

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by Stephanie McCaw, 2008 Churchill Fellow

“To study the 'Scotland-Venezuela' music education program and other community music projects - UK, Ireland, Finland”

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Index

Introduction	3
Executive Summary	4
Background	5
Program	5
The Journey	8
Conclusions	15
Recommendations	18

Introduction

For eight weeks from February to April 2009 I travelled on a Churchill Fellowship to the UK, Finland, the US and New Zealand, visiting music education projects in schools, communities and universities.

Travelling with me was my husband, James Harper, also a musician.

I'm very grateful to the Churchill Trust for providing a scheme that gives the recipients the opportunity to have extended direct contact with colleagues and peers, which allows time for reflection, and isn't obsessed with quantifying every outcome in economic or bureaucratic terms.

The trip was very inspiring, and has given me a framework for a better understanding of the depth and variety of work being done by music educators of many kinds, and a valuable perspective on my own work and its potential.

Executive summary

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Project description:

“To study the 'Scotland-Venezuela' music education program and other community music projects - UK, Ireland, Finland”

Highlights

Apart from developing a deeper understanding of adaptation of the Venezuelan “el sistema” program to conditions in England, Scotland and the US, the main highlight for me was being able to meet numerous highly accomplished, dedicated and hospitable musicians, educators and program organisers in all the places we visited.

Delivering a talk on Ferny Grove State High School Instrumental Music Program to staff and postgraduate students at the Education Faculty, Cambridge University, was a milestone, and overall I was grateful for the chance to gain some insight into the thoughtful solutions that musical performers, coordinators and researchers are devising, to problems facing communities and their young people.

Major conclusions

1. There is much to learn from the experience of the UK in implementing music programs, which approaches are likely to succeed and which are best avoided.
2. There is an inherent contradiction in calls for more creativity in education while curricula become increasingly narrow and focused on testing and bureaucratic “accountability”. Australia should be wary of following the same path as England and the US in this respect.
3. By comparison with the places visited, Queensland’s music education infrastructure looks reasonably well set up, but falls well short of its potential.
4. In terms of the place it gives to music in education, Finland is streets ahead.
5. A strong grounding in a culture’s traditional music and dance provides a good foundation for learning about classical music. Venezuela’s “el sistema” is a great inspiration, but it will not fit seamlessly alongside some aspects of Western schooling systems.

Disseminating the information

I have begun by making connections with research departments at Brisbane’s major music institutions, Queensland University’s music department and the Conservatorium. I hope to interest them in research at Ferny Grove, and to myself become more involved in teacher training.

I plan to maintain my involvement with a pilot project for an Australian el sistema, and pursue some of the ideas for repertoire for young musicians that I picked up during my travels.

Background

El sistema (“the system”) is the music education program established in Venezuela over 30 years ago. As much a social justice program as a musical one, it is available to all levels of society and has been credited with benefitting more than 400 000 young people, the majority from the most impoverished backgrounds.

Musicians and educators in the First World have recently become aware of *el sistema*’s success, and there is now widespread interest in adopting it. Pilot programs have been, or are about to be, launched in the USA and UK, including one in the Raploch, a housing estate in a deprived area of Stirling, in Scotland.

In the current early attempts to establish *sistema*-like programs in the West, the need for a long-term approach seems to have been understood. Several supporting institutions and organisations have consented to timeframes of 10-years and beyond. This contrasts with the standard approach of the vast majority of community-based arts programs, in the Anglosphere at least, that usually have to rely on short-term project structures.

Program

The starting point of my program was my interest in *el sistema* and how it might be adapted in Australia. One of my aims was to see how pilot projects based on *el sistema* in the UK and US were travelling.

There is great enthusiasm for *el sistema* in many quarters. That is partly because of the extremely vibrant and exciting performances given by its flagship group, the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, as well as its success in generating a widespread enthusiasm for orchestral music in Venezuela, and its ability to engage large numbers of young people from some of the most deprived parts of that society.

I was also interested in the role of music in society more generally, and in how the countries I visited were treating music education. Was it seen as an essential, as an extra, or was its status less easily defined?

