Music Education: The Time is Ripe

Throughout my career as a music educator, the driving force has always been to enable access to active music learning for all children.

I believe that every child should be able to experience the thrill of playing a simple tune, creating a new tune, singing in a group, and playing music in an ensemble. As these experiences become deeper and more complex over time, so too can the inherent enjoyment that comes from the associated sense of achievement that is felt. Children are naturally curious and interested in music-making. Interest in music learning can be generated and enhanced when students perceive that they ‘can do it’ (i.e. are competent, challenges are optimal), they can relate to it, and when they have some sense of control (autonomy) in their involvement. Social interactions with others through peer learning and joint projects can also contribute greatly to enjoyment in the learning process.

Evidence has been growing about the impact of music learning on other areas, especially in early childhood. Canberra’s Dr Anita Collins has highlighted research in neuroscience and music education, which shows that nothing “lights up” the brain like music, and that, over a sustained time, learning to play a musical instrument and to read music, leads to enhanced development of neural networks. This can result in improved language development, executive functioning (such as paying attention, making decisions, empathy) and social skills. You may be interested to read further in the book *The power of music* by Susan Hallam MBE, and on Dr Collins’ *Bigger, Better Brains* website.

With the advent of the Music Education Strategy, the time is ripe for music education to grow in South Australian schools and for music education to become more accessible for all children. There will also be a growing need for additional specific instrumental learning outside of schools, along with other opportunities for children to participate in music learning through the rich network of music organisations, like AMEB, in this state.

The South Australian government recognises the importance of music education, and government schools in South Australia are set to benefit from the new 10-year Music Education Strategy 2019 to 2029 which was launched on December 1, 2018, by the South Australian Minister for Education, John Gardner. This document sets out South Australia’s long-term vision that all children and young people throughout their education have access to high-quality music education that is valued and inspires learning.


In developing the Strategy, the government undertook research which showed that “globally, many high performing education systems prioritise music education within their curricula” (p.10).

Since the launch of the Strategy, there have been some significant milestones including:

- the establishment of the Music Education Advisory Panel
- appointment of the Manager of the Music Education Strategy, Mr Nick Birch (formerly Assistant Principal and Head of Music at Playford International College)
- the launch of the Music Innovation Fund in June, 2019
- the appointment of 3 Music Education Network Field Officers to commence in Term 3, who will work as mentors/coaches to strengthen and support quality classroom music through modelling and promoting high quality music education practices with teachers.

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The University of Adelaide

Liver Hallam MBE, and on Dr Collins’

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Meet an Examiner

– Erna Berberyan

I was born in Cape Town, South Africa as the youngest of three children to my classical singer/teacher parents. I started with much loved violin lessons through the Suzuki school in Stellenbosch at the tender age of three, but moved to traditional tuition around the age of seven. Just before reaching high school age our family moved to a small city called Bloemfontein in the dry centre of the country where the cultural life was contrastingly flourishing and very much alive.

During my high school years I had wonderful opportunities to study with first class teachers who themselves studied in Europe and I feel very privileged that I could be influenced by these wonderful musicians. During those years the local Symphony Orchestra offered a cadetship program where promising young musicians were allowed, by audition, to join the ranks of the orchestra for pit work during Opera season. I distinctly remember sitting in the orchestra pit as a 15 year old with my mouth hanging open in awe during my first practical opera experience playing Verdi’s Aida complete with a camel and a horse on stage!

I also learnt piano and saxophone and liked singing and writing popular songs in my spare time. Up to that point my music aspirations were focused on becoming a singer in a band like, I guess, many teenagers. Being a part of these mammoth productions, as well as my involvement in annual youth orchestra camps all over the country with like-minded young people, made my choice of studying to become a professional musician an easy and inevitable one.

Growing up, I was regularly involved in Eisteddfods and music examinations, much like the AMEB. Initially, I was more concerned about the special banana split ice cream which was my regular remuneration straight after each exam, but as I grew older, I realised how invaluable these opportunities were in shaping my work ethic, learning how to deal with triumph as well as disappointment, learning to cope with many pieces all at once and improving my physical and mental stamina. Last, but not least, these exams gave me an invaluable goal where other performance opportunities were not always in abundance and it provided an accurate (and sometimes sobering) measuring stick of my progress as a musician.

I have been blessed with two wonderful children of 13 and 16 years who play a mix of Viola, Trumpet, Cello and Oboe. They have both progressed through the ranks of the AMEB exam system for all the reasons I have already listed above. I can now also look at this system through the eyes of a parent and, although their lives become very busy and hectic at times, I just love seeing how they persevere in their focus and practice preparing for each exam and the sheer joy they experience when things go well - also the determination to do better next time when things did not quite go as planned. I took up classical singing about two years ago and have stepped out of my comfort zone to also do AMEB exams, as I believe that the benefits are relevant and valuable for all ages.

This year I have applied to become an examiner myself, which is something I have been considering for some time. Over the years I have prepared lots of students on various instruments for AMEB exams and I felt that I wanted to share and develop my skills further in this regard. In this day and age where everything is about instant money, instant food, instant gratification, etc., I am happy to see so many youngsters persevering with their instrumental tuition and I hope to hear many of them in my new role of examiner for the AMEB.

Erna Berberyan
AMEB Examiners
If you want to have this...

I’m sitting here in awe watching my son play basketball. He is in a new social team. Some players are at their first game, whilst others are veterans of the sport. I see my son confidently dribble the ball down the court. His eyes are up and focused. Evidence of his dedication to twice-weekly training, intensive camps and hundreds of games over the past four years.

