

LEADING MUSICIANS

A series of three articles published in Music Forum, 2002-2003

1. CONTEXT

“Change or you don’t survive’ sort of washes away the irrelevance”¹

With five of Australia’s music institutions currently experiencing leadership turnover,² the challenges ahead for such positions prompt a timely debate. Even a cursory glance at the history of Australian music institutions would suggest that times have rarely been comfortable for them, but the events of the last decade in particular have amplified the demands on music schools and as a consequence, on their leadership. Most have endured organisational change, and the bold have even been reinvented. Life at the helm of a music institution is not a simple one, blending demands which are variously artistic, educational, cultural and political, depending on the individual context of the institution.

Leaders come to music institutions from various pathways: some as prominent artists, some as composers, some as musicologists. Most Australian music schools preserve the long-standing tradition of appointing a musician to the leadership role, despite the impact of significant changes in what is expected of them. This practice has long been based on the notion that a respected performer, composer, conductor or musicologist might bring with them the status of reflected success, with potential as a role model of the highest profile. The institution basks in the reflected glory of the individual.

Increasingly, this model is under question. In past times, leaders were able to maintain high profile public commitments whilst head of the music school. Groves was writing the Dictionary of Music and Musicians whilst leading the Royal College of Music in London. Eugene Goossens held a dual appointment to both Sydney Conservatorium (then the N.S.W. State Conservatorium of Music) and the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. In practical terms, it often meant that the leader was absent from the institution for extended periods of time,³ but the overall effect was minimal. In reality, very little was required of the leader in the way of innovation. He was the spokesperson, the successful role model, the figurehead of the music school. Decisions were more artistic than managerial, related to visiting artists, performance programs and student intake rather than funding and strategic planning. The challenge was not to change but to improve what had already become established practice. Arguably, the contemporary context is more demanding of the leader’s attention and energies.

Recent research into the work of arts executives in higher education describes the nature of their leadership role as multifarious, academic administration mixed with varying measures of responsibilities such as artistic director, producer, facilities manager, and community liaison officer.⁴ To those, might also be added cultural policy advisor and strategist. Different institutions have different ways of approaching this problem. In the USA, many institutions adopt the corporate model, employing a CEO as well as an artistic/academic director. In Europe, the practices vary from country to country, and among institutions. They include political appointments which bear no relation to artistic or management practice, elected positions of a temporary nature, traditional artistic appointments and administrative ones.

Tertiary music institutions in Australia have experienced significant structural change in the last fifteen years, much of it resulting from the Higher Education Policy.⁵ This policy did not target music institutions specifically, but they became collateral damage in its rationalisation of what was then a dual system of tertiary education. The process which brought this about was flawed, provoking radical change in the university sector ‘without having any clear idea how that might end’.⁶ At the time only a few autonomous conservatoriums seemed directly affected by the requirement that institutions with fewer than 2,000 students should amalgamate with a larger

university.⁷ With the choice of partner open to each organisation, the courtship processes and outcomes were as individual as the resultant relationships. However, time has demonstrated that the implications for all music institutions, autonomous or not, have been more complex than anticipated, and the impact on leadership significant.

The consequences of the Dawkins reforms created new tensions for academics in executive roles across all disciplines. That change and constraints were being felt throughout the university sector was lost on conservatorium leaders who were at the same time adjusting to the culture of the university, and it was even lost on those music schools already residing within the sector and having to absorb radical change. Most universities initiated restructures, some of them more than once. Most music institutions just wanted to be left alone to devote themselves to their artistic pursuits.

McWilliam makes the case that in the current academic climate, a strong grasp of disciplinary-specific knowledge is no longer sufficient for the 'professional expert'. Making specific reference to the film "Facing the Music",⁸ she suggests that an academic pleading to be left alone to 'teach my discipline' is making a naïve and unrealistic request in the modern university.

*'As "professional experts", academics must now have quite specific knowledge about the communication and operational systems through which they are to manage their work in the large organization that is the university.'*⁹

In respect of the adjusted economic climate, Simon Marginson relates the changing culture in Australian universities directly to Canberra's determination to make its dependents 'do more with less', noting that 'within two years, the universities were found doing to their own faculties and schools what Canberra had just done to them.Imitation gave them a means to meet external objectives and a way to fashion tools for reforming their own institutions'.¹⁰

This superficial form of devolution has been significant for many music institutions. Executive power is now often separated from the disciplines, and the spirit of devolved decision-making has left leaders in specialist disciplines with responsibility but not flexibility to respond in innovative ways. Operating within a tight budget doesn't allow for flexibility unless there is the possibility of (and the courage for) total reinvention. Faced with choosing strategies without budget flexibility, decision-makers may interpret the situation as a 'more with less' option. Using this approach, maintenance of the school's basic functions has the potential to become increasingly unsustainable.

Economic rationalism, the new culture inherited by the university sector from the Federal Government, replaces social objectives with economic ones in policy and decision-making. Typical strategies are privatisation and commercialism,¹¹ neither of which is compatible with the 'do more with less' strategy. Translated into the education market, trying to get a maximum return from limited expenditure implies a concentration 'on the higher education of a comparatively small elite'.¹² Whilst this objective may have been the preferred option for traditional music institutions, it contradicts current strategies for increased access and the practice of enrolling more students because of the dollar value they bring to the school.