My program was a combination of observation and conversation. I was able to visit a pilot project based on *el sistema* in the Raploch Estate, Stirling, and talk to the organisers of related projects in London and New York.

I gained a good overview of the growing cross-fertilisation between community music, traditional music, research, education and arts policy in Scotland.

I made a presentation on the instrumental and choral music program at Ferny Grove State High School to PhD students and staff of the Education Faculty at Cambridge University, and had contact with programs at Edinburgh University and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.

Visiting peak music advocacy organisations and major institutions in Finland provided some insight into the extremely broad and popular Finnish system, which enables that country not only to produce many fine performers but creates a knowledgeable public that sees music as integral to the national identity.

Finally, two long conversations with a project director in New York and an eminent choral conductor in New Zealand helped me put the previous two months experience in perspective.

Although the original intent of the trip included a visit to Ireland, I had difficulty finalising contacts there. The opportunity to make contact with the New York-based Harmony Program arose late in the planning, and seemed a better fit with the overall shape of the program. The Churchill Trust agreed to the change in itinerary.

The Fellowship led me to a wide variety of people, ranging from organisers of national arts policy to university researchers to people running projects in extremely deprived communities.

Each situation had its particular set of circumstances to absorb and learn from, and everyone I met gave generously of their time and knowledge.

People and organisations visited

Weeks 1-2 Cambridge/London/Newquay (Cornwall)

Dr Pam Burnard
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Education, Cambridge University

John Finney
Senior Lecturer in Education (music),
Cambridge University

Anna-Marie Higgins, Christine Yao, and other post-graduate students, Cambridge University

Phil Mullen, Community musician

Brendon LePage, Lambeth Music Service/In Harmony project

Will Coleman
Project manager, place-based learning
Eden Trust, Cornwall

Juliet Rose
Eden Trust, Cornwall

Mike Petty
Eden Trust, Cornwall

Weeks 3-4 Edinburgh/ Stirling

Kathryn Jourdan
Post-graduate researcher
Faculty of Education
Cambridge University

Paul Jourdan

Former member City of Birmingham Orchestra

Jennifer McGlone
Manager, Youth Music
Scottish Arts Council

Kim Edgar
Performer, recording artist and community musician
The Big Project
Broomhouse Estate
Edinburgh

Nicola Killean/Hannah Muddiman/ Richard Holloway/Jen Nicholson/Jo Fenna/Robin
Panter/Alison Gornall/Aimee Watt/Gica Loening
Sistema Scotland
Raploch Estate

Weeks 5 – 6 Edinburgh/Glasgow/Plockton

Fiona Dalgetty
Edinburgh Youth Gaitherin'

Professor Nikki Moran
A/Director
Institute for Music as Human Communication
Edinburgh University

Mary McCarthy
Coordinator
Traditional Music Course
Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama

James Dean
Platform Arts Centre
The Bridge
1000 Westerhouse Rd
Glasgow

Dougie Pincock
Director, National Centre of Excellence in Trad Music
Plockton High School
Wester Ross

Weeks 7-8 Helsinki/New York/New Zealand

Ms Henna Salo
Finnish Music Information Centre (FIMIC)

Ms Hanna Isolammi
Finnish Music Information Centre (FIMIC)

Mr Timo Klemettinen
Association of Finnish Music Schools

Ms Rea Warme
Rector, Helsinki Conservatory

Ms Fiona Tharmaratnam
Helsinki Conservatory

Ms Sari Kallioran
Helsinki Conservatory

Mr Petri Aarnio
Rector, East Helsinki Music Institute

Ostinato Sheet Music
Toolontori

Mr Jukka-Pekka Maki-Luopa
Cantores Minores
Choir of Helsinki Cathedral

Mr Hannu Norjena
Cantores Minores
Choir of Helsinki Cathedral

Ms Anne Fitzgibbon
Harmony Program
City University of New York

Mr Dale Barltrop
Principal 2nd Violin
St Paul Chamber Orchestra

Assoc. Professor Karen Grylls
Faculty of Music
Auckland University

The Journey

Overall it was easy enough to observe how the situation in music education differed from country to country.

