PATHWAYS OF AUSTRALIA’S COMMUNITY MUSIC

Community music is flourishing in every imaginable location in Australia, from bustling urban centres to remote outback towns, and millions of people are participating on a weekly basis. Those are among the findings from the Sounds Links project, writes BRYDIE-LEIGH BARTLET, researcher at the Queensland Conservatorium.

Over the past two years, the Sounds Links project has researched the dynamics of Australia’s community music activity, and the models it represents for music learning and teaching in both formal and informal settings. A close examination of six diverse case studies, and a nation-wide online survey, revealed an intricate picture of musical activity, which until now had barely been visible outside the circles of its participants.

Just Fiddling, Albany, Western Australia.

The case studies
At the start of the project, the scope for case studies in community music was vast. Across Australia there is a staggering array of activities, ranging from small-scale initiatives to those of fairly major organisations. From this wealth of possible examples, with the input of our partner organisations and their networks, six were selected. Over 600 people from these communities then participated in the study. These communities included a middle-class suburban location, a large established regional city, a small rural town, a culturally-diverse urban city, a remote Indigenous setting, and an urban Indigenous setting.

Accordingly, each case study provided a variety of insights into the dynamics of community music across a range of settings, locations, approaches and outcomes. For instance, the Dandenong Ranges Music Council (DPMC) case study provided a vibrant model for creative and innovative community partnerships, both through their ongoing activities and their successful school-community collaborations, which occur on an everyday level and at a flagship level. The Albany case study provided valuable insights into how community music operates in an Australian regional city. There was a striking community-mindedness in this regional centre, which then translated into a commitment towards participating in and supporting community music-making. The McLaren Vale case study provided a practical model of how a school-initiated community music program can take shape. The local Tathila Lutheran College is nurturing a number of vibrant school-community collaborations, which shows a commitment to intergenerational learning, and in turn enhance the school’s curriculum and students’ learning experiences.

The Fairfield City case study examined how community music programs operate in a culturally-diverse urban location in Australia: there was compelling evidence to support the connection between community music and cultural identity, particularly in case of migrant communities. The Borroloola case study illuminated how a remote Indigenous community music operates: it showed that in such a context, notions of culture, kinship and the land are deeply connected to Indigenous concepts of community, and by extension community music. The Inala case study demonstrated how a

The Sound Links project—the lowdown!
Sound Links was a project of Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre Griffith University in partnership with the Music Council of Australia, the Australian Music Association, and the Australian Society for Music Education. It was supported by the Australia Research Council’s Linkage scheme. The research team for the project consisted of Professor Hub Schippers (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre), Associate Professor Peter Dunbar-I.Ill (Sydney Conservatorium of Music), Dr Richard Leats (Music Council of Australia), and Research Fellow Dr Brydie-Leigh Bartlett (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre). The project was undertaken during 2007–2008.

The resulting report was launched at a Community Music Symposium co-hosted by Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre and Music, Play for Life in May of that year. The report makes a number of targeted recommendations for creating a sustainable environment for community music across the country. From an international perspective, it also constitutes the first study that considers six widely different practices with a consistent approach, creating the opportunity to draw conclusions about site and project specific characteristics, as well as more general features of community music activities. This article briefly discusses some of the most significant findings from the report.
community-driven program called ‘Stylin’ UP’, strongly supported by a local council, can be used to engage young Indigenous people in an urban context, and allow them to feel a sense of pride about their cultural identity.

The nation-wide survey

The Sound Links nation-wide survey was designed to validate the case studies and benchmark them against national impressions and perceptions. The survey was developed in consultation with the partner organisations, and distributed online, mostly through their mailing lists, to a wide range of music educators, community music facilitators and practitioners, music therapists and arts administrators. Over 200 people responded, representing every state and territory. School teachers made up the highest proportion of respondents (60.3%), and a large proportion of those were then involved in choral music (48.6%).

