



Blackburn HIGH SCHOOL

Becoming a professional musician is a long hard road. Some begin this journey before they reach secondary school, if they are lucky enough to have parents who are enlightened enough to recognise the value of music, often at considerable expense. Private music lessons are expensive, as they require one-to-one attention from a highly trained professional. Quality musical instruments are expensive. It takes a student about 10,000 hours of practice on an instrument to learn and refine their skills to the standard required to be a professional player. At every turn there are obstacles for those who wish to take this path.

Yet society needs musicians, in precisely the same way that it needs doctors, nurses, police officers and teachers. One needs to only observe how communities deal with times of great hardship and adversity, such as Black Saturday in Victoria in 2009, to know the truth of this statement. Whilst the doctors and nurses heal the wounds, the police and other emergency services provide physical safety and security, and the teachers provide the intellectual understanding and rationalisation of what has occurred, the emotional healing begins when communities come together, and such gatherings inevitably involve music, whether they be a church service, a community singing event or a concert to commemorate the losses suffered by all. And long after the wounds have healed, the buildings have been rebuilt and all those involved have move on with their lives, they will still come together to remember. These gatherings will still involve music, and the musicians who provide that music are crucial to the healing process.

Music is also there in good times. When was the last party or celebration you attended where there was no music? It may have been recorded, it might even have been of dubious quality, but there is always music, and it will have originated with a real live musician who has studied long and hard to perfect those skills.

Music is not entertainment. It is not some mindless frivolity that we can afford to do without. It is not a luxury that should be available only to those who can afford and choose to pay for it. Music is an essential part of the human experience. It has long been recognised that music is one of the essential intelligence modalities, along with numeracy, language, spatial, kinaesthetic and personal. Any truly enlightened educational system should seek to educate its' students in all of these areas. When we do that, we will have a truly enlightened society.

The provision of instrumental music programs in our schools is an essential part of this process. Not every student will seek to become a professional musician, no more so than every student who studies English will wish to become an author, but the skills and knowledge learnt as a student of music will allow them to become a more complete and well-rounded member of society. These skills are not only applicable to music, but also to their development in the other intelligence modalities. There is mountains of neurological research that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that learning to play a musical instrument has enormous benefits for the development of the whole student, not only in literacy and numeracy but also kinaesthetically and socially, because it is one of the few activities that engages and promotes the development of the whole brain.

Students who have the benefit of a quality instrumental and ensemble program learn values of persistence, commitment and hard work. The pursuit of excellence that is promoted by such programs is invaluable experience in all areas of life, as well as the leadership opportunities that are provided. Being part of such a worthwhile activity builds the self-esteem of all students involved, promotes teamwork and social inclusion and helps to create a more tolerant and inclusive society in a way that very few other school programs can. Involvement in a program such as this can create a connection and engagement with school which for many students would otherwise not exist, and makes coming to school worthwhile, particularly during the difficult middle years of 9 & 10.

Music is intrinsically good, and is worth studying for its' own sake. It should not be dependent on a desire to become a professional musician, and it is not realistic to suggest that every school should have a program capable of taking students to this level. But our education system has to be equipped to cater for those students who do wish to pursue this path. This is where there needs to be consideration given the provision of funding for elite level programs to serve this purpose. It can be argued, and this is certainly the view held at Blackburn High School, that the most efficient and effective use of such funding that is available for high level music education is for it to be used in a small, discrete number of locations – “centers of excellence”, if you like - creating a kind of “hothouse” atmosphere. The gathering of academically gifted students in one school such as Melbourne Boys High or MacRobertson Girls High allows such students to achieve great things due to the mutually supportive and inspirational environment. The same applies to instrumental music, not just at the elite level, but at all levels. Any proposal that aims to “equitably” distribute music teachers to all secondary schools across the state, regardless of whether this resource would be used effectively or not, would merely ensure that no school would be able to provide the quality of musical education that is currently provided at Blackburn. We must resist the temptation of allowing mediocrity to become the norm in the name of political expediency.

The arguments of equitable distribution ignore the differing demands of different regions, schools and clientele. Within the metropolitan regions there are schools running programs of excellence, and others that simply do not have the clientele to demand such a program. Nor do they seek it. The critical point here is that the funds necessary to implement this would be taken from existing programs of excellence, such as Blackburn, Balwyn, Ringwood and Camberwell High Schools.

It is crucial that the committee understands that in order to run a truly high-quality instrumental music program, there needs to be a concentrated population of students and expert teaching staff to provide the opportunity of an outstanding ensembles program. This has always been Blackburn High School's unique strength. Currently we run some twenty or so highly specialized ensembles. The importance of these ensembles can probably be best explained by a sporting analogy - that teaching a student to play the clarinet, oboe or trumpet to the highest levels, and not providing an ensemble in which to perform, is a little like teaching a group of students the skills of football, such as to run, mark, kick and handball, yet never forming a team to play matches.

One of the factors which is crucial in the argument for specialist music programs is this understanding of critical mass - namely that to run high level orchestras, bands, choirs, chamber music, instrumental consorts and jazz programs, there MUST be a minimum dedicated benchmark of specialist staff to instruct in the instruments required. Of particular interest to us at Blackburn is our Symphony Orchestra. We are the only school in the NEVR, and one of a very small number statewide, that runs a Symphony Orchestra on a year-long basis as part of its' music program. A fully-instrumented Symphony Orchestra cannot exist without full sections of oboe, bassoon, french horn etc. These instruments can only be taught through specialist staff. They also generally require smaller lesson groups.

Any understanding of music education demands that there must be considerations made for teaching in smaller groups:

- in particular instrumental areas such as oboe, bassoon, horn and tuba
- for advanced-level students, of which we have many.

The economies of scale dictate that only larger, well funded programs will have the flexibility to allocate resources where they are needed. Such flexibility is impossible in a program with a small number of staff who are teaching outside of their specialist area(s).

Blackburn High School has, for many years, attracted students from all over Melbourne due to the excellence of its' music program, including, it must be said, myself. I completed my secondary schooling at Blackburn in 1985-6, changing schools because my previous school was unable to provide the type of musical experience that I craved. The point here is that students will make the effort to attend such schools. They are as relevant to students and parents now as they were then. Blackburn consistently attracts students from the Dandenong Ranges region, as well as from other locations in all directions. At various times in the last decade, Blackburn has drawn out-of-zone music students from as far as Seaford (south), Christmas Hills (north-east), Craigieburn(north), Essendon and Altona (west) and Yarra Junction (east), a radius of some 40 km.

The inevitable consequence of the adoption of the “equity” model would be that programs of music excellence would cease to exist in the state system. Those schools that choose to continue with existing programs would be forced to pass their increased costs onto parents. The fact that only more financially able families will be able to afford an instrumental music education erodes all arguments of "equity", and will only serve to perpetuate the false notion that quality music is some sort of luxury, and that a quality music education can only be obtained from the private sector.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues further with you.

Stephen Hardie

Director of Music

