

Submission to:
Parliament of Victoria
Education and Training Committee
Inquiry into the Extent, Benefits and Potential of Music Education in Victorian Schools

Via email to
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Parliament House
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Submitted by: Mr Chris Earl



Just under two years ago, I made a submission to Education and Training Committee inquiry into the Education of Gifted and Talented Students from the perspective of benefits derived from exposing students to music throughout their primary and secondary years.

The report of the Committee contained many references to the relevance of music in the education of gifted and talented children and this new Inquiry allows for far greater exploration of the benefits to children, communities and society in general of the inclusion of music in the curriculum in all Victorian schools and at all learning levels.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Music (and indeed dance) provides a universal entry card for people of all ages and, therefore, the benefits to society are immense.

For young people, they can become worthy and valuable contributors to the social fabric of their community from an early age. The learning and development of musical skills gives them a connection into musical groups, choirs and bands that enrich a local community and sees them performing alongside people of all ages who share that love of music and are part of local celebrations and events.

Music benefits the local society. Learning music in schools, a community group or privately helps develop discipline and self-discipline on musicians, develops greater respect of people and develops a sense of belonging within a peer group and the wider age spectrum.

However, student musicians are often not seen as being “cool”. Why? Schools place a greater emphasis on sport and celebrate achievements in the sporting arena with unbridled enthusiasm. There is, I would suggest, a greater sense of humility in student musicians and their teachers as well.

Within the school curriculum, sport/physical education has its own designated slots on a timetable. Instrumental music is an “extra” that can require students missing classes on a rotational basis – the student is removed from the mainstream and therefore viewed as being “different” and “not one of us” – or outside of normal school hours.

While sport builds camaraderie in the same way musical ensembles do, participation is limited to the time of interest and physical ability to participate. Music stays with a person for life.

For the individual, it has been my experience that music strengthens and grows social skills in young students that lead to mature, respectful and appreciative members of society.

Increasing music proficiency helps build their confidence, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and forms a rounded balance between study and other activities.

THE ASPIRING PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN

The school education system is but one facet in providing meaningful opportunities and support for the aspiring young professional musician – it is my submission that for young people to maximise their learning, opportunities and skills the partnership must involve and be intertwined between school, home and community. For this to be successfully enacted, there must be an awareness within schools that there are experienced people external to the education system with much to offer the young musician, an acceptance that parents can have the skills to be part of the teaching and learning journey (and where they do not, support from others to help them understand and nurture the talent and the passion inside their young Mozart).

The school curriculum (as opposed to co-curriculum) is currently based on a student perhaps considering music as a career when in Year 10 or 11. The curriculum prior to that is often tokenistic, perfunctory and designed for the masses, not the advanced.

The curriculum lacks real indicators of standard and achievement. In fact, it is concerning when parents are told that KPIs are not applied in earlier years of music education and external examinations in pre-VCE years are not actively promoted and encouraged. Likewise the absence of support from schools for local eisteddfods where students can receive an external assessment and be with their peers of similar interests.

I believe the school curriculum for music at secondary level should mirror, not exclusively, but certainly the performance and theoretical aspects of the Australian Music Examination Board syllabus. The AMEB syllabus has evolved since 1887 in all instruments and theory and provides an excellent progressive teaching and learning structure that benchmarks students. AMEB grade attainments are recognised by major universities and in fact form part of the entry pre-requisites for most tertiary music courses in Australia. Further, university entry auditions are held prior to the release of VCE results.

Inclusion of AMEB examinations within the school curriculum would enable aspiring musicians to be well prepared for university entry. As much of the music life in our schools is co-curricular, aspiring musicians juggle and cram performance and theoretical lessons with

other requirements in the curriculum and often undertake these lessons before or after school, at weekends or during lunchtimes. The VCE and pre-VCE curriculum should provide scope for aspiring musicians to undertake AMEB examination preparation and learning within the timetabled day.

The breadth of VCE music performance units, as given in the repertoire listing, is quite wide in equivalent AMEB standards. Consideration should be given to reducing that range (from the lower end). Inclusion of AMEB examinations in earlier years of secondary schooling (Years 7-10) would help establish a higher standard at VCE level.

A cultural attitude also needs to be addressed in the music education of children in schools: that advancement be based on merit and not age/year level.

I also reiterate part of my submission to the earlier Inquiry:

These can be evident in young musicians throughout primary school years and certainly strengthened well before the aspiring professional artist undertakes tertiary education – therefore in Victoria I would encourage the committee to look at the creation a uniform and supportive framework to nurture and grow young musicians who have demonstrate an early gift or talent in one or several musical disciplines, eg, piano, instrumental, voice, composition.

