

**Submission
No 99**

**INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Name: Professor Goetz Richter

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Goetz Richter AM, PhD

Associate Professor Violin, University of Sydney/ Sydney Conservatorium of Music

Ms. Julia Finn MP

Chair

Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales

July 24 2024

Dear Ms. Finn,

I am writing this letter as a submission to the joint select committee on Arts and Music education.

I am currently an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney, with four decades of experience in the training of professional, performing classical musicians (largely violin performers, but also other string players and ensembles). Furthermore, I was an associate concertmaster of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra from 1988 to 2004, a director of the orchestra's company board for some years and a president of the Musicians Association responsible for establishing groundbreaking working conditions for musicians during the administration of Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating. I am also a founding artistic director of the Kendall National Violin Competition (now in its 23rd year) and NSW President of AUSTA (Australian Strings Association). I hold a PhD in philosophy from the University of Sydney where I teach a course on the philosophy of music.

I have observed and contributed extensively to primary, secondary and tertiary programs of music education in NSW, nationally and internationally over several decades.

My submission will proceed in three steps: I will outline some general observations about music and musical education, its current condition, the skills required and the human capacities developed by its artful practice.

Secondly, I will outline the requirements of musical competency and the wider cultural, social and human importance of such competency.

Finally, I will make some suggestions for directions that may need to be considered to advance education and music in NSW.

If this submission is deemed too long, I can suggest you read the concluding remarks.

Summarily, I hope that this submission will be helpful to the important work of the committee. I congratulate the NSW State parliament for establishing this committee in the first instance as music education is a most important topic. Its importance is not contingent on our times. It is of fundamental human importance succinctly expressed by the Greek Philosopher Plato who recognised that "...when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them...". The quality of musical education has civilisational implications far beyond a current and immediate context.

General Observations

Over the past decades I have observed an increasing confusion about fundamentals of the teaching and learning of music in educational institutions, including universities. There is insufficient attention to essential characteristics of the many different genres of music and their uniqueness. Understood as a cultural product made available for consumers, music of all kinds is increasingly reified, its significance reduced to sounding structures for consumption.

However, music is essentially not sounding structures - it is a temporal form. Music is an existential activity through which humans achieve - and develop consciousness of their inner life and their soul. Music can help us develop such consciousness to a high level of detail when we understand its potential to develop active listening and the unique human capacity to create and play music through our active musical imagination – rather than through devices. The

commodification of music has been accelerated by rapid technological development and will be further advanced by the role of Artificial Intelligence in the future. If society remains thoughtless here, humans will lose an important spiritual opportunity for development.

Mesmerized by objectifying, technological functionality and data management that is artificial intelligence we tend to become trapped in modes of objectifying manipulation unable to see a grounded concept of human creativity that must underpin any education in music and art. Indeed, the joint select committee itself may need to reflect whether the authentic requirements of musical education are congruent with requirements enabling participation in the creative industry – as suggested in the terms of reference. (The committee must surely consider, whether the latter might undermine the former? It would seem important to contemplate this possibility, it seems to me...)

Be that as it may, in essence, I see the following development:

The past two decades have seen a decline in musical and wider humanistic competencies. Naïvely assuming that technology might replace such competencies we have become infatuated with appearance. In music, genres are considered essentially without fundamental differentiation, ignoring that ritual music, entertainment music, artistic music, etc. all require different approaches and intentionalities and develop different qualities of consciousness and attention. We are beginning to see symptoms of a sobering disillusionment with this confusion, however, evident in a decline of mental health and attentional capacities particularly in younger people. A responsible society must return unequivocally to a competence-based approach in these disciplines as this allows individuals to truly advance and liberate themselves and develop genuine autonomy and authenticity.

This submission seeks to remind us about the fundamentals of music and our human relationship with it. **Fundamental to music is the human ability to sing.** Singing is a form of embodied thinking or consciousness that combines feeling and thinking in a variety of modalities, attention and imagination. Artful and complex music can develop this embodied consciousness to a very high level provided it is conceived through the active imagination, listening and anticipation.

The development of musical literacy and active listening competence, the **ability to read and imagine musical notation** and to conceive such notation in embodied, tonal ideas as a temporal play through the capacity of musical performance (singing, instrumental performance) affords humans a unique possibility to develop themselves and their cognitive, spiritual, emotional and social capacities. Understood as this possibility, music is entirely unique and has a civilising power as important as the ability to read and interpret text autonomously. Naturally, as a mere product of experience music can also be manipulative and disempowering – the history of civilisation illustrates this thoroughly. It needs to be clear that practices which replace autonomous embodied consciousness with technical manipulation of musical sounds do not afford such an opportunity. They reduce musical experience to function and product. Accordingly, singing, playing and actively reading music are essential in providing us with educational benefits from our engagement with music.

Regrettably, the **development of these capacities seems no longer central to musical education** at a primary and secondary level of education. That is quite different in other countries, incidentally (eg. Finland) and seems to have occurred in the past years through a preoccupation with educational ideologies. Putting this point into perspective, I would remind the joint select committee that in the late nineteenth century a vast majority of Australian households had access to musical instruments and members of such households of any class and any economic possibility had some competency in reading notated music. This enabled many citizens to participate meaningfully in musical life, develop empowering competencies and project a vision of ensouled life well beyond initial confines. Great Australian musicians and artists emerged from this context transcending their initial boundaries, transcending social limits and achieving international renown. Many more simply advanced their capacities as human beings and achieved manifestation and advancement of spiritual potential through a discipline of making music that was based on their own capacity of reading and interpreting musical notation.

