, Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music, Monash University.
The CHAIR — Firstly, thank you for coming along today to appear before the committee. You are lucky last today, but we are certainly very grateful that you were able to come along. Thank you for your submission as well. Just in terms of process, we will ask you for a brief opening statement and then we have some questions for you. Hansard will be recording today’s hearing. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript and make any changes that need to be made. I also need to point out that the evidence you give today is covered by parliamentary privilege, which is the same privilege afforded to members of Parliament. So between these four walls you are safe, but that does not apply outside this hearing. I might hand over to you for a brief opening statement and then we will get into some questions.

Mr BURKE — Sure. As you know, we are from Monash University. Our thinking in a way parallels education music education in schools. The vice-chancellor, Ed Byrne, and the chancellor, Alan Finkel, have made it a priority at Monash to promote music because they believe a great and balanced university is inclusive of creative arts. We are very good at sciences; we are very good at medicine and those areas of study and research. But for us to be on the international stage and to compete with the other universities, and to contribute to the cultural aspect of our society, we need to have a really strong school of music and also offer a point of difference to other institutions.

Having said that, the vice-chancellor and Monash University are putting a lot of money into the school of music. They are going to put a new building together and things like that. So it is very important to Monash University to promote music. In parallel to education I think it is really important that the government looks at music education and that every school student has a music education.

I state in my report that I think it is really important that students learn to sing as a basic tool set, because they learn to vocalise and in that learning process they internalise. The whole process of learning by vocalising, I think, is a really important aspect of the learning process. It is also important for their memory. I also wrote down memory coordination of cognitive information, rhythm and listening, creative skills and music comprehension.

I also think that it is very important that we educate our students to be culturally aware, and music is a really important element of that. Maybe Tony can elaborate on that.

Prof. GOULD — Thanks, Rob. I have moved around in my life from one institution to another. They have not removed me; I have done so by choice. It occurs to me as I get older and learn more about education that the principal aspect for me is relevance to culture and society. Music education should be relevant to society culturally. I say that because there are still institutions with what I would call a museum culture. I love museums, but I think in terms of music we have to be relevant to society. This is not to denigrate Beethoven or Bach, whom I love dearly, but I think that schools at the secondary level — and in fact at the primary level — need to be thinking contemporarily, in the sense that we cannot have an imbalance between old and new in music. I think we have to start with the new.

The teaching of music chronologically is a very antiquated way of teaching music in my opinion — that is, starting with the Renaissance and then the Baroque. I think that should be dismissed summarily, mainly because you will never get to the 21st century. I think there is teaching in some schools that still adopts the principle that if you cannot play Beethoven, you cannot play the music that follows it. I do not actually believe that for a second. I think a more contemporary thinking music school is a better school than a historical one — not to dismiss history.

The place that I am in at the moment has the view that relevance is the essence of teaching music. Rob has mentioned a few details about choral singing, and I support that totally. There is still a division, or a schism if you like, in music education in private and state schools, if I may say so. That is a debate that is worth having.

I also think that there are some issues with teachers teaching students about rock and pop music. It strikes me that the students probably know more about rock music than the teachers do, frequently. I was associated with a wonderful secondary school head of a private school, I have to say, and her philosophy was, ‘Let’s teach students something they do not know, rather than something that they do know’. In other words, educate. I will leave it at that.

The CHAIR — Excellent, that is great. It is probably a good lead-in to what I want, to kick off my questions, in regard to where you see the current framework of music education in our schools now in terms of
the extent and the quality of programs in our schools, particularly in our secondary and private schools, and what you believe should be the priorities for school music education in Victoria.

Mr BURKE — Obviously I think it is very varied between the schools. A lot of the private schools have very good music departments. Schools like Blackburn High School, McKinnon High School, Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School, play a major role and it gives an opportunity for the students to go to those schools, that do not have the opportunity at other schools. They play a very important role, especially the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School.

Generally, I do not note the extent of education at schools, but I do visit a lot of schools, like Balwyn High School, because we recruit. I personally think it is very important that the students get a music education from a very early age.

The CHAIR — Would you say that in Victoria we are lacking that opportunity at the primary levels?

Mr BURKE — Yes.

The CHAIR — What could we be doing at those levels to give young people a taste of music to, hopefully, then pursue that further?

Prof. GOULD — I think it boils down, obviously a lot of things do, to money. That is the first item, which I put aside; I am not very good at it anyway. It is the teaching profession that maybe needs to be looked at in a very broad fashion.

For example, if we are thinking in a temporary way about music — and this is not really new thinking, I have to say — that there is a lot to be said for creative music-making at an early age rather than learning the classical repertoire off the page, which I also love.

