

From: Ashley John Cross [REDACTED]

Hallo, please find attached my submission to the review into music education funding.

While this is a personal submission it is reflective of my professional life at the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, Melbourne University. In accordance with this the submission has been looked at by my Head of School, Associate Professor Mark Pollard [REDACTED]

Thank you,

Ashley Cross

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## To Whom It May Concern:

“No, music is not simply a kind of mathematics. It is the most remarkable blend of art and science, logic and emotion, physics and physiology, known to us.”  
(Philip Ball, “The Music Instinct – how music works and why we can’t do without it’ page 2)

This submission to the Education and Training Committee is a personal one and comes from two arguably narrow perspectives. Here is the first.

I have been a full time lecturer in the Contemporary Music Performance programme at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne for nearly twenty years. The students that we hear and see at audition time to a degree represent the results of the Victorian music education system as it stands in secondary schools. The students that audition for the VCA are those who are thinking about undertaking a career in music and who have come from a jazz, improvisatory, contemporary background. I have probably heard thousands of auditioning musicians over the years. Not all of these have just finished year 12 (we take in many students of a more mature age) but a great deal have.

Music education (I am referencing music but I would extend this to include all arts education) in the primary and secondary sectors needs to work in two ways. The first is so that all students going through the system get a generally expansive (something that goes beyond their own tastes and experiences) musical education and come to know something about this most amazing gift to humanity that too many take for granted these days. Secondly, while most secondary students will not go on to study music as a career (sigh of relief), a few however will, and the education system needs to support these students in the same way that it supports those who go on to study medicine, engineering, maths, physics, sport, business, etc.

There are many great music departments in the Victorian secondary system, however most of them exist in the private schools. The graduates of these schools however, even if they display excellent musical ability, generally speaking will not go on to study music at the tertiary level, they will venture out into more financially rewarding careers. However, the students from private schools that do go on to study music at the tertiary level (usually in the area of classical music) have generally been very well prepared and have enjoyed the benefits of an excellent music education. It might be true to say that the range of symphonic and chamber music experience available to students in many of Melbourne’s private schools often betters what is available in the tertiary institutions.

I am sure that if one was to ask various principals of private schools about the embedded music programmes within their schools, they would concede that a general music (and arts generally) education is an essential part of the overall education package that these schools provide and is not a mere ‘add on’ to the more ‘serious’ subjects on offer.

At the VCA our students tend not to come from the private system (for one, the VCA no longer has a classical music stream) but from the state system and they have a wide range of musical backgrounds. Most of our students haven't had the benefit of a truly excellent music education at secondary school. A few have though, and these students (without having figures) come from a fairly select handful of secondary schools scattered throughout Melbourne. The two schools that over the years have best prepared students for acceptance into the VCA have been The Victorian College of the Arts Secondary School (VCASS) and Blackburn High School. There are other schools that prepare students well (University High, Balwyn High, Eltham High etc.), but my experience tells me that these two schools have been over representative in terms of where the VCA derives its student body. I also speak about them because they are the two schools I know the best, having taught at VCASS and having had a son go to Blackburn High.

These two schools operate very differently. VCASS is not zoned and entry is by audition. The standard of the student cohort is high and the programme, which has an excellent small ensemble component to it, is very focused and very effective. Blackburn High on the other hand is also not zoned (but will zone if the school is full up) but accepts students without audition from all over Melbourne. It operates at a much more grass roots level. At one point a few years ago I recall being told that 50% of the school's students were playing a musical instrument. The school has a terrific orchestral, band and chamber music programme that features all students from the novice to the most advanced.

It is my opinion that Blackburn High and VCASS constitute two of the cornerstones of Melbourne's rich, vibrant artistic culture. The concerts that both of these schools put on are truly extraordinary and anybody making decisions about funding music in secondary schools in Victoria needs to get along and hear them. While many musicians that go on to study at the tertiary level really flower in that particular environment, it is their secondary school education that provides the necessary springboard.

Regardless of what happens in a generalist sense in secondary school music education it is imperative that schools such as VCASS and Blackburn High flourish and are given the resources they need in order to continue the great work they do.

In regards to music education for all secondary students there are a number of things to keep in mind. The first is that music is essentially about two things; creativity and connection. If you are sitting in an orchestra playing a Beethoven symphony for example, you are literally taking an active part in realising and experiencing a work of genius. That music with its highly creative sense of tonal colour, placement, structure and emotional maturity along with the fact that ones own sound has to connect with everyone else's within the orchestra leaves an indelible impression on people, giving them a clear insight into profound creativity and a deeper understanding of the nature of connection and its great power.

Likewise at the heart of great business lie creativity (producing something that can be sold) and the ability to make connections (selling what you have to sell). Apple over the last few years have demonstrated in an amazing way what can happen when high levels of creativity and connection work in sync.

Connection is also apparent in the world of sport, particularly team sports. Sport helps people make connections. However, not everyone is overtly sporty and not everyone necessarily wants to compete in the win/lose sporting arena.

Many kids go through tough times during their adolescence. They can become disconnected. It is important that schools see the value in music as a vehicle for keeping kids in contact with others while they ride out those difficult years.

The second perspective I am writing from is that of a parent of a son who has graduated from Blackburn High at the end of 2012. I have spent a lot of time at Blackburn High over the years and would suggest that the music programme at the school gives the place a special feel. The school seems not to overly suffer from bullying and circumstantial evidence from speaking with other parents bares this out.

The music programme at the school left my son with many rich musical experiences and I can't thank the school enough for that.

It is imperative that music in Victorian secondary schools caters for a thoughtful, expansive, generalist approach as well as being a vehicle for those who wish to excel.

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