1. England

Striking the full intensity of London was a slightly daunting way to start the trip and I was relieved to complete my first major engagement, delivering a presentation about the instrumental music program at Ferny Grove State High to an audience of PhD students and staff at Cambridge University's Education Faculty.

Fortunately it was well received, and it was clear that the kind of program we run was of interest to researchers music education. The audience responded with particular

interest to the information provided about the culture we've been able to create in our department, the engagement with our students – especially the boys - our wider community connections, and the sort of repertoire we perform.

Talking to staff and students brought home to me the liveliness of contemporary research into areas such as the psychology of music, the complex interaction between music and the brain and the ramifications of findings in this area for education, social development and our understanding of the very concept of creativity.

That these areas of research are thriving ties in directly with my own interests in el sistema and with the position of music in the community. The experience suggested it would be well worth following up on university connections back in Australia – an impression that was reinforced as the trip progressed.

Back in London I was able to meet with community based musicians, including Brendan La Page who is piloting In Harmony, England's first sistema-based program, for the Lambeth Music Service, based at Vauxhall Primary School.

It was a bold move to establish the program in that school community, where the majority language is Portuguese, the country of origin of a large proportion of families is Africa, and the white working class are particularly alienated, and suspicious of attempts to engage them in school and community activities.

That visit was my first experience of the high level of security in British schools – getting on to the premises was almost as formal a process as getting into the country.

We were told the Dunblane school massacre, in Scotland in 1996, was the event that triggered the high level of security consciousness in British schools. It has proven to be a self-perpetuating syndrome, stoked by the education bureaucracy's concerns with health and safety, risk management, and accountability.

A popular joke that we heard: "How many health and safety inspectors does it take to change a lightbulb? None; it's far too dangerous."

Any incident of confrontation or violence that occurs in a school community fuels the tendency to increase restrictions.

In general, I couldn't help but be conscious of England as a society divided by class and economics, somewhat uneasy with its multicultural makeup, and all this exacerbated by deep public disillusion with the political system.

Conversations with Dr Pamela Burnard, at Cambridge, with Brendon LePage, with London-based musician Phil Mullen and with community worker Will Coleman, in Cornwall, gave me some insight into the various ways that young people in England can learn about music, in and outside school.

However, as they explained to us, the system has its limitations. For example:

- Many schools are not able to provide music education
- Restricted resources mean that community-based projects are often short-term.
- The school curriculum emphasises constant testing of the basics and "league tables", leading to teachers "teaching to the test". Many school administrations are reportedly preoccupied with "gaming the system" to improve their standing. These particular problems were analysed in depth in a large-scale independent study by Cambridge University, released in February this year, which concluded

that English primary school students were not getting the well-rounded education they deserved. (*Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a report from the Cambridge Primary Review*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Education, 47 pp, ISBN 978-1-906478-31-5.)

- The heavy emphasis on school security and risk management restricts the possibilities for parental and community involvement, teacher-student interaction and even musical expressiveness (for example, a teacher might discourage students from being too physically exuberant in responding to music through movement, for fear they might injure themselves).

English music education also continues to suffer the consequences of the abolition, in the 1980s, of a once-thriving free instrumental tuition and youth orchestra program. The effect has been to dramatically narrow opportunities for music education, making it available mainly to the better off.

I was told that the recruitment base for young classical musicians is now largely restricted to public (i.e. private) schools with music departments. One recent survey revealed that in 2008-09 all of London's major music colleges recruited only three students of non-English-speaking background, and only one of south-Asian origin. In a society as culturally diverse as England that is a telling statistic.

We also became aware of the segregation of different styles of music. By and large, school music departments would be likely to restrict themselves to one style of music – rock or hip-hop in the inner city, classical in the wealthier schools.

With this approach go cliched attitudes, with classical music being considered either elite (good) or “elitist” (bad) depending on your point of view. Likewise, hip-hop was either “relevant” or culturally degraded. The idea that repertoire might draw on a range of styles would be considered unusual by many.

There is, nonetheless, a growth in the reach and diversity of activity. In Harmony, for example, has gathered high profile support from the likes of the Lord Mayor of London, the London Philharmonic, Sir Simon Rattle, and Julian Lloyd Webber.