One of the problems is that the education system — I think this is still true — has not attended, as well as it should have, to the art of creative music-making. I am talking about improvisation, and people have various opinions about what improvisation is. Is it mucking about? I guess it is at an early stage, just to open people’s ears to things. It is much more than that later on when it gets to tertiary education. It is a very serious art form.

I think that is where the bottom line is for me, in primary and in secondary education, that people still — if I may, with great respect to all of those hardworking teachers — do not have a grasp of what it means to improvise in a contemporary way without just getting a whole bunch of percussion instruments in the secondary school and beating the hell out of them. I think there is much more to it than that.

As Rob said, it depends on the teaching, and it depends on, I hate to say this, money. We can talk about the demography of Melbourne and what happens on the other side of the river, if I can put it that way. It is happening that teachers are either being beaten into submission in some cases, saying, ‘We are going to teach you something you do not know, or just let you go along with it’. I speak to a lot of secondary principals on the other side of the river and they despair, I have to say, at the whole notion of attitude and cultural enrichment. I do not know how you solve that, but I think music would play a very important part in that re-education, if you like, or call it de-education first and then re-education. Music has a fundamental role to play in that right across the state.

The problem is, of course, that it is an intangible art. You cannot measure the success in an electoral three or four years; you have to wait. It is really deep seated in this country that it is very important to be patient but just build up the kind of cultural and sociological education disputes. I think music can play a fundamental role in that.

Mr BURKE — To give you an example, I have three kids and everyone thinks my kids are talented, but they grew up in a musical environment where they listen to music. I just got them to sing and it made it so much easier for them to learn an instrument because they could sing, and they sang along to music. When they go to choir, people say, ‘You have got a great voice’ but at a very early age they learnt to match when they vocalised and they also learnt a sense of rhythm. It made a huge difference to their self-confidence in many ways. To me that is the fundamental of ear training. As an education, as they get older they have the skill sets if they have the opportunity to learn music.

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Ms MILLER — Following on from that, talking about enrolments, could you describe the demand for a bachelor of music degree at Monash and the trend in student enrolments?

Mr BURKE — This is something that I do a lot of, and I have worked with Helen Champion, finding out what is happening at the VCE level. We have had an upward trend at Monash. I have been working at Monash since I started as a lecturer in about 2002. I have seen where we have struggled to get students, and we did not take many students. Now we have around 650 students auditioning for around 120 spots.

Ms MILLER — Have these musical programs, like the TV programs, had an influence on that, would you say? Or do you think it is a general progression of the Arts?

Mr BURKE — I think maybe it is. We have taken it from other institutions, from ANU. I think there is more interest in music and also the students are aware that doing a B.Mus. gives them transferable skills, because we are part of the Arts Faculty. Students come in and they can actually do electives as well, whether it be in languages or whatever.

It is that whole importance of an education, but a lot of them want to do music as a major, knowing that when they come out they have the skill sets to do music and have another career in that as well. They have got skill sets to do that.

Ms MILLER — Just on that, when we look at the Arts we have performance arts, visual arts, musical arts. If you were to look at those three separately in terms of the trend in growth, would the musical component be the lower growth, as compared to the other two, or would it be the highest?

Prof. GOULD — Do you mean performance?

Ms MILLER — Yes, like dance.

Mr BURKE — It is very hard for me to make that judgement. I do deal with fine art and the faculty of art and design. Graphic design is very popular, of course, because you can see a tangible career at the end. You can do that with music, but from what we have seen, we have had huge interest in it and the quality of the students has risen. The quality of the students we are getting at Monash is very high now.

The CHAIR — Do you want to ask your question on career pathways now?

Ms MILLER — Yes, because it kind of leads into that. Could you provide the committee with an idea of the types of likely career that students studying for a bachelor of music will enter into?

Mr BURKE — Okay. On our website we have a huge list, and I was told by a recent review that it was highly inappropriate to list the careers, but obviously teaching. I did a survey — we had 120 students do the survey — and 99% said they would teach.

The CHAIR — Okay.

Mr BURKE — So that is a really important thing — teach music. Then there is career and performance. But I think it is that balance of having a teaching career, a performance career, composition, writing jingles, being involved in technology — I think music technology such as iTunes — and festivals — is a really important thing. It is those transferable skills that are really important. We get approached by McKinsey. I put this in my report. The head of McKinsey came and saw me and said, ‘Do you have any students?’ I said, ‘Yes, I have some students’. One of them got accepted into their training program and then became a Rhodes scholar. He did music first, but he is not going to be a musician. He is a very smart person. He did a music degree because he knew that that part of his education was really important. It is about improvisation, free thinking and being able to make instantaneous decisions. Music is also about being very disciplined and being a perfectionist. Those skill sets are really important, whether you are going to have a career in music or you go on to other careers.