In the case of students in regional and rural areas, the paramount importance of both peer and professional development networks is even more important. A “rare talent” in a country school may not fit in with other members of his/her student cohort because music is not cool, the student avoids sporting activities and devotes after school time to music practice instead of computer games. The teaching cohort, too, may have a bent towards sport and as a result, potentially let the Young Mozart slip through the gaps on the keyboard.

A viable, comprehensive network of support can be activated quite easily if thinking and implementation is not limited to the confines of the education system. Exposure to experienced musicians in the community (some experienced with qualifications, others through years of practice) will aid the development of a young musician.

Regular regional programs that bring together primary students of like minds could also be established to act as a bridge until at a level, and age, suitable to regular travel to Melbourne for participation in such worthy programs as Melbourne Youth Music.

A peer and mentor program for country students using the internet could establish regular contact with performers and educators at leading metropolitan schools and our universities with links further solidified during regular face-to-face gatherings of program participants.

The program could potentially include discussions on a student's current composition, new music for their instrument and genre, looking at classic composers and their works.

Establishment of programs for the gifted, talented and advanced in upper primary years can help establish pathways and reduce the drop-out rate of students in 10-13 age group, and particularly boys.

Our young musicians must believe and be shown that they belong to a group with special gifts (music is indeed a special gift!), that they are not alone or isolated.

For musicians in the non-metropolitan areas of Victoria – country, rural, regional – there are certainly fewer opportunities to experience and to be inspired. There exists the regional touring programs for Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Orchestra Victoria that visit an area once a year to provide “live” highlights in musical enrichment.

As Orchestra Victoria said . . . when promoting its On the M.O.V.E Education Workshops:

“Unfortunately, kids in regional Victoria don’t have access to the same learning opportunities as their metropolitan counterparts, so our workshop aims to bridge that gap and hopefully prepare them for a career in music.”

It is acknowledged that the Melbourne-based Victorian College for the Arts Secondary School is the state's specialist music tuition provider for secondary school students providing a structured program in music and dance disciplines and over the years many students have made the trip to Melbourne to advance study and performance.

Again, however, this exceptional facility is Melbourne-based with accommodation options for country students limited to home-stay arrangements at the VCA or the family moving to Melbourne.

I would encourage this inquiry in its deliberations to address four keys areas in relationship to gifted, talented and advanced music students in all Victorian schools –

- 1 Should music be defined as a curriculum or extra-curricula subject?*
- 2 Should students who fall within any of these three definitions be afforded opportunities for development based on their demonstrated ability rather than existing programs that are restricted by age?*
- 3 Should programs, networks and mentoring be integrated through all levels of conventional schooling and university years to ensure a seamless and supportive environment at all times: and*
- 4 Should performance, peer support and mentor programs be established in regional centres to increase accessibility for students in country Victoria?*

Forging truly positive partnerships between schools and universities, education and community, music ensembles and government would result in a “yes” to all four of these areas.

For parents in regional Victoria, there is the added financial commitment to the education of their musical student aspiring to be a professional musician – music lessons are an extra, performance and workshop opportunities involve regular travelling and attendance at concerts to develop the aural understanding likewise involve considerable travelling.

BENEFITS OF MUSIC EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS

The submission I made to the committee’s earlier Inquiry on education of gifted and talented children, is particularly relevant to identifying the benefits of music education for children.

In part that submission included:

The music program in Victorian schools ranges from the minimal and non-existent to the token and the outstanding. The 2005 Commonwealth Government report on National Review of School Music Education in Schools concluded that a uniform music component of the Australian curriculum was vital to the development of children.

In fact, that report provided a number of recommendations to lift the profile and quality of music education in Australian schools. It also referenced a number of overseas studies that clearly demonstrated the link between music and improved results in core academic subjects for students at primary and secondary levels.

Key areas of the report undertaken by Murdoch University were to consider:

- *The current quality of teaching and learning of music in Australian schools;*
- *Factors that affect the quality and status of teaching of music in Australian schools;*
- *Examples of best practice of teaching and learning of music both in Australian schools and schools overseas; and*
- *Key recommendations, principles and priorities for enhancing school music education.*

Ref

www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/publications_resources/profiles/school_music_education.htm

The report stated:

Many writers such as Charles Fowler (1996) and others (Oddleifson, 1992; Reimer & Smith, 1992) have articulated eloquently the rationale for including the arts in schools, and the numerous virtues of the arts have been explicated (see Chapman

& Aspin, 1997). For years the arts were justified mainly from the aesthetic and utilitarian perspectives. But today, the arts are increasingly being advocated for their practical relevance to 'serve the educational and human priorities of the moment'.