The results revealed a number of significant trends, particularly in terms of success factors, learning and teaching models and school—community collaborations. The survey identified a range of critical success factors in Australian community music, the top five being:

1. inspiring leadership from an individual (64.7%)
2. careful planning (62.8%)
3. location, venue and facilities (62.7%)
4. support from the broader community (61.5%)
5. choice of repertoire/style/genre (59.6%)

These success factors were all highly evident in the case studies, and substantiate the importance of engaging practice and pedagogy, the provision of infrastructure and organisation, and connections to the broader community in vibrant community music-making.

In terms of learning and teaching in community settings, survey respondents noted the prevalence of one-way instructional teaching and peer or collaborative learning. Many of the responses touched on the need for the musical director/conductor to be flexible, responsive to participants’ needs, and to acknowledge that skill levels can differ. A focus on the process, the enjoyment of learning and the social factors of playing music together were also noted. However, the most striking response to the online survey was in relation to the connections between the schools and community music: 74.3% of respondents believe the connections are not reaching their full potential. This is a significant response, and illustrates the importance of not only examining this issue further, but finding positive models for how these connections can be initiated and developed more effectively. Such models are explored in greater detail in the report.

Significant findings and recommendations

Sound Links demonstrates that community music is a vibrant and widespread phenomenon in Australia, enriching the lives of people across geographical locations and social and cultural backgrounds. It also suggests that community music has perhaps been less recognised than it deserves as a powerful player in the cultural arena because of one of its very strengths—strong local engagement and support—often leading to relative independence from external drivers and funding. Although the brief of this project did not extend into the economics of community music, Sound Links suggests there is a strong case to be made for a high return on investment; the ‘musical activity for public dollar’ value of community music activities is considerable beyond doubt, and a possible source of inspiration for more effective arts funding strategies at the local, regional and national level.

Given that each of the six case studies was selected to represent a very different set of circumstances and environment, many of the characteristics of the community music activities observed were unique to their specific participants, facilitators, sites, contexts, aims, and infrastructure. However, there were also strongly shared underlying characteristics between the activities. Indeed, the research team discovered nine domains were present (in varying degrees) in all community music activities observed:

- Infrastructure: Organisation: Visibility and public relations; Relationship to place; Social engagement; Support and networking; Dynamic music-making; Engaging pedagogy and facilitation; and Links to school. This may well be the most significant outcome of Sound Links. As it represents the first community music research project that has juxtaposed six widely different practices examined through a single methodology, the research team was able to draw comparisons that were previously difficult or even impossible to make.

In light of these findings, the Sound Links report outlines a number of concrete recommendations based on the nine domains identified, designed to create a sustainable environment for community music to flourish in Australia now and into the future. Some of the recommendations are aimed at practitioners, others at cultural officers, policy makers, music educators and other stakeholders. Many can be used and implemented at a local level. However, the most significant recommendation on a national scale was to initiate a community music network in Australia. Music Play for Life stepped up to the challenge and acted upon this recommendation at the Symposium in May this year. Australia's Community Music Network website is now up and running (see listing in E-contacts). The research team hopes that these initiatives, and the implementation of the other recommendations outlined in the report, will ensure a sustained and growing engagement with community music in Australia in the years to come.

Aside from the specific research findings from this project, one of its most important outcomes is the series of case studies that can serve as exemplars for professional music educators. So whether you're a classroom generalist teaching music, a specialist classroom music teacher or...
specialist instrumental teacher—if you have a commitment to community music making, please obtain a copy, read through the chapters that are relevant to your interests and your local community, and swing into action to help put community music into practice. M=A

To find out more about Sound Links

The book Sound Links: Community Music in Australia can be ordered in hard copy from the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre for $39.95 (including postage)—email: qcrc@griffith.edu.au to order.

- HTLT downloadable copies are available from http://tinyurl.com/sound-links-report/

A free brochure outlining the most significant findings from the project can be ordered in hard copy from the Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre—email: qcrc@griffith.edu.au to order.

- FREE downloadable copies are available from http://tinyurl.com/sound-links-summary/

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The Victorian Orff Schulwerk Association
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- Level 1 & 2 Courses 6-10 April 2010 in Glen Iris
- Living Music & Dance 7-8 May 2010 in Preston
- Marimba Family Camp 6-8 August 2010 in Healesville
- 14th Early Childhood Conference of Performing Arts (ECCPA) 21-22 August 2010 in Kew