Ms MILLER — Your opening comment was about the fact that everyone should sing.

Mr BURKE — Yes.
Ms MILLER — I made that comment earlier today as part of this inquiry. Do you believe that if that is done early on in life, in primary school, at a very early age, it complements a mathematical, scientific and life-learning brain, if you will, as opposed to not?

Mr BURKE — Yes.

Ms MILLER — Certainly in secondary school, university and beyond?

Mr BURKE — I just think it is so important. When I was a child and growing up we had a choir and I could not sing. I got put aside. So I know all about this. I know the struggle that it took for me to sing. I am not a singer but I can sing everything that I can play. When I listen to music I can hear most of the notes and pick where they are within the chord and write it out. I learnt that skill from singing, but I had to do it the hard way. As I said, my kids, as they have grown up, it is no miracle, but they have learnt to sing—

— The CHAIR — At an early age.

Mr BURKE — At a very early age, and it has made a huge difference to the way they think, their organisation and, as I said, their confidence to express themselves.

Mr ELASMAR — Does a Bachelor of Music degree attract students from rural and regional Victoria and lower SES schools?

Mr BURKE — Yes. The Monash School of Music has a history of attracting people from the Gippsland area. As part of our recruitment process we put aside money to go out to the country. Last year the classical department did a tour of the Hamilton area for recruitment purposes. We have four or five students from that area this year. We are involved in the Wangaratta Jazz Festival. We do workshops at the Wangaratta Jazz Festival in country Victoria. That is a really good process. We started that initiative last year, but we have always recruited from country Victoria. We see that as a really important aspect.

I used to work for Musica Viva; we used to go to country schools. You could see the schools that had a music department and the difference that made to their concentration and involvement in music compared to those students who did not have a music curriculum at all. Their interest in the music we were playing was very difficult; they could not concentrate on it. I think there was an issue there.

Mr ELASMAR — Are there any strategies you can suggest for preschool?

Mr BURKE — Again I think it is really important to have a compulsory component and to have some sort of music subject at a very early age. That comes down to the education of our teachers and the curriculum that we put in place. I remember that growing up we all had to sing in the 60s; we all had to sing on those television programs.

Ms MILLER — Follow the dot?

Mr BURKE — Yes, all that sort of stuff. They put the TV on and we would all sing along and things like that. I think that was very important, and, as I say, I do not really know but I have seen through being part of the Musica Viva program that there was a huge difference in the concentration of these kids and their involvement at the different schools.

The CHAIR — I just want to touch on the VCE music program. Does the current VCE music program prepare students for your bachelor degree? If not, what would you suggest could be improved in the current VCE music program?

Prof. GOULD — I think there is an imbalance between the conservative side of music teaching and the more contemporary side, and I qualify that, as I always try to do, by saying I love the conservative side of music — what I call the historical repertoire. But there is an imbalance between the teaching of it, and I think it gets back to what Rob said before; I think we both said it. It is to do with the education of teachers first as distinct from the education of students. In my experience, and it is still true, I think, that people who go into teaching at primary and secondary level have an education which is still somewhat narrow in the scheme of what is happening in music these days. It is not just narrow but perhaps a little bit — how can I say this —
anti-Australian and pro-Eurocentric, which really bothers me greatly, I have to say. But that is a deep cultural thing that we need to deal with in this country.

I think it is getting better in the improvisatory world, if I can call it that — not necessarily jazz because jazz in my opinion is a historical term now; it is history. In the contemporary improvisatory world it is still sadly lacking, and I think that is true in a lot of private schools too. I do not think it is the students’ fault; it might be the principals’ fault. I think it is to do with just simply not knowing. A lot of people are frightened of creating music without the printed page. It is quite an interesting thing to take a piece of printed music away from a musician who has been trained in the classical world. You can see the fear in their eyes, and it is to do with the idea of perfection in the notes. You have to play what is on the page, and if you take it away, they virtually cannot play anything. Let me put it another way: they are too frightened to be exposed to making a mistake. I think music is about succeeding and failing, and if you do not have the fails, you are not going to get huge successes.

The CHAIR — Just extending on from that, what is your view then of the use of technology and particularly in utilising technology for student-centred learning where you might have young people that are using programs like GarageBand and what have you to create music, and in some instances they may know more than the teachers, as you said earlier? What is your view on harnessing those sorts of activities in the school, particularly in schools that may not have much activity in their music programs?

Prof. GOULD — Rob is a greater expert on technology than I am, but I think in this day and age technology is absolutely vital and crucial to know about. I think the students often know more about it than the teachers, in my experience, but that is beside the point. I think it is totally crucial. I hope this does not sound old-fashioned — I do not mean it to be — but there is nothing like facing somebody and having the sound. I think it should be a combination of both.