The five music institutions currently awaiting new leadership have all experienced change in the last decade and some continue to do so. It is inappropriate to speculate that the current change in leadership is related to these circumstances. Nonetheless, in some cases, the impact has been significant and suggestive of the range of issues which resulted from the Dawkins reforms.

Queensland Conservatorium amalgamated with Griffith University in 1991, and has relocated to the South Bank cultural precinct which compounds university obligations with public expectations about cultural infrastructure and relationships with parts of the performance industry. The amalgamation between Sydney Conservatorium and the University of Sydney resulted in ongoing public and sometimes acrimonious debate regarding the role of the Conservatorium and that of

the University's Music Department. The University of Western Australia's School of Music and the Western Australian Conservatorium (part of WAAPA, which amalgamated with Edith Cowan University) have had protracted debate over possible amalgamation, and in 1999 entered a collaborative arrangement under an imposed superstructure, the Western Australian Institute of Music.

The current context thus finds Australian music institutions operating within new structural frameworks, challenged to maximise intake, obliged to adopt research as a priority, under the pressure of declining funding, and all in the light of an uncertain future for the music industry they've traditionally addressed. The personal and professional attributes of their leaders are now more significant to music institutions than perhaps ever before.

Context plays an important role in determining the effect of leadership just as leader differences have been shown to affect the performance of an organisation.¹³ In particular, studies have shown that certain kinds of leadership may have a positive influence on an organisation in times of uncertainty.¹⁴ In such circumstances, credibility is an extremely important attribute for the leader in gaining the confidence of others. The question remains: should the credibility be artistic or otherwise?

Research has acknowledged that professionals in the creative arts work in a different way; that collaboration, risk-taking and freedom are important to creative artists and this has implications for the style of leadership they respond to.¹⁵ Musicians are familiar with the orchestral model, in which a group of talented individuals, each one a unique component in the outcome, places their trust in one conductor's overall vision for the performance. It would be difficult for the conductor to enlist such trust without first establishing artistic credibility. But once they have done so, a remarkable thing happens: artists want that association, expect to experience that special magic, and sometimes will make personal compromises to be able to do so. It's an interesting phenomenon, a unique combination of risk and trust, reliant on the ability of the leader to keep creativity alive at all levels.

Other performance models do not rely on individual leadership and vision. In an improvisatory ensemble, leadership might be shared, allowing each individual in the organisation to contribute their own creativeness and ideas for a limited time, all of it resulting in a new and transient whole. In this scenario the overall vision emerges from a shared trust each one has in the other to bring whatever is necessary to the performance.

Whatever the model, few of these artistic leaders have to address fiscal issues. A recent informal survey among leaders of Australian music institutions demonstrated that economic pressures ranked high among the current challenges they face. Five years before, a similarly informal survey of a similar membership rated organisational change high on the list. These are vastly different challenges, and approaching them requires different leadership styles, and tests different leadership skills. This would suggest either the need for a high degree of turnover in leaders to account for the different skills, or the need to familiarise leaders with a suite of leadership styles which they might apply according to the context. Either way, it means addressing such issues as appropriate professional development, leadership development and succession.

The literature on leadership is extensive, and there are many lists of leadership attributes and interpretations of leadership styles for business. The attributes which are most commonly stressed in discussions with leaders of music institutions¹⁶ are respect (professional and personal), vision, good communication skills, and self-awareness, specifically the ability to manage one's own emotions in working with others. These attributes match those of the typically transformational leader who does more than merely 'contract' the services of the followers. The transformational leader seeks also to motivate and satisfy higher needs, by engaging the 'full person of the follower'.¹⁷ Vision and self-motivation are linked to transformational leadership, just as they are important elements in the creativity and performance, processes familiar to the musician.

In leadership, vision is that element which looks beyond the present, to the future.

*"Just as great leaders have to live inside inconsistency and inhabit multiple realities, so they have to manage day to day based on fact, while at the same time leading day to day by the light of a vision that's based not on fact but on an ideal. The simple fact is that without a vision based on an ideal, a leader will never get us there."*¹⁸

Vision doesn't need to be shared, but it must be based on respect, on trust. Related to the familiar orchestral framework, the conductor's credibility is that factor which allows the individual musicians to place their trust in an overall vision. Translated to the institution, the overall vision connects the various transient presents with the future, whatever that may be perceived to be. Whether the vision is that of the individual leader, or a shared vision, it remains an important cohesive force as evidence of an ultimate goal.

In organisations where, as in the jazz ensemble, the element of surprise is encouraged, and individual short-term vision promoted, the outcome or future may not be so clear. The organisational structure may well seem more democratic, but the long-term health of the institution is reliant on a long-term view.

With a long-term strategic vision, the short-term decisions are more easily agreed because they may be based on the endorsed strategy. Decisions are either programmed (repetitive and routine) or unprogrammed (unstructured and less predictable).¹⁹ Given the level of change which is shaping music institutions, leaders are very likely to be faced with unprogrammed decisions. In such situations, respect and trust in the leader's ability to make appropriate choices is extremely important.