Phil Mullen told us the variety and reach of programs was growing, a trend increasingly supported in education policy, (if not always in practice). There was considerable lobbying work being done to convince politicians, of all stripes, of the value of music education. However, he felt, if there was to be a change of government, “all bets are off”.

As an aside, Will Coleman also gave us some insight into the revival of Cornish music, more akin to the music of the Celtic cultures of Spain and Brittany, and altogether different to the folk music of England, derided as “Humpty Dumpty music” for its characteristic rhythmic feel.

Will also expressed scepticism of the value of music teaching that concentrated only on what the kids were already familiar with, or was considered by adults to be the musical style “relevant” to a particular group. Certainly, students or community project participants may need a hook to raise their interest, but it is important to move on from there.

2. Scotland

We spent four weeks in Scotland, and were able to get a feel for the variety of activity there, from primary age to university and community-based music education and performance. The situation seems much healthier than in England.

My week visiting the sistema-based Big Noise project, on the Raploch estate in Stirling, was the central event in our stay. In the end, however, I came to see that while Big Noise is certainly ground breaking it is only one of many interesting elements in the diverse fabric of Scottish music.

There is no doubt that the Raploch, an extremely deprived estate, is a challenging place and it was clear that in its first year of operation, Big Noise has established good community relationships and been very beneficial for the young children taking part.

The regular classes three times a week, the high teacher-student ratio and the considerable work done to connect with local families meant that the foundations of a sistema-like music community were gradually being laid.

Whether the eventual result will resemble the Venezuelan prototype it is too early to tell. But having made the early social connection, it seemed to me that the project staff needed to start to give a bit more thought to the kind of musical results they were aiming for.

The teaching approach was surprisingly conservative when it came to trying to unlock the students' musical expressiveness. True, most of the kids came from unstable homes and in a classroom enthusiastic expression can tip over into apparent chaos. But there seemed to be a preoccupation with ensuring "good behaviour" that manifested in a reluctance to allow the students to express their enthusiasm beyond fairly narrow boundaries.

People we discussed this with suggested that the Scottish (and British) approach to child-rearing is more strict, in terms of limiting exuberant behaviour, that what we are used to in Australia education, and combined with the risk management approach prevalent in schools, it was no wonder that the teachers seemed cautious and somewhat controlling.

However, it was still clear that Sistema Scotland was having a very beneficial effect on the children involved.

Also, it is still very early days for the project, and one of its strengths is its long timeframe – 10 years. This represents acknowledgment by its backers that any program with such ideals requires a substantial investment of time and resources.

This is heartening to see, especially in a country where so much of the music education has to occur outside the core curriculum of the school system, and therefore tends to be built on short-term, under-resourced projects that, even if successful, often come to an end just when they are beginning to make some headway.

Elsewhere, I was impressed by the amount of cross-fertilisation between several strands of music making and education going on in Scotland, judiciously aided by the Scottish Arts Council. The Council's support is in part derived from an acceptance by the Scottish government that the arts, and music in particular, can make a genuine contribution to community building and social development, especially among young people.

The Arts Council representative I spoke with suggested that his was partly out of desperation, as the problems affecting significant numbers of young people are dire and the standard institutional intervention methods are seen as offering too little, too late.

Among the trends and projects I observed were:

- A significant growth of interest in Scottish traditional music, especially amongst young people. One venerable folk musician we met told us he thought the tradition was now the healthiest that he'd seen it in his lifetime. The offshoots of this trend have included:
 - the establishment of a School of Excellence in traditional music, in the Highland village of Plockton
 - a network of organisations providing tuition in traditional music throughout the Highlands and Islands
 - establishment of tertiary courses at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD) and other institutions.
- Community music projects in deprived areas. One of the most impressive we saw was the Bridge project in the seriously deprived Easterhouse estate in Glasgow. It integrates an arts centre with a swimming pool, a library and a community college, and appears to have succeeded in providing opportunities and common ground to a socially divided community.
- Cross-disciplinary work in universities, investigating music as a mode of human communication, how the brain responds to music, and applying insights from music therapy to general music studies (traditionally it has been one-way traffic in the opposite direction). Edinburgh University's Institute for Music in Human and Social Development (IMHSD) is a prominent example.