The CHAIR — Both, yes.

Prof. GOULD — For example, years and years ago in California they tried the idea of aural training by computer with nobody there: you just do the exercise on the computer and you pass or fail. It was not too long after they introduced this system of 100 computers sitting in an aural training class that nobody was there; nobody wanted to do it. And I thought, ‘Why don’t they want to do this?’ , and I came to the conclusion that they actually wanted a human being to be there as well. That is going to be a big issue in education. Rob will mention Polycom, that we have just adopted at Monash, and this online teaching, and the whole thing. I think that is going to be a massive issue in the next 10 or 20 years.

The CHAIR — Over to you, Rob.

Mr BURKE — Two things: just go back to VCE, I was on the VCE advisory panel and I had issues with the outcomes of that because my point of view is that I think students need to learn about fundamentals. For example, I used to take ear training at the institution and I would ask every class, so there would be 100 students. I would say, ‘Can you define “diatonic” to me?’ . I would say maybe five of the kids knew what diatonic meant.

Diatonic means the ability to play any note of the scale in the key. If you play ‘Happy birthday’ you can play it in any key: you understand. You play your scales, you are playing in that key — you play that tune in that key. It is such an important fundamental but 5% of students turning up after doing VCE music were not understanding this fundamental.

I kept saying that, and that sort of education is really important at the VCE level. That is where there is an issue of addressing it. There is an AMEB exam, you have got to play this repertoire, which is really important, and they learn about techniques for their instruments, techniques for their music, but the fundamentals of the music need to be taught.

Prof. GOULD — And that transfers, if I can interrupt, to a class I did this morning, by sheer coincidence, with singers, some opera, some musical theatre. That is exactly what we do not get in tertiary education sometimes. Not knowing just by the music and learning the dots on the page; no understanding of the social or cultural context in which the music was made. I said to somebody this morning, ‘Do you understand why you
should change the mood?’, and this person said, ‘No, I don’t’, and I said, ‘It is in the melody and it is in the harmony’.

You do not have to theoretically know that, you can do it intuitively, but it helps if you do. If they are not doing it you have got to find a way to say, ‘Well look in the music — understand, think about what you are doing’. As distinct from ‘Just go and get the music, learn the Puccini aria’, I said, ‘Tell me a bit about Puccini’, and there was a deafening silence. I said, ‘How can you sing this music — or Mozart too — without knowing the context of what you are singing?’.

Mr BURKE — That is in the VCE, where they have that specialist subject, and I think there is improvement at the VCE level where they actually do research the music that they play. As I say, I think there needs to be more work on the fundamentals, not all surface skill sets.

I know time is running out. But the thing about interactive teaching that I think is really important, especially for country Victoria, is that there is technology involved; where there is interactive teaching and things like Polycom it is really important. We call it blended learning where there is an element of preparation, videos. So it is in preparation, and then there is some sort of interactive component, and then there is one-on-one or there is a classroom situation. It is getting that balance and really using the technology, and strategising that technology to work for us, not just saying, ‘We could just let the technology do it all for us’. Blended learning is the key.

Mr ELASMAR — Do you provide any professional development for teachers in the area of music?

Mr BURKE — At Monash?

Mr ELASMAR — Yes.

Mr BURKE — For our academic staff?

Mr ELASMAR — Yes.

Mr BURKE — Every three years our staff are allowed to go on six months research leave, and we have workloads of 40-40-20. So it is 40% research, 40% teaching, 20% service.

The CHAIR — We have concluded our questions. Is there anything that we have not covered that you think we need to be aware of before we finish up?

Prof. GOULD — I would just like to say one thing. I am passionate about the intangibles of music education. What I mean by that is — and I know Rob and I talk about this a lot — music, for all the reasons we have said and beyond, is brilliant in turning out graduates, or whatever we want to call them, as decent human beings. I think music can do that. Apart from the skill sets that we talk about, I am really interested in seeing, ‘Are you a decent human being?’, and I think music can do that. I know that is philosophical, but I think it is really important. That goes back to the teaching. Teaching is not a bank where students come to withdraw information. I do not think it is that, and that is why the personal contact, for me, is as important as the technology.

Mr BURKE — I just think our students need to be culturally educated, and music plays a role in that. That develops our culture. One thing I would like to add is the importance of Australian music.

Prof. GOULD — That is another debate.

The CHAIR — I thank you for your submission and appearing before the committee today. I also wish you well. I know you said at the very outset that you have strong supporters in Ed Byrne and Alan Finkel, your Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor at Monash, and I am aware of the new soon-to-be established building that is actively under way. Good luck with all of that, and keep up the great work you are doing in the programs.

Mr BURKE — Great. Thank you.

Prof. GOULD — Thanks very much.

Committee adjourned.