

Music Education in Australia

Richard Gill - Melbourne Age & Sydney Morning Herald, August 2009

Your children are being discriminated against if they are not receiving a well-planned and properly taught music program at their schools. They are being denied all sorts of educational opportunities and are being placed at a disadvantage when compared with the relatively small number of children who do receive good music education in Australia.

Some private schools and some state schools in Australia have outstanding arts programs. The tragedy is, however, that in spite of small pockets of excellence in some schools, the condition of one of those arts subjects, namely music, ranges in this country from shoddy to completely unacceptable in a regrettably large number of cases.

It is a cause for national embarrassment and a national disgrace that large numbers of school-age children in Australia are not receiving any music education. It is also disgraceful that huge numbers of children are receiving sub-standard, watered-down versions of music. Activities such as playing children Mozart sonatas while they do arithmetic, believing it will make their brains bigger, or having them gyrate their bodies to the latest pop music, do not constitute music education.

We teach music to children because of its immeasurable capacity and potency to act on the heart, mind, spirit and soul of humanity. We teach music to children because, in so doing, we acknowledge a heritage which points to the fact that there is almost no civilisation on earth which does not have music somewhere at the heart of its existence.

Through music we can learn many skills associated with social inclusion and social interaction that are particularly characteristic of music. We teach children music because it is unique and has its own integrity as a subject or discipline.

Apart from the intrinsic reasons for teaching music, or any art subject for that matter, the evidence from the collected wisdom of neuroscience is now overwhelmingly demonstrating that children studying music seriously have a considerable advantage educationally over children who don't study music. In short, because of the essentially aural nature of music, together with the requirements of intense listening and intense concentration, the child's brain responds powerfully to music education, thereby enhancing all other learning the child might undertake.

Is it not, therefore, a matter of discrimination against children when they are not provided with properly trained music teachers teaching a well-designed curriculum? Is it not further discrimination to deny every child, irrespective of social circumstance, the opportunity for a full and complete education that includes music?

On reading most creative arts curriculums, and I have read most of them in this country, one is reasonably led to believe that many of the curriculum writers who dream up this nonsense would appear to be non-practitioners of anything genuinely educational or artistic, but seem to have a facility in edu-speak: bullshit baffles brains, I believe is the appropriate expression.

In the most recently regressive acts of educational malfunction, schools of thought have emerged that would have one believe that all the arts are related and function the same way. The visual arts, dance and drama all have their unique qualities and their own integrities, all of which must be preserved and not rolled into one meaningless subject.

A serious music education starts in preschool and continues to the end of schooling. Serious music education has singing as its basis, which includes singing songs representative of all musical styles and periods, from which basic skills in learning to read and write music are taught. A serious music education includes composition: the reason we teach music is so that children can make their own music. This means that children should listen to a vast range of musical styles so that an understanding of how music works might be achieved.

At some stage, the teaching of instruments follows and is relatively painless because the child can already read, write and understand musical notation; the instrumental teacher can do his or her job properly. Social inclusion, communal behaviour, co-operation, ensemble skills, teamwork and sharing creative ideas all become part of a serious music education.

It is, therefore, greatly to the credit of the federal, state and territory education ministers that they, at the request of Arts Minister Peter Garrett, have agreed to include the arts subjects in the new national curriculum. Such an act demonstrates enlightened thinking. The Rudd/Gillard policy of social inclusion in education and the policy of serious educational reform could be enacted powerfully if good music education were available to every child in Australia. Governments should not rest until every child in this country has access to a highly qualified music teacher. The universities need to take a long, hard look at the way they teach music teachers.

Would you train a surgeon on 11 hours of classes? In some places in Australia, that's the number of hours a trainee primary teacher receives in music education.

What passes for the tertiary training of music teachers these days is completely inadequate. Indeed, the whole question of universities and music needs a very serious examination.

"Music is a more potent instrument than any other in education," said Plato in response to a question asked approximately 2300 years ago, and here in Australia, in the year 2009, some children are still being denied an opportunity to have a complete education.

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