

Submission:

Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools.

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Introduction:

For nearly twenty years, it has been my privilege to hold positions as an Instrumental Music Teacher in Victorian State schools, and various other educational institutions. The progression to employment in these positions was in part due to life experiences as a student musician, and also in part to the influence of instrumental music teachers from the primary and secondary schools that I attended while growing up. These teachers knew their job, their instruments, and how to motivate and extend students. They also encouraged me into other areas of music making, for example the community band scene, a scene of which I am still an active participant to this day. Other formative experiences and influences were from my friends and fellow students at TAFE and University who brought with them their own unique, but similar stories of musical influence. I mentioned in my opening sentence about the ‘privilege’ of being an Instrumental Music Teacher; it has been a privilege to impart my musical knowledge onto my own students in various schools.

Each of my various teaching appointments has been different. I have had the opportunity to work in state, catholic and private schools, community music schools, and locations in metropolitan Melbourne, regional and rural areas. I have had the opportunity to work with students across a whole range of ages and abilities, and work with other teachers who have brought different experiences and skills into institutions. In each educational institution my primary aim has been to work and engage students in the love of music making.

The focus of my submission to this Parliamentary Inquiry will be to firstly highlight some of the important historical progressions of music education in Victoria in order to show the pride Victoria had in its music education programs. In the second section I will be reflecting on my own teaching practice; how my students progress and are engaged through their journey in instrumental music. The third section will detail two different kinds of instrumental music education delivery models from other Australian states – purely as examples of ways in which an instrumental music program *could* be run. The concluding statements will reiterate important points from other sections.

Music education in Victoria, an important part of education in this state:

“The teaching of singing and efforts to develop musical appreciation is part of the ordinary work of every school.” (Hansen, 1932, p. 78)

Music instruction has been conducted in Victorian schools since the 1850’s although the nature of this instruction was predominantly sporadic class singing

lessons. (Stevens, 2001, 2005). The local authorities on the goldfields of Victoria in particular, saw music education as a civilising influence upon the younger generation due to the anti-social behaviour displayed by the population of the goldfields at the time (Stevens, 2001). Although music instruction at this time was delivered “in the absence of a prescribed syllabus for music” (Stevens, 2005, p. 254), there were indications from local school inspectors and communities that “vocal music had a beneficial effect on children’s “intellectual and moral progress” as well as a “civilising and elevating influence”.” (p. 254). The civilising of children was a factor that was central to educational thinking at the time.

These early days of music education were well meaning but educational results varied due to the lack of a syllabus and the competencies of the teachers (Stevens, 2005). Subsequently, future Boards of Education addressed both the problems of a syllabus and teacher competencies, and with the appointment of an “Inspector of Music in 1884” (Stevens, 2005, p. 255) to ensure proper standards of teaching, music instruction was delivered to state schools in Victoria. However, as a result of the economic depression of the 1890’s, “the government of the day decided to terminate all paid instruction in singing, to dismiss all itinerant singing masters, and to abolish the post of Inspector of Music” (Stevens, 2005, p. 255) which led to all music teaching ceasing in Victorian schools.

The early 1900’s saw resumption of music instruction in Victorian schools, with the use of the gramophone, instrumental instruction and singing all being utilized to instruct the students in music. Hansen noted in his book *Thoughts that Breathe* (1932) that:

[...] much good has been done through the Bequest of the late William Gillies [...] who died in 1925 leaving his estate – about £10,000 – to be devoted to three purposes:-

1. The encouragement of instrumental music in schools, leading, it was hoped, to the increase of village bands and family orchestras (p. 79) ¹

(The nature of this bequest was also reported in newspaper articles of the day: "Music and Reading Aloud", 1925; "Music and Reading: Bequest", 1925)

The monetary interest gained from this bequest was mainly used to purchase instruments for use in expanding Victorian school music programs ("First State School Band", 1926; "West Preston School Band", 1928; Greaves, 1996; Hansen, 1932; Hyde Street Youth Band, 2001; Kew East Primary School, 2013). Indeed, when Hansen wrote his book, he noted with pride that in 1932 there were (at the time) “31 brass bands, 9 orchestras, 13 fife bands and 23 violin classes” (1932, p. 79). Such achievements were also noted in the Victorian newspaper articles of the day (as previously cited). Two of the bands that were established in this period are still in existence although one of them, the Hyde Street Youth Band is no longer tied to the education system and has evolved over time to become a community youth band (Hyde Street Youth Band, 2001; Kew East Primary School, 2013).

