THE DILEMMA IN BOYS’ MUSIC

SCOTT HARRISON offers insights into the effect of the Australian popular masculine image on boys’ music making.

Music can be the means through which boys most freely express themselves, and can provide opportunities for growth like no other activity in a boy’s social, intellectual and emotional development. However, some boys might not want to participate in certain styles of music, particularly school-based music. Also, some boys might shy away from music that sounds high, soft or gentle, simply because of a perceived association with femininity.

One result is that boys tend not to choose to play instruments such as violin or flute. Even more importantly, they tend not to engage in certain singing activities such as choirs. Low participation by men in choral activity has been an historically well-documented problem for the last century in many Western cultures, yet the involvement of men in choirs in cultures such as England or Wales doesn’t seem to carry the same stigma as it does here. Much of this prejudice is related to perceptions of masculinity in Australia.

Several themes defining Australian masculinity are evident in both research literature and popular texts–contempt for authority, participation in sport, and love of beer all contribute to constructing the Australian male identity. Mateship is promoted as one way in which Australian masculinity is homogenised. According to McLean, ‘Male camaraderie or “mateship” is founded on sharing the rituals of masculine identity. The exclusion of women is an integral aspect, and many of these rituals turn out to be destructive or oppressive. Binge drinking, gambling and violent sports are obvious examples.’

Mates are different from friends-mateship often avoids signs of weakness or emotion that can destroy relationships; mates goad or dare each other into risky or often unhealthy behaviour. ‘Bagging’ and ridicule are frequently used to force mates into subscribing to accepted norms. Historically, Australian heroes and warriors were contemptuous of authority–for example, characters like Ned Kelly, and the swagman from Waltzing Matilda. The two world wars demonstrated the fearlessness of the Australian male in battle. Men, as Australian novelist Tim Winton has commented, ‘were meant to be heroes, patriarchs, warriors, powerhouses, impenetrable, immovable, unyielding and without emotion.’ Winton’s description goes a long way to explain why some men don’t always associate with music.
Many Australian males are fairly rigid in their rejection of feminine characteristics. Generally speaking, men are less comfortable in crossing the gender divide than are women, and the result for arts participation is a gender imbalance, with more girls than boys engaging in musical activities at school. Music teachers find this a particular problem when they need to balance singing ensembles at upper primary and secondary school levels. Avoiding femininity is a more serious issue for boys because of the erroneous connection of femininity with homosexuality. Boys who participate in activities categorised by some others as ‘feminine’, such as choral singing, can be subject to negative scrutiny and become vulnerable to homophobic abuse, regardless of their sexuality. This can discourage involvement in some forms of music. In extreme cases, bullying and homophobic insults directed towards boys engaged in these activities can lead them to social isolation, thence to feelings of depression and its possible consequences.

The situation is not ‘etched in stone’ however. Boys and men will often be more inclined to participate in music performance if the style is contemporary, popular and accepted by their peer group. Theatrical productions generally mean there is a supportive group of other male participants. A closer look at these performances provides teachers and researchers with possible solutions to engaging males in music. Similarly, the recent successes of The Birrabeen Blokes in nationally televised choral competitions are proof that with strong leadership, appropriate role models and sensitive choice of repertoire, men will happily engage with music making. Australia is blessed with a fantastic array of musical role models-Jimmy Barnes belting out Working Class Man, Richard Tognetti playing a Bach violin concerto; Peter Allen giving his rendition of I Still Call Australia Home; Slim Dusty singing Pub With No Beer; The Preatures belting out their electro-punk My People on stage at the ARIAS; Nick Cave (who, incidentally, sang in Warragatta Cathedral choir and the choir at Caulfield Grammar School) singing his spooky Murder Ballads; and the ARIA Award winner Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu playing guitar and singing Djarrimiri in Yolngu.

Beyond our shores, young men are seeking to involve themselves in music, too. Like The Birrabeen Blokes, the all-male UK group Only Men Aloud is a fine example of the achievements men can have in choral singing: they won the televised competition Last Choir Standing and have now recorded and toured to enormous acclaim. Boys in the UK have embraced new ways of learning through the Musical Futures program, in which boys became interested in music because they knew they were going to put on a show and have jolly good fun! Initial results from Sing Up-the £40m campaign launched in 2007 in order to make singing integral to every primary school curriculum in the UK by 2011-reveal the resurgence of singing by boys. Patrick Freer’s work in the United States demonstrates similar findings, while Robert Faulkner’s effort with male singers in Iceland documents the use of singing throughout Iceland as a means of renewing traditions and rebuilding nationhood.

The main concern for music educators is to find readily available resources with feasible solutions for engaging boys. Practical tips can now be found in a number of recent publications on this subject. Martin Ashley emphasises the importance of peer role models in music and interrogates the role of repertoire and genre, through his 2008 book Teaching Singing to Boys and Teenagers; Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music by Freya Jarman-Ivens, follows up these ideas by presenting and analysing suggested repertoire for boys and men. Daryl Barclay’s doctoral dissertation emphasises the roles that school principals play in school music-in promoting, advocating, participating and encouraging non-music staff to support it. This will be one piece of research music teachers can leave with their school principal to contemplate and act upon! Insights into the extent of gender role rigidity in schools are given in my book Masculinities and Music, which also gives examples of men and boys making music, setting out boys’ personal stories, and the problems and remedies associated with boys’ music making.

What I hope will be a useful reference for Australian music educators is my forthcoming book, Male voices. Stories of boys learning through making music. It draws on accounts of boys creating music in an array of distinctly Australian contexts, and provides ideas for music teachers and community music leaders across the country. There are practical examples for:

• involving parents, particularly fathers and grandfathers, in making music
• enabling flexible approaches that match the culture and expectations of the school
• persuading the school leadership team to support music in tangible ways
• bringing an integrated arts approach to fruition through school productions, movement classes, dance, media, drama and visual art
• managing transition periods, particularly from primary to secondary school
• advocating a non-judgmental approach by accepting participation over ‘right notes’
• embracing informal, relaxed learning environments
• using technology for engagement
• creatively using limited resources
• being (and employing) positive role models.

These ‘top ten’ initiatives are only part of the remedy to the problem of engaging boys in music making. With moves towards a national curriculum firmly on the agenda, the time is ripe for music educators and school music programs to ensure that school music helps boys’ growth and development, rather than hindering them in their socialisation. Taking account of the positive role models and initiatives suggested here will ensure that all students have the
opportunity to willingly engage in music making without fear of failure or ridicule.

Notes

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