The paradox is that the musician has the creative capacity to face such challenges in a resourceful way, and yet the evidence suggests that few leaders of music institutions take advantage of this attribute in leadership off-stage. Business leaders hire artistic leaders to demonstrate their leadership styles, yet the same leadership styles musicians employ in performance are rarely used by them in the non-performance setting. It would seem that there is less analysis of approach in institutional performance than there is on stage.

Collins, D. (2001). Sounds from the Stables: the story of Sydney's Conservatorium. Sydney, Allen & Unwin.

Collins, J. C. and J. I. Porras (1998). Built to Last. Successful Habits of Visionary Companies. London, Century Ltd.

Johansson, J. (1996). "New Tendencies in Conservatories Concerning the Future of Performers." ISME Commission for the Education of the Professional Musician: 55-64.

Lawn, J. (2001). "What is leadership?" Food Management **36**(6): 8.

Marginson, S. (1993). Education and Public Policy in Australia. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Marginson, S. and M. Considine (2000). The Enterprise University. Power, governance and reinvention. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

McWilliam, E. (2002). Music teacher as knowledge worker: what 'experts' need to know. CONNECTing with... Brisbane, Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University.

Milliken, F. J. (1987). "Three types of perceived uncertainty about the environment: State, effect, and response uncertainty." Academy of Management Review **12**(1): 133-143.

Renshaw, P. (2002). Making connections : A challenge to leadership. CONNECTing with... Brisbane, Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University.

Taylor, J., W. Wacker, et al. (2001). The Visionary's Handbook. Nine paradoxes that will shape the future of your business. New York, HarperBusiness.

Thomas, A. B. (1988). "Does leadership make a difference to organizational performance?" Administrative Science Quarterly **33**: 388-400.

Waldman, D. A., G. G. Ramirez, et al. (2001). "Does leadership matter? CEO leadership attributes and profitability under conditions of uncertainty." Academy of Management Journal **44**(1): 134-143.

¹ Head of leading European music school, in interview.

² Leadership positions about to be filled or advertised are: Director, WAAPA; Head of School, UWA; Head of School, University of Sydney; Provost/Director, Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University and Principal, Sydney Conservatorium (University of Sydney).

³ Tregear, P.J. (1997), The Conservatorium of Music. University of Melbourne. An Essay to Mark its Centenary. Melbourne: Centre for Studies in Australian Music; Olmstead, A. (1999). Julliard. A History. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press; Collins, D. (2001) Sounds from the Stables: the Story of Sydney's Conservatorium. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

⁴ Hope, S. (1996) The Work of Arts Executives in Higher Education. Reston: National Office for Arts Accreditation in High Education

⁵ Dawkins, J. (1988) Higher Education Policy. A Policy Statement. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

⁶ Marginson, S. and M. Considine (2000). The Enterprise University. Power, governance and reinvention. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

⁷ In 1988 only three conservatoriums were autonomous: NSW State Conservatorium (now Sydney Conservatorium), Queensland Conservatorium of Music, and Victorian College of the Arts. Other conservatoriums were already part of the College of Advanced Education or University sectors. Given that the reforms targeted the CAEs, those institutions embedded within the CAE sector experienced the impact indirectly.

⁸ Connolly, B. and R. Anderson (2001). Facing the Music. Lindfield: Film Australia with Arundel Films.

⁹ McWilliam, E. (2002) Music teacher as Knowledge worker: what 'experts' need to know. CONNECTing with... Brisbane: Queensland Conservatorium, Griffith University

¹⁰ Marginson, (2000), op.cit. p.22

¹¹ Marginson, S. (1993). Education and Public Policy in Australia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.57

¹² Hayek, quoted in Marginson (1993), p.70

¹³ Thomas, A.B. (1988). "Does leadership make a difference to organizational performance?"

Administrative Science Quarterly 33: 388-400.

¹⁴ Waldman, D.A. et al. (2001). "Does leadership matter? CEO attributes and profitability under conditions of uncertainty." Academy of Management Journal 44(1): 134-143.

¹⁵ DiMaggio, P. (1988). Managers of the Arts. Washington: Seven Locks Press; Creese, E. (1997). "The Tension between Artistic Purpose and Management Functions in the Performing Arts." AESTHETEx 7(1): 57-69; Caust, J. (2002). "Arts, leadership and creativity: how are they reconciled within a managerial paradigm?" 16th ANZAM Conference: Enhancing Business and Government Capabilities. Beechworth: La Trobe University.

¹⁶ An extensive series of interviews are in progress worldwide as the basis of the writer's current research. The sources and precise content of these interviews remain confidential until the completion of the process.

¹⁷ Bass, B.M. (1985). Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations. New York: The Free Press

¹⁸ Taylor, J. et al (2001). The Visionary's Handbook. Nine paradoxes that will shape the future of your business. New York: Harper Business.

¹⁹ Leigh, A. (1983). Decisions, Decisions! A Practical Management Guide to Problem Solving and Decision Making. London: Institute of Personnel Management.