At Sistema Scotland I met researchers from both Glasgow and Edinburgh working on projects connected with that project. It is another strength of the program that it has involved tertiary institutions in tracking and evaluating its progress from the beginning.

The Scottish scene is relatively small, and most people at least know of each other and each other's work. People in different fields seemed inclined to communicate and to work with each other, rather than stay within a ghetto defined by academic school, community sector or performance style.

Several people pointed to the widely held view that Scotland had avoided the worst bureaucratic and benchmarking-obsessed excesses of the English system. We were referred data that showed that academic standards in Scotland were higher, and that Cambridge University is prepared to accept Scottish students with lower grades, on the grounds that such grades still indicate a more rigorous and well-rounded education than English equivalent, or indeed higher, levels.

3. Finland

Finland was a completely different situation

We knew little of Finland other than that it is rated as having the best education system in the OECD, and one of the best, if not the best, music education systems.

We noticed that even the standard of musicianship from buskers in the street was extremely high.

Music education begins at a very early age, with most parents anxious to enrol their children in early childhood music tuition, which continues through school and also via specialist music colleges of which there are many.

It seems that by the time students reach high school most of them have benefited from the motor skills and intellectual stimulation that music training can provide. We saw performances by young ensembles that showed a high degree of skill, and provided some powerful moments, though compared with the Venezuelans they were rather contained performances.

Some of the people we spoke to talked about the introverted strain in the Finnish character. One person told us a joke: “How can you tell if you are talking to an extroverted Finn? He is looking at your feet, not his own.”

They claim that a desire for solitude and reluctance to communicate is characteristic of their country, and that it has something to do with “being Protestant” – that is their shorthand phrase for describing the syndrome. They said they were not surprised we found some of the approach to performance a bit low key.

We should note that all the people we discussed this with were very outgoing, friendly and conversational.

Music has been important in the expression of Finnish identity since the mid-nineteenth century; especially the work of the composer Sibelius, who seems to be part of the general consciousness to an extent that would be unusual in most Western countries.

The Kalevala, an epic poem on which many of Sibelius’s works are based, written in the 19th century but based on much older material, occupies the same sort of cultural position.

Finland also has a strong “getting in touch with nature” culture, and although 98 per cent of the population identify as “Lutheran”, church attendance is the lowest in Europe (around four per cent).

In the twentieth century Finland experienced both a bitter civil war and a Russian invasion. The first event divided the country and the second united it. The shock of these two traumas seems to have been a driving force in the country’s evolution into a modern Scandinavian social democratic state with a high level of social equality.

A culturally quite homogenous, wealthy, highly educated society, Finland has been able to make music education almost universally available, rather than available only to some sections of society, as is the case in English-speaking countries.

By the time they go to school, at age 7, most Finns have already had up to seven years of music education.

As a result music educators don’t have to wrestle with many of the problems that face those in the UK and elsewhere, though this might change if the society becomes poorer as a result of a combination of economic downturn and increased immigration – at least, if the newcomers and Finnish society are unwilling to accommodate each other’s ways. There are apparently some signs of this occurring.

4. New York

The visit to New York tied together many of the impressions I had developed in the previous weeks.

Meeting Anne Fitzgibbon who spent a year in Venezuela working with el sistema provided a helpful broader perspective. Ms Fitzgibbon, who has worked in the commercial and political worlds as well as music, now runs the sistema-based Harmony Program based at City University of New York.

Being a lot more familiar with Venezuelan culture than the other Sistema workers I had met, she was more aware of the potential difficulties of adapting the system in the Anglo-American world.