There wasn’t any real change in the way music instruction was given until the 1960’s in Victoria where, responding to developments overseas, two distinct streams

¹ Although Hansen & the newspaper articles made mention of the three purposes of this money, I’ve only chosen to list the music purpose as it is relevant to this portion of history of music education in

of music instruction emerged, classroom & instrumental (Stevens, 2001). With reference to the (then beginning) instrumental program in Victorian state schools, Graham Bartle (1968) wrote as part of his research report into school music in Australia that:

Beginning in an experimental way with four teachers in 1964, the Victorian Education Department now employs twenty-eight teachers in instruments in high schools, fifteen of them full-time. Each teacher usually spends time in from two to five schools per week. The total number of schools involved in early 1967 was thirty-eight, twenty-nine of these being in the metropolitan area, four at Bendigo, four at Geelong and one at Shepparton. All types of instruments are taught, most of the teachers being qualified to give instruction in more than one instrument. Several of these teachers are undergoing part-time courses of academic and/or teachers training to gain permanency with the department. All are well qualified in their professional field of instrumental playing. (p. 163)²³

Bartle's (1968) report was very extensive and he also made note of the types of ensembles on offer to students in schools at the time including orchestras, string orchestras, woodwind ensembles, brass groups, pipe bands, chamber music groups, light music groups and Advanced Orff-music group (pp. 190-193). Advancing nearly 30 years after this report, the *National Review of School Music Education* (DEST, 2005), as part of site visits to various schools (see pp. 169-236), described the kinds of ensembles on offer at various schools. Analysis of this review, Bartle's book (as described above) and Hansen's note on the number of ensembles indicate that little has changed in the kinds of ensembles on offer in Victorian schools. However, it could be argued that with the advent of instrumental technology and the influence of contemporary music, the variety of ensembles has increased to include rock bands and other similar groups (McPherson & Davidson, 2006).

Instrumental teaching in Victorian schools was further established during the 1970's and 1980's into the form and function that we know today (Stevens, 2001). This coincided with the designation of music specialist high schools and the opening of the Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School (Stevens, 2001). This period of consolidation and establishment of instrumental music teaching in Victoria has led to the state having a strong focus on music and room for further development, which will be discussed in the third section of this submission.

Observations from my teaching practice:

Why do I teach instrumental music? Mills (2007) suggests that the teachers' "personal engagement with music means that we naturally want to teach it 'musically'" (p. 14) - it is due to our/my own personal past and present experiences that influence our/my want to teach music. For myself, as mentioned in the opening paragraphs, I

² Since the time of this report by Bartle, the instrumental program has obviously expanded since these embryonic beginnings, however in my experience, the nature of the employment of instrumental teachers described by Bartle, especially in Secondary schools, hasn't changed – teachers still work over multiple schools during a working week.

³ After this description of the work of instrumental teachers, Bartle went on to describe the way in which students attended lessons and borrowed/hired instruments which again, in my experience, hasn't really changed since the time of Bartle's report.

feel that teaching music has been a privilege. I have been providing, as Mills (2005) suggests, “musical teaching” that “builds on students’ musical achievements” (p. 20). My personal teaching practices as a part of a variety of educational institutions, has enabled me to observe the progress my students are making. In the following subsections, through the telling and use of personal stories, anecdotes and pictures, I will show that my students are learning, they are engaged and involved in their school music programs, and they are members of a school music team.

My students are learning

Learning, as Blair & Wiggins (2010) tell us, “is an act of the individual” but as they also state, “learning is a social process” – “[...] learning is an act of an individual that takes place in the context of interaction with others” (p. 19). With this in mind, I see evidence of my students’ learning as they continue their journey in instrumental music. As my students attend lessons, attend ensemble rehearsals, and interact with each other, they are always learning. This might be shown in little bits – suddenly having small technical elements ‘click’. Or it might be evident in more substantial ways, for example being able to present a whole piece of music or learning to lead an ensemble.