This is to satisfy community desire to see prevailing concerns such as 'dropout rates, school reform, cultural diversity and violence' addressed through arts education (Fowler, 1996, p. 37). Since the 1990s, numerous research projects across the world have been successful in documenting and proclaiming the value of arts education.

One American study found that 'engagement in art activities provide more intrinsic rewards than engagement in mathematics or science' (Reimer & Smith, 1992, p. 180). Music was an effective tool used for language intervention purposes in an Australian study (Wilmot, 2002).

Case study research by Bresler (1996) and others indicate that the arts can effectively build up a community and promote selfexpression.

Participants in an innovative integrated arts programme experienced the unexpected connection with their inner selves, and were excited to discover their own voices of creativity, delight and wonder through constructing their own realities (Powell, 1997). A university study found significant increases in the overall selfconcept of children at-risk after participating in an arts programme that included music, movement, drama and art (Barry, Project ARISE, 1992). The Cultural Interaction Projects in Saskatchewan, Canada, demonstrates the potency of the arts in fostering interaction between cultural diverse groups (Bush & Therens, 1997). And in Norway, the impact of music in 'reduc[ing] harassment and ethnic tension' surprised researchers of a programme which introduced multicultural music to fourth-graders in 18 inner city schools (Skylstad, 1997, p. 73).

Studies have highlighted "advanced" results in mathematic subjects particularly by those students who learn a musical instrument.

Evidence linking music performance to increased academic achievement is overwhelming and provides strong reason, I suggest, for the music component of the Victorian school curriculum to be strengthened and aligned to developmental success in core academic subjects and assisting students reaching their potential.

A study released last year (2010) by Northwestern University Illinois - "Music training for the development of auditory skills," by Nina Kraus and Bharath Chandrasekaran drew together converging research from the scientific literature linking musical training to learning that spills over to skills including language, speech, memory, attention and even vocal emotion.

"The science covered comes from labs all over the world, from scientists of varying scientific philosophies, using a wide range of research methods.

“The explosion of research in recent years focusing on the effects of music training on the nervous system, including the studies in the review, have strong implications for education, said Nina Kraus, lead author of the Nature perspective, the Hugh Knowles Professor of Communication Sciences and Neurobiology and director of Northwestern’s Auditory Neuroscience Laboratory.

“Scientists use the term neuroplasticity to describe the brain’s ability to adapt and change as a result of training and experience over the course of a person’s life. The studies covered in the Northwestern review offer a model of neuroplasticity, Kraus said. The research strongly suggests that the neural connections made during musical training also prime the brain for other aspects of human communication.

“An active engagement with musical sounds not only enhances neuroplasticity, she said, but also enables the nervous system to provide the stable scaffolding of meaningful patterns so important to learning.

“The brain is unable to process all of the available sensory information from second to second, and thus must selectively enhance what is relevant,” Kraus said. Playing an instrument primes the brain to choose what is relevant in a complex process that may involve reading or remembering a score, timing issues and coordination with other musicians.

“A musician’s brain selectively enhances information-bearing elements in sound,” Kraus said. “In a beautiful interrelationship between sensory and cognitive processes, the nervous system makes associations between complex sounds and what they mean.” The efficient sound-to-meaning connections are important not only for music but for other aspects of communication, she said.

“The Nature article reviews literature showing, for example, that musicians are more successful than non-musicians in learning to incorporate sound patterns for a new language into words. Children who are musically trained show stronger neural activation to pitch changes in speech and have a better vocabulary and reading ability than children who did not receive music training.

“And musicians trained to hear sounds embedded in a rich network of melodies and harmonies are primed to understand speech in a noisy background. They exhibit both enhanced cognitive and sensory abilities that give them a distinct advantage for processing speech in challenging listening environments compared with non-musicians.

“Children with learning disorders are particularly vulnerable to the deleterious effects of background noise, according to the article. “Music training seems to strengthen the same neural processes that often are deficient in individuals with developmental dyslexia or who have difficulty hearing speech in noise.”

“Currently what is known about the benefits of music training on sensory processing beyond that involved in musical performance is largely derived from studying those who are fortunate enough to afford such training, Kraus said. “The research review, the Northwestern researchers conclude, argues for serious investing of resources in music training in schools accompanied with rigorous examinations of the effects of such instruction on listening, learning, memory, attention and literacy skills.