Her thoughts matched several impressions I had developed, including that

- El sistema involves no particular teaching “method”, teachers adopt strategies from various approaches to music education, including the Suzuki and Kodaly systems. El sistema’s particular characteristics are:
 - Immersion - students attend five or more times per week
 - Strong relationships between staff and students and the building of a affectionate, community atmosphere
 - Encouragement of parental support and involvement
 - Emphasis on ensemble playing from the beginning of tuition
 - A long-term perspective – it takes many years to produce a well-rounded musician. El sistema does not seek to turn all participants into professionals, but to give them a solid grounding and create a community with a high level of musical understanding.
- The “immersion” – five days a week or more – of children in sistema is a fundamental characteristic difficult to reproduce in the West. The Harmony Program allows for three after-school sessions a week, and Anne regards this as a very good outcome for a fledgling first-world program.
- The Venezuelan approach to teaching, while quite “formal” by our standards, is also quite affectionate. Physical contact between adults and children is not automatically hedged about with the fear that it will be seen as sexually charged, which has become the default institutional response in the British, US and Australian systems.
- The Venezuelan system, though focused on the Western classical tradition, is also firmly grounded in Venezuelan folk music and dance traditions, which provide much of the foundation of the typical energetic and joyful approach of their ensembles of all ages.
- Maestro Abreu, the founder and leader of el sistema, is not only a visionary and idealist, but also a very canny political operator. One of the principles over the years has been very careful control of what is presented to the wider world – the recent flurry of international activity by the Simon Bolivar youth orchestra has been timed for maximum effect.
- El sistema is very much a product of its originating culture – the secret of the system is that there is no system” It has achieved international success partly because it has become a recognisable “brand” but other countries seeking to learn the secret and perhaps aiming to reproduce it will need to realise they must develop their own version.

In New York I was also able to catch up with Dale Barltrop, a former student at Ferny Grove who is now a principal player in the St Paul Chamber Orchestra, based in Minnesota. Our conversation reinforced some of the impressions Anne Fitzgibbon had given me about the difficulties even the most elite classical music organisations are having maintaining audiences, and attracting young people especially beyond the wealthiest sectors of society.

5. Auckland, New Zealand

As a postscript, I was able to catch up with Karen Grylls, Associate Professor and Head of Choral Studies at Auckland University and conductor of the globally respected New Zealand Youth Choir and Voices of New Zealand.

Choral music is an important strand of the Ferny Grove program, the component that probably does most to make music accessible to kids who have little or no musical background, not much parental support, and perhaps no obvious musical talent.

It is open to all and our biggest group is 200 strong. Finding repertoire for ensembles with a huge range in ability – from quite sophisticated to barely able to pitch a note – is a continual struggle.

We have had some success by drawing on repertoire based in folk tradition, mainly from Ireland, Africa and New Zealand, often arranged by local musicians, as much of the published repertoire really requires a choir to have a reasonably high level of technical accomplishment in order to have a better chance of creating a musically satisfying result.

By the same token, there are highly accomplished choirs that tackle difficult repertoire with skill, but without much emotional connection.

I was therefore interested to learn what Karen, director of what is certainly a sophisticated choir, might suggest. I found that our thoughts were very much on the same wavelength.

She was definitely of the view that emotional connection was the primary aim of musical performance, and had concluded that music based in folk traditions was one of the best sources of material most likely to resonate with audiences.

In recent years she has placed a lot of emphasis on connecting with Maori tradition, and also cited works from the Baltic countries as challenging but satisfying and accessible repertoire.

She gave me several repertoire sources to follow up.

Conclusions

I've concluded that at Ferny Grove High we have a situation that many of the people we met overseas would regard as extremely fortunate in terms of resources, within a system sufficiently flexible to enable us to pursue our goals with a good deal of freedom – though this could always be compromised by matters beyond our control, such as an unsupportive school administration or a change in political priorities in the Education Department.

Our program emphasizes creating a community atmosphere in which students feel at home and supported. When they are at ease in this way they are far more likely to go the extra distance and work to produce expressive musical performances.

To reinforce this we also aim to extend the community to involve parents and the wider community.

This is fairly much what most of the programs we visited in the UK and US also aimed for.

In some ways the situation for music education doesn't look that positive, in the light of broader trends in education policy.

In England and the US we can see where the path Australia is following will probably lead - it's unfortunate that we seem to be headed in that direction at a time when many educators in those countries are trying to extricate their systems from that situation.