By contrast, today **musical literacy has rapidly declined and has been replaced by the passive consumption of music and reactive, passive or manipulative engagement with music as a cultural product** in education. Much music has become a mere consumer product (a stimulant, tranquilizer or mood enhancer), an ideological determination or a way to manifest appearance, achieve escape from - or expression of frustration. Our ability to encounter music as a catalyst for truly creative transformation is declining. This development has been accelerated in recent years by Australian Universities and Conservatoria who have shown themselves to be thoughtless in understanding this development, opportunistic in seeking benefit from consumer attitudes and irresponsible in abandoning the consistent conservation of music as an important, truly creative spiritual activity.

Embodied Consciousness and Human Existence

On a very fundamental level **music develops our embodied consciousness, thinking and feeling.** It can also inhibit such development. The history of music in all cultures shows its ambivalence - music can be used for the manipulation of

people. It can accelerate intoxication, social divisions and alienation. It can advance formation of self, promote the cohesiveness of society and advance humanity. It can balance the manifold complexities of our soul and importantly develop freedom, feeling and thinking. What practices and skills might achieve positive advancement in education?

I would argue that the practice of music as an autonomous art as it has evolved in the history of Western art music is important in developing spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical and social existence. This does not mean such music is the only music that might do that. It simply means that it needs to be acknowledged as a particular opportunity through which humans transform themselves in a powerful way. Consuming music and discussing this consumption does little to develop musical competency and has little ability to achieve true educational outcomes.

Music education cannot be driven by ideology, industry or commodification – it needs to be determined by the development of a competency of listening. It needs to be advanced through attention and reflection to develop the embodied consciousness that manifests itself in artful creation and play of music. Ignoring the fact that some music demands high levels of active attention and literacy from those participating in this practice as listeners, singers and players of music undermines human success and our capacity for transcendence. Musical education that confuses technological manipulation with embodied thinking, is oblivious to the essential characteristics of different genres of music or ignorant of the fundamental cultural contexts from which music emerges will not develop authentic human capacities. It contributes to a confusion between human and artificial intelligence that seems currently one of our biggest civilisational challenges.

Concluding remarks

Naturally, this submission cannot go into large amounts of detail, however, in the main I would like to conclude with some brief points about requirements for music education in the state:

1. Music education must establish and advance musical competencies founded in embodied consciousness, imagination and feeling. These are **singing, reading, playing and composing**. Such competencies are developed in this order. No one can properly compose music who does not sing, read or play music. **Primary school children need to sing daily**. Schools must establish programs of instrumental learning that are competently directed and lead to an advancement of **proper skills of playing**. Such skills require **ongoing, systematic development and thoughtful structure directed by discipline experts**. Our culture regulates the quality of car mechanics, doctors and hairdressers. Yet, violin teachers can simply set themselves up by claiming to be such. Incompetent instrumental teaching is extremely detrimental to the physical, emotional and mental well-being of young people. I spend much of my time here at the University in remedial work with students who lack proper foundations of playing despite having played for a decade or more. My colleagues would agree with this statement.
2. Playing and composing music must be taught through inner singing and listening, conception of musical direction and form rather than manipulation of already existing sounds. **Singing must become the leading musical activity for every child**. It is the immediate manifestation of our musical imagination and conception initially. In primary school childhood musical training through proven methods like Kodaly method need to lay the foundations for higher musical skills. Solfege, sight -singing and ear training need to be consistently taught and practiced from primary stages of musical education onwards.
3. While diversity of musical genres is important their unique characteristics need to be understood, properly respected and recognised for their educational relevance or otherwise. Where such genres require high levels of competency, such competency must be respected and developed. Music in educational contexts must lead to advancement of competency to lead to freedom of thinking and feeling.
4. The **consumption of music cannot set the pace or direction of education**. We promote healthy eating and sustainable living. We also must promote spiritual well-being and the capacity for young people to achieve an active, healthy emotional and spiritual life through competent musical practice. This requires engagement and exposure to artful music.
5. The **stunning inequality of musical education** that currently exists **between private and public schools and between major cities and regions needs to be urgently addressed**. The Catholic school system has attempted to address inequality in music education through its Amadeus program. However, it seems to me that this program cannot achieve what it sets out as the pedagogical competencies and much of the detail of the program is lacking. It may in fact do damage to music and musical competency if it is not established properly.
6. **Universities and Conservatoria need to focus on music education and musical pedagogy as ways of developing musical, embodied competencies**. This needs to be particularly addressed in the areas of instrumental learning which requires much more strategic and consistent attention. Currently the outcomes here are concerning as music teachers lack understanding of instrumental pedagogy and performers lack pedagogical knowledge. Current university course structures and leaders are failing to address this challenge adequately. Instrumental learning and teaching needs more consistent and homogenous attention across the state, through proper support of Regional Conservatoria and their teachers, as students from regional NSW remain

disadvantaged. Other states in Australia (notably Queensland, WA) are doing better here as they support peripatetic instrumental teachers in schools throughout the state, I understand.

7. Developing the fundamentals of musical competency (singing, reading, playing, writing music) needs to be achieved in a consistent and focussed manner. Handing over educational resources to performing arts organisations (ACO, Sydney Symphony) who only have an occasional capacity to contribute to musical education needs to be balanced with resourcing the daily, important work that music teachers must undertake every day in their classes. I would guess that a major look at resourcing musical education properly to achieve an increase in musical competency would be required if we are respecting its fundamentals sincerely. This may not mean an increase in funding but rather a distribution of funding reflecting the proper, structured development of educational outcomes.

Thank you for reading this submission. If you wish to discuss it further, I would happily make myself available to the committee for further discussion.

Yours sincerely

Dr. Goetz Richter AM
Associate Professor of Violin
Sydney Conservatorium of Music
The University of Sydney