A student at one of my schools who has learning difficulties started learning Violin from me at the beginning of 2011. Although she had learnt Violin from another teacher during her primary school years, it was obvious that the previous teacher had compensated for this girl’s learning difficulties by writing a multitude of directions and pencil marks on her music. As such, during an initial assessment of her abilities I found that this girl couldn’t read music at all, and had difficulty remembering basic technique.

My teaching strategy was initially ‘brutal’ – I took a pencil eraser in the second week of lessons and erased as many pencil marks off her music as I felt was necessary. I eventually surmised that the trick to getting this girl to learn was to introduce simple technical patterns and reinforce those patterns with the aim that these patterns would eventually become unconscious. This teaching strategy has ultimately been successful; my student can now read music with some confidence. Before this strategy, she could only get through two lines of music in half an hour. Now, she is able to read a whole page of music in 15 minutes and still remember her technical tricks. She is eager to learn more and now accepts challenges more readily.

My students are engaged & involved:

Music programs at schools will generally encompass instrumental, ensemble and classroom programs, all of which benefit one another. Students at the various schools in which I teach have the opportunity to be a part of all three of these programs whether it be classroom (compulsory up until the end of year 8 then electives), instrumental (students make their own commitments to being part of the program), and ensemble (students undertake to be a member of ensembles in conjunction with their involvement in the instrumental programs). If a student happens to be involved in all aspects of a music program, the commitment can be substantial, but also very rewarding.

My students are encouraged to be a part of such music programs. For the most part, they are committed to attending weekly lessons and ensemble rehearsals

and the obligatory performances. They feel a part of the music program as a whole, and willing and able to make a strong commitment. Such involvement stretches to other music activities where they have had the opportunity to interact and perform with students from other schools.



Figure 1: Two of my students from different schools enjoying themselves at the SMR Stringfest, 2012

My students are part of a team:

My students work in a spirit of teamwork that has been developed and enhanced through their participation in music activities. I would also define my ‘team’ as a community; a community of musicians that work together, play together, are friends with each other, and work hard to achieve common goals together. Such working has not happened by accident. Research has noted that the building of community among students is a direct consequence of being involved in extra-curricula activities. Adderly, Kennedy & Berz (2003) state that “the social climate of these surroundings contributes to the solidification of these unions” (pp. 200-201). Dillon (2007) provides a definition of the social environment as being “the student-teacher relationship, the classroom, the year level, the campus, the school and the community” (p. 193). It is within these constructs of the music department, as a portion of an overall school community, that my students build their own community – their own team. I’ve seen this being built and reformed each year as my students continue their journey as members of the school musical community.

The photo on the next page (Fig. 2) of the Dandenong High School Orchestra is a perfect example of teamwork. Here, we have a group of students who differ only in age, year level, ability and instruments, helped by some music staff members, all-working towards a common goal. The reason they worked so well together is that they work as a team, and share a common interest as members of the school music community. Outside of this ensemble I am aware that many of them are classmates and firm friends as well. The instrumental staff who play in the ensemble, are also teachers of some of the students pictured, and they run various other ensembles for

the students to participate in. In this way the school music community, and sense of teamwork is strengthened.



Figure 2: The Dandenong High School Orchestra in rehearsal, 12/2012

Where do my students go from here, and what have they gained?

I can't predict where my students will go in life after they have finished their schooling, or whether they will have any interest in music making. It would be fair to say that a fair proportion of them won't continue with their music after they finish school, or even when they are still in school as they make decisions based on their other school activities. If my students withdraw from lessons at a certain age, it could be seen as typical behaviour for certain age groups. Shephard, Rugers & Bedwell (2008) identified two major stages where students withdraw from instrumental music "1) transition from primary to secondary school, 2) at completion of secondary school." (quoted from web page). A short summary in the *Australians' Attitude to Music* market research report (2007) correlates with the statement of Shephard *et al* (2008):

As in 2001⁴, almost a third of those giving up playing do so before they are teenagers. A further 30% drop out by the age of 16 yrs. The major reason is just loss of interest. It appears that discontinuation of lessons at school is a major factor, but, in older age, lack of access to instruments and co-players have a tangible effect. (p. 1)

⁴ A similar study to the one completed in 2007 was written in 2001. The study completed in 2007 is essentially an update of existing information.