The English experience demonstrates the pitfalls, and the paradoxes, in Australia's current direction.

On one hand, concern about poor basic literacy and numeracy has led to obsessive testing of "the basics", resulting in teachers "teaching to the test", but little noticeable improvement in the areas of concern.

On the other hand, politicians, bureaucrats and academics in both countries are concerned about a perceived lack of "creativity" in education, considered crucial to maintaining a healthy economy and a society that can thrive in the 21st century. Terms like "flexibility", "creativity", "innovation", "excellence" are thrown around, but it is not clear how they are being defined, while the direction in which the systems is being steered seems guaranteed not to encourage those kinds of outcomes.

If the aim really is creativity and innovation, a narrow focus on testing and quantifying the basics will produce the opposite of what policy makers say they want.

The benefits of music for social and intellectual development are increasingly well known, and borne out by the kind of research we encountered in Cambridge and Edinburgh.

The social and musical strength of Venezuela's el sistema, the success of the Finnish education system, the adaptability of young musicians trained in the high aural skills of the Scottish and Irish traditions - these all demonstrate aspects of music's value.

There's no reason why young people cannot learn to play classical music with the same exuberance and joy they more often find in pop and folk. The Venezuelans who have come through el sistema offer the obvious example, and it is clear why the classical world finds them attractive - their natural exuberance has been nurtured and channeled, not stifled.

El sistema is also attractive in the West because it has now almost become a "brand" - at first glance it seems to be a system or method that produces a well-packaged product - fine young musicians, happy faces, social justice.

Which it does.

However, as Anne Fitzgibbon, coordinator of New York's Sistema-based Harmony Program said to us, "the secret of the system is that there is no system."

Teachers combine useful techniques from any number of music-teaching methods with their own ability to inspire and communicate, within a structure that allows them the freedom to do so.

El sistema is nothing more nor less than “good teaching”, supported by sufficient resources to allow immersion in subject and community involvement.

It has grown out of the dedication of its founder, economist and musician Jose Abreu, a visionary individual and also a highly effective political operator. It is also an adaptation of the Western classical tradition within Venezuelan social conditions and culture, its social structures, child-rearing methods and musical and dance traditions.

In other words, there’s no package or model that our system can simply adopt and plug in, should it decide it wants to. There are simply general musical educational and organizational principles adapted to our situation. Australia could develop its own sistema, given the political will to commit resources for the long term. This would be both a more difficult and more liberating course of action than adopting a new product or self-contained package or model.

How might it be done? That would be a huge undertaking. At this point, I can make only some general observations.

As a general principle, I think the true evidence of good music making can be seen in what conductor, educator and music missionary Benjamin Zander calls “the glistening eye” – that look on the eye of the young performer (or performer of any age) that speaks of enthusiasm, communication, imagination and joy in music.

It’s hard to define in academic terms, but easy to recognize. The Venezuelan Simon Bolivar youth orchestra has it in spades.

I believe that the glistening eye effect is the basis of all the other benefit to be found in music, the social, the artistic, the intellectual etc. It is not always present, even at the higher levels of professional performance and, in my experience, is certainly not common in school music making.

There is nothing esoteric about good music teaching. The fundamentals are not out of reach for anyone who has the necessary resources of time and administrative support, and teachers who are both good musicians and good teachers.

A long timeframe is essential – regular, preferably almost daily group playing and a timeframe long enough for students to go through the system then return as mentors and teachers. This is perhaps the part most difficult to sell to politicians and policy makers keen on short-term results.

In Australia we have the basis for a system equal to any, especially in Queensland with its free instrumental tuition scheme in state schools. But the system currently languishes far short of fulfilling its potential.

Quality depends entirely on individual schools having teachers of sufficient quality backed up by supportive administration. It is almost completely a matter of chance whether or not these exist in any particular school, and in many cases the situation falls well short of ideal.

Measures such as the number of students taking lessons or the number of ensembles a school has, say nothing about the musical or educational quality. They say nothing about whether there is a sense of community about the undertaking or whether the “glistening eye” or the glow can be seen, or if community members attend school concerts not only because their own kids are performing but also because they know they will encounter a genuinely moving musical experience.