It is not so different from my daughter’s school orchestra. Last week, this group of thirty young musicians presented a well-rehearsed and thoroughly entertaining program. I’m reminded of the internet meme highlighting the need to have children’s orchestras in order to have professional orchestras. A snapshot of what is behind the black tie and tails.

But this meme only shows the tip of the iceberg. Behind every school orchestra, behind every musician, there are years of study and focus. There is the passion and dedication of an instrumental teacher and parents. Decades before young professionals join an orchestra, the first seeds of skill, persistence and a love of music are sown.

These 12-year-old musicians have for years consistently attended their instrumental lessons, bringing their books and being responsible for their own instruments. They have learnt to read a new language. They have learnt to manage complex things with their instrument. They have learnt a large amount of repertoire. They have taken exams, with all the discipline and focus it takes to reach that goal. And above all, these musicians have learnt to perform, establishing the stagecraft skills required to present their efforts to an audience.

In an age of short attention spans, instant gratification and shallowness of knowledge, these children have done something remarkable. They have learned dedication. They have learnt to manage complex things by breaking them down into smaller parts, and if they don’t at first succeed, to be persistent. Along the way, their focus has improved. Their depth of study has been rewarded with an inner confidence. These children have an avenue for self-expression and a foundational understanding and appreciation of artistry. And their consistent effort has opened the orchestral door.

Before they are ever in an orchestra, instrumental teachers work with musicians to develop all these skills. From the earliest years, we challenge our musicians. We scaffold learning plans to motivate, inspire and encourage them. We prepare them for recitals, exams and auditions. We are their coach. We develop their skills at training and encourage their best performance in games.

I’m still sitting here on the cold aluminium basketball bench. I see my son’s teammate pass him the ball. He fakes one way then drives to the basket, just as he has hundreds of times at training. He scores! And just like that the game goes on. They don’t win the game today, but that’s just another part of the learning journey.
Overcoming obstacles and finding confidence through Speech and Drama

Not everyone knows what Speech and Drama is all about, so we thought the best way to learn more would be to hear directly from students. We asked 2 students from Speech and Drama Studios SA (Chelsea, taught by Lois Brimblecombe and Kelly Bickle, and Adrian, taught by Lois Brimblecombe and Laurie Rea) to share a bit about themselves and why they each study Speech and Drama and undertake AMEB Exams; how it is helping them overcome personal challenges and realise their potential.

How long have you been going to Speech and Drama classes?

Chelsea (14 years old)

- 6 years.

Adrian (22 years old)

- 2 years.

What do you like about Speech and Drama classes and what would you say to someone who doesn't really know what it's all about?

Chelsea:

Speech and Drama classes have been a huge part of my life and I am very grateful for all the opportunities it has given me. Speaking to people in positions of power or public speaking to a large audience is the number one anxiety and fear-provoking activity for most people, and especially for children. Speaking, communicating and speech can be tricky for anyone but it can be especially difficult for children who are shy, who have a disability, who are from a non-English speaking background, or who have a speech impediment.

However, if I told you that you could turn your fears on their head, and you could surprise yourself by getting so much fun and enjoyment from going to Speech and Drama classes every week, you might not believe me. That’s exactly what happens for me every Wednesday night at my Speech and Drama class. Every week, you will find a group of students, including me, having a wonderful time learning how to speak clearly, recite poetry, present prose pieces, learning to act and making lasting memories and friendships.

Adrian:

The lessons accommodate my interests, particularly trains and railways.

I have been working with my teacher, looking at many types of texts, including poetry and prose and she’s been teaching me how to make these texts sound interesting when reading them aloud. We also play word games in the sessions and I enjoy them. I have also enjoyed the one-to-one learning experience and found it quite helpful in improving my speech and communication.

What have been some highlights for you?

Chelsea:

One of my highlights is coming first in the prose reading at the Balaklava Eisteddfod. It was really fun and I felt super confident.

Adrian:

I have been going to TAFE, studying Information Technology for the past few years. I have completed Certificate II and am now undertaking Cert III. I have found some of the work quite challenging, but my lecturers have been giving me support with it.

Hopefully I’ll become more confident with speech and communication which may help with forming friendships in the groups I am involved with. I am very fortunate to be involved in these activities and value the help.

Do you do AMEB Speech & Drama exams?

Chelsea:

Each year I learn and practise so that I can take an AMEB exam and this year I am doing Grade 5. Having the opportunity to take exams is fantastic as it allows me to see how well I can do and how far I can reach to achieve my best. I can put all of my weekly learning into a real result by getting a good mark for my exam. I always feel very proud when I achieve a high result and it challenges me to try again the next year. If you have a child who is struggling to communicate, who is shy or isn’t able to speak up for themselves, Speech and Drama classes and the AMEB exams are the perfect way to help them to turn their fears into fun, their anxieties into opportunities and their shyness into confidence.

Speech and Drama also helps me sing more clearly and get higher marks in my AMEB singing exams and when I participate in Eisteddfods.

Adrian:

I recently undertook a Speech and Drama exam and am proud to have done so.

Another one of my areas of interest is music. I’ve been learning the organ for several years and have done three exams. I also play cello with the Norwood Symphony Orchestra and I sing with the male choir of the Young Adelaide Voices. I enjoy going to rehearsals and performing in concerts. I usually feel nervous before exams and concerts, but they help me overcome my anxiety.