Thankfully, in various stages of my teaching career and practice, I have had students' progress through to a senior year level. I like to think that they have enjoyed their music up to these points – and that the benefits of learning an instrument will stay with them for the rest of their lives. The benefits that they, and all instrumental students gain include:

- a. Academic abilities, including spatio-temporal reasoning, numeracy, literacy
- b. Socialisation and the ability to cooperate
- c. Self-discipline
- d. Self-confidence

(Letts, 2012, p. 3 of 13)

In my position as an instrumental music teacher, I can't interfere with my students' life choices. What I can do is enhance their life choices so that their learning of an instrument is as enjoyable as possible, and that they have enjoyed their experiences of music making with me and as part of a whole music department team.

Instrumental Music Education in Victoria; room for systematic improvement?:

The third section of this submission is to detail my ideas on how Instrumental Music Education could be improved in this state. Fundamentally, as shown in the first section of this submission, the way in which individual teachers work within schools hasn't changed (Bartle, 1968 see p. 163). What I would like to advocate for is a change to the running and provision of instrumental teachers to schools, as I feel there is a weakness in the decentralised system that is currently in place.

At present, as I see the system, (secondary) instrumental music teachers are employed directly by individual schools who may or may not receive a certain amount of regional funding to cover a day of teaching on a set amount of instruments. The nature of employment is either ongoing or by single year or two year contracts. The teachers are basically left up to their own devices as to where they work, with administration for individual schools left up to one of the teachers' schools – a base school. I personally feel that this system is flawed as it is too decentralised, teachers have to deal with a variety of schools, and the base school has to organise administration for other schools.

I regard no system as totally perfect, but there are other ways in which a service can be run, and I would like to highlight the school instrumental departments of South Australia and Western Australia as examples.

The *Department of Education and Child Development* (DECD) of South Australia provides instrumental music services in schools via its own music programs (Gov. of S.A.- DECD, 2012). I don't know much about this service, however, from research of the website, there are regional coordinators and support staff. There are also instrumental faculty leaders who ensure that all teachers of certain instruments are kept up to date with advances in teaching their instrument. This is something that Victoria lacks – unified instrumental curriculum that covers all schools with support staff for instrumental staff. The closest Victoria comes to providing this kind of support is statewide professional development days.

The *School of Instrumental Music* (SIM) (Dept. of Ed. - WA, 2012), part of the Department of Education, Western Australia, is another example of a state-based music provider of which I have been impressed with, and has been described to me by my colleagues from Western Australia. My understanding of this service is that it is very centralised, operates out of its own dedicated school with its own building, principal, assistant principals and admin. staff. The Victorian equivalent of this service I think would be the Victorian School of Languages. A description of the services the SIM can offer are briefly detailed on its website homepage (and further detailed on another webpage):

The Department of Education's **School of Instrumental Music** services over 400 primary and secondary Western Australian Government schools.

Providing consultancy, instrumental instruction and ensemble direction, staffing allocation and management, an instrumental loan, maintenance and repair service, a resource centre and varied enrichment activities for students. (Dept. of Ed. - WA, 2012, quoted from webpage)

I think the model offered by the Western Australian SIM is one that would well suit Victoria. Such a school would take over the administration and time allocation of all instrumental staff, and such a school would deal directly with schools that would require instrumental music staff.

I reiterate the point that no system is ever perfect, and I'm convinced that there is more that can be done to improve instrumental education in this state, aside from more funding of a dedicated teaching service! I would advocate Victoria to examine practices and administration with the aim of more effective provision of instrumental music in this state.

Conclusion:

There is much to be proud of regarding the past and present provision of instrumental music education in Victoria. Victoria has had a wonderful and rich history of singing, bands, orchestras and other ensembles that have produced highly skilled musicians. Many thousands of students have had direct benefit of school music programs, which have given them the opportunities to be part of unique teams and communities within music programs. Teachers work collaboratively with other teachers in order to provide effective music programs. And there is a structure of sorts in place that enable teachers to move between schools and teacher a wide variety of students.

If instrumental music education can continue to be supported and expanded in Victorian state schools, I believe there is much more that can be accomplished. There is room for improvement in a variety of areas, and more support needs to be given, especially in funding. As more schools continue to be built, they will want instrumental music teachers, but the current pie can only be sliced up in a finite manner. Learning music provides a real opportunity for our students, and the more that are exposed to the joys of learning an instrument, the better.

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