BRINGING MUSICAL SKILLS TO REMOTE SCHOOLS

Since the establishment of Regional Conservatoriums in NSW in the late 1970s a network of conservatoriums providing extensive music education services to almost 20,000 students in NSW regional communities has developed. These services encompass specialist instrumental and vocal training with a special emphasis on the music education training of school aged students and curriculum support for schools. In most cases, Regional Conservatoriums are the principal provider of music education services for their region servicing schools, individuals and the wider community’s musical needs.

Regional Conservatoriums are often teaching across wide geographical areas requiring teachers to travel vast distances in order to provide students in outlying communities, villages and cities with access to specialist teachers. The majority of these outreach programs are working exclusively with NSW Public Schools. Fundamentally, Regional Conservatoriums are attempting to provide equity for students in remote areas so that they have the same access to music education opportunities as do their city counterparts.

The developmental music program
A pilot project was designed to offer students attending small schools in the rural and regional areas served by two of the three divisions[1] that comprise Mitchell Conservatorium (Bathurst and Lithgow Regions), access to quality music education and to develop musical citizenship through the attainment of life-long musical skills. The small schools targeted were category S5 and S6 Department of Education Schools. This transfers respectively to a school having 26 or less students (S6) and 26 or more but less than 52 (S5). The program aimed to improve students’ confidence and to assist their integration into a larger secondary school environment through secondary school music groups. The program planned to include a demonstration lesson, supported by a sequential program to build skills in the fundamental acquisition of music and instrumental techniques, including movement to music, singing, percussion and recorder. Ensemble sessions for the whole school eg choir, recorder ensemble, rock group, percussion ensemble, were envisaged and the program highlighted support to school band programs through the development of basic pitch, rhythm and music reading skills.

When this pilot program was presented to the school principals it was anticipated that six schools would be interested; however, all 12 school principals responded favourably. This resulted in the funding that had been sourced for six schools being evenly distributed over the 12 schools. Initially two staff from the Mitchell Conservatorium Inc were engaged in the project but the demand was greater than the human capacity of these two individuals so a third teacher was engaged. The implementation of the developmental music program has three stages:

Stage 1
Weekly classroom sessions developing the fundamentals of rhythm, pitch and notation were delivered. This increased student’s understanding and accomplishment in music, and they acquired an appreciation of the meaning and value of music personally, culturally and as a form of communication. In some schools these sessions augmented an existing music program while in other schools the developmental music program initiated engagement in and through music.

Stage 2
On the strength of the overwhelming success and interest during Stage 1, the next stage involved individuals being offered instrumental tuition by the teachers involved in the program. These lessons incurred tuition fees so were only available to students who could afford the fees. To ensure continued interest and a sense of equity, all the activities of Stage 1 continued concurrently during this phase.

Stage 3
This stage saw the expansion of the program into a whole school ensemble approach or the formation of a small ensemble. Each school established an ensemble that was appealing to the audience of the school. The ensembles formed ranged in genre from a “rock group” to a whole school percussion ensemble.

The benefits
The schools involved expressed appreciation for having qualified music teachers delivering the sessions. Classroom teachers with no musical training observed the instruction and in turn developed their own knowledge, skills and understanding of professional music teaching within the classroom environment. The program was also able to satisfy the K-6 Creative Arts curriculum by providing assistance to classroom teachers with no previous musical training to achieve the relevant syllabus outcomes.

It is also noted that the implementers of the program were all male: Gavin Lidgad, Aaron Holler and Rob Shannon. These instrumental specialists provided the opportunity for young boys to interact with role models that fracture the stereotypical characterisation of music teachers being female. This has seen a positive spin-off for most of the young boys through their enthusiasm and interest to learn to play an instrument.

The students gained basic musical knowledge and were offered the opportunity to learn and become proficient on an
A Systematic Music Education for Australia

Our most precious treasure in Australia is greater than the rich bounties of the resources out West. Greater than the wonderful landscapes both coastal and inland; more worthy than the diversity of our peoples and the culture they enjoy. It is our children - nothing is more important than their future and their opportunities. It is essential that our young people be given every opportunity to reach their full creative potential and the technology to achieve it. As such, every child must have equal access via this technology and be connected and networked to learn together. How? Music!

Many of us already know that music, more than just about anything else, is the empowering force that enables us to deliver this networked connection and unlock the creative potential of our children. Many of us have had the good fortune to have experienced this ourselves. One actual example - Nick was a young boy who had struggled in all his primary school education, suffering from an undetected visual and learning disability, who had become a shy child with low self-esteem, poor reading skills, worse mathematical ones and a general malaise. He considered himself "stupid" and shunned anything in class where he had to stand out. But Nick was absolutely transformed into a bright, enthusiastic, outgoing, well read, articulate and talented young man, all within a period of just six years. How could this have happened? The high school he attended had a compulsory instrumental music program. It was almost entirely due to the hugely positive effects of music and his learning to play a violoncello. To him and his parents, it seemed like a miracle had taken place. He even became the Vice-Captain of his school!

Back in 1974 a young economist named José Antonio Abreu, working in the Venezuelan Government, came up with a concept, a way in which he could unlock the tremendous potential of youth in the society of his country. Venezuela was racked by poverty, crime, drugs and a heavily disadvantaged society; puzling over what he could do to change this and arrest this downward spiral by the youth of his country, he turned to his first love - music. He was an accomplished pianist - amateur, but loved music with a passion. He thought that if he could share his joy of music with the young, that he might be able to give them hope and the lifting of their spirits that only music can impart. With huge obstacles and a seemingly impossible task ahead of him, he introduced an orchestral music program for the street kids in Caracas - El Sistema (as it became known) was born. He started with 10 kids and 15 music stands, and only his own finances to support it. Today there are over 250,000 (some put it closer to 350,000) children involved in over 200 youth orchestras across Venezuela. There were none when he started.

El Sistema systematises music education and promotes the collective practice of music through symphony orchestras and choruses, as a means of social organisation and communitarian development. Simply: community music education by teamwork and networking.

His medium is classical music. Why classical music? Because it has the structure, the form and the inclusiveness necessary to allow everyone to be a part of it - particularly in the context of a symphony orchestra or a choir. No other music form enables this to take place. Anyone who has ever played in an orchestra knows how well it does this - there is a tremendous sense of belonging and everyone has a role and a place. No truer example of "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts" exists.

It is immeasurably important that we try to preserve the things that help us experience our common humanity. Many of the young musicians involved in El Sistema who went on to achieve greatness in various professions (and there have been many) credited music studies for providing the discipline and structure in their lives.

The Managing Director of the Canadian Glen Gould Foundation, which recently awarded...