“The effect of music training suggests that, akin to physical exercise and its impact on body fitness, music is a resource that tones the brain for auditory fitness and thus requires society to re-examine the role of music in shaping individual development, ” the researchers conclude.

Ref: <http://nuin.northwestern.edu/taking-music-seriously/>

What the Kraus study highlights is the strong relationship between music and advancing achievement in a range of academic pursuits, potentially increasing the number of students who could fall into the gifted, talented or advanced categories and thus lifting academic excellence in Victoria.

Ideally, I would suggest the introduction to music and rhythm should occur at kindergarten level and progress throughout primary level so that a reasonable level of sophistication exists by secondary level and certainly there is no reason to think the attributes of a gifted, talented or advanced musician will only emerge at tertiary level.

Exposure and participation to music and rhythm at those early ages will not only assist in core curriculum performance but also in the nurturing of our next Young Mozarts with a musical talent born of a passionate desire to learn, to perform, to develop proficiency and to understand musical styles that are translated from dots on a piece of manuscript to the presentation of a musical journey that takes listener and performer into the mind and times of a particular composer. Each of these attributes is special and when married with a maturity beyond the performer’s years, there is a clear indication of a gift, a talent, of advanced understanding.

These can be evident in young musicians throughout primary school years and certainly strengthened well before the aspiring professional artist undertakes tertiary education – therefore in Victoria I would encourage the committee to look at the creation a uniform and supportive framework to nurture and grow young musicians who have demonstrated an early gift or talent in one or several musical disciplines, eg, piano, instrumental, voice, composition.

EXTENT AND QUALITY OF MUSIC EDUCATION PROVISION IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS

The provision of music education in Victorian schools should, in my view, be based on three basic tenets:

- To introduce students to well-structured musical forms and history through listening, performing and exploring in a way that enables them to retain an appreciation throughout life and where they have the passion and proficiency, to make career choices.
- To have a curriculum that is flexible and accommodating of those desirous of advancing their musical studies in a broader school-family-community partnership
- To have a curriculum that reflects the musical culture of a community (ie, the school program working in partnership with local musical groups to keep a tradition alive as in brass bands, pipe bands not imposing a new genre in an alien environment) and enables students to be an active participant in their community.

Access to instrumental music programs in Victorian schools has throughout history been patchy. There have eras and communities where it has flourished thanks to a community ethos and particular staff, perhaps best demonstrated in the late 1960s and early 1970s when secondary school programs were established in a number of areas.

The future of music education in Victorian schools should continue to be one of maximum inclusion while at the same time raising standards to benefit aspiring professional musicians and harnessing the positive learning attributes of music for all students across the curriculum.

A stronger emphasis on refined learning at upper primary school level would be a significant step forwards in raising the level of attainment at VCE level and I believe assist in reducing the dropout rates identified in the Commonwealth study into music in schools – continue to engage and stimulate young people! Never under-estimate their capacity to learn!

I would also urge this Inquiry to give consideration to the needs of schools, teachers, students and families in communities across rural and regional Victoria where distance, time and financial considerations can inhibit the development of young musicians.

Greater use of technology for learning and in providing peer support and mentoring have a place in the life of the today's students.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is currently a strategic partner for Melbourne Youth Music and its Saturday programs. However, I would urge very strong consideration be given to an expansion of this support into regional areas to enable the establishment of regional programs.

Orchestra Victoria's exceptional MoVE program successfully engages country regions and has now been expanded to culminate with a Hamer Hall performance by selected students – that is once a year. Country students need and deserve more.

The pathway for young musicians from rural and regional areas should be de-cluttered.

I would be pleased to further comment on matters raised in this submission should the committee wish.

The work of the committee can lead to Victoria taking a real role of leadership through innovation, achievement and creativity in the field of music to benefit all students and particularly those aspiring professional musicians and teachers of the future.

Chris Earl has been involved in community music at local, state and national level for more than 35 years. In the brass genre, he has conducted some of Victoria's leading brass bands, acted as an adjudicator across Australia at competitions and eisteddfods and for 15 years published the national brass band magazine. As a music publisher he commissioned major new works from Australian composers and in 2006 was a finalist in the Australian Classical Music Awards. He has worked with major international brass soloists and produced major musical performances. As a private teacher, he has prepared students for eisteddfod performances and AMEB and VCE examination performances. Chris is also the father of a young 14-year-old musician currently performing and studying piano, trumpet and composition