In the UK, and Scotland in particular, the push is significantly based on their having such major problems with a significant proportion of young people – alienation, illiteracy, violence, alcohol, family dysfunction etc.

At all levels of government there is increasing willingness to accept – perhaps out of desperation as much as anything - the argument that the arts have to potential to help mitigate some of these problems, and that this requires serious commitment of resources.

The commitment is partial and limited, and the economic and political situation imposes further restriction and uncertainty - but it does seem to be growing.

Finland offers a suggestion that things might be different – not perfect, but a considerable improvement.

I don't know that Australian policy makers have yet reached whole-hearted acceptance of this idea, despite the last 20-plus years of lobbying by the Australia Council for the Arts and other strands of the “cultural sector”. Maybe our social problems aren't bad enough yet.

Cultural differences in approaches to teaching, and the lack of strong traditional integration of singing and dancing in everyday life may make it more difficult for us to duplicate the characteristically energetic performance style of the Venezuelans as the standard, rather than the exception.

I am not pessimistic about this – it does take a sustained effort to cajole the average “laid back” Aussie kid to release their inner expressive drive, but it can be done. And many, of course, dive in with relish as soon as they grasp what is being asked of them.

Recommendations

1. Specific recommendations about school music education are contingent on what happens in education in general.

So my big-picture recommendation is that Australia's education authorities be very wary of continuing down a path focused on obsessive, time-consuming testing to quantify the basics of literacy and numeracy, and narrowing and marginalising the rest of the curriculum.

The standardised testing route is the politically palatable one, but is it sophisticated enough for the contemporary world, when there is so much evidence pointing to the benefits of a more rounded approach and the value of creative activity such as music in stimulating the development of young brains?

2. Education authorities and theoreticians should also make sure they are clear what they mean when they throw around terms such as “creativity” and “innovation”. The jargon of the education and “creativity” fields can make it difficult to distinguish accurate description from fashionable rhetoric.

It is encouraging to know that such qualities are being made a priority, but it is also essential to be able to point to practical examples and models wherever they may be being implemented.

The Sistema program is one example of genuine creativity that Australia can certainly learn from, and we encountered several others in the places we visited.

Unfortunately, as many occur outside the formal education system they are often restricted in timeframe and resources. Sistema Scotland seems like an exception, as its advocates have been able to position it as a “brand”, and draw relatively substantial institutional and business backing.

3. Australia should by all means consider the adoption of a Sistema-based music education program. However, this should be clear-eyed knowledge of the differences with the Venezuelan teaching methods and environment.

4. Advocates for such programs in this country need to understand the exact nature of what they are advocating – that el sistema is primarily a social justice program, not a particular method for teaching music. Its essential characteristics are those outlined in the “New York” section above - immersion, relationships, community involvement and a commitment to expressive, high-quality musicianship.

Political and educational decision makers considering approving an “Australian sistema” will need to be committed to supporting it through a long timeframe – 10 to 20 years.

5. The State of Queensland should take a clear-eyed review of its music program, its strengths and weaknesses. How much does its rhetoric of “creativity” match the reality?

Queensland has a rare opportunity to position itself in the forefront of music education, as its instrumental music program has a framework that enables it to reach large numbers of children. The curriculum and methodology have not advanced much since the program was introduced in the 1970s, but it has significant potential.

Disseminating the information

Following my return to Brisbane, I am again fully engaged in running a busy music department. The knowledge I have gained is certainly providing me with a wider perspective to reflect on.

My short-to-medium term plans include:

- To begin to integrate Ferny Grove’s feeder primary schools more closely with the high school program.
- To offer Ferny Grove’s program as a source of research to interested departments at the Queensland Conservatorium and University of Queensland.
- To extend my involvement with the tertiary sector to try and make a contribution to the direction of current teacher training.
- To maintain connections with many of those whom we met, who generously shared their work and ideas.
- To explore further cross-genre repertoire, exploring the potential of Scottish and Irish fiddle music for string orchestra, and song from the Maori and other folk traditions.
- To maintain and develop my involvement with the Sistema Australia project.