LEADING MUSICIANS

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

2. CHALLENGES

"Leadership is moments of brilliance among hours of terror"[i]

The first in this series of three articles outlined the current context for leadership in Australian music institutions. Context is at the same time generic and unique: all institutions are affected by generic circumstances, and each has its own distinctive perspective bringing specific challenges to its leaders.

Traditionally, leaders in music institutions were selected for their artistic profile, the implication being that it would enhance that of the institution. With few exceptions, the organisational structure was simplistic, demanding little of the leader in administrative responsibility. This model no longer fits most contexts, because recent years have seen the structure extended and the role intensified.

Leadership in music institutions usually incorporates various functions: artistic direction, event production, facilities management, community liaison, and education administration. Given the new university governance in Australia, additional responsibilities related to curriculum design, program assessment, delivery issues, research and university management are very often overwhelming. Where the leader also aspires (and is perhaps required) to retain an active role as teacher, researcher or performer, balancing the various loads is vital to the health of both individual and institution. Many leaders acknowledge that they are forced to choose between their artistic aspirations and leadership responsibilities for the duration of the appointment. Some note that even having done so, expectations on them remain 'unrealistic', or 'overwhelming', indicating they would not seek the role again.[ii]

For leaders around the world, this diversity of responsibilities represents an assortment of challenges, including the impact of political policy, managing structural change, maintaining quality whilst coping with financial constraints, confronting the implications of a changing musical environment, matching the evolution of music professions, and the need to work with various communities. Inevitably, financial concerns top the list.

Through these challenges runs a common thread: what is the most appropriate training for the future musician? Most conservatoria continue to juggle the needs of the focused performer with those of musicians who will work in a more eclectic profession. Trying to keep all the balls in the air at once absorbs time, energy, and precious resources. In a comprehensive approach there exists potential for superficiality, threatening traditional expectations of excellence.

There is an alternative to the comprehensive institution: specialisation. In Europe there is often a high density of institutions in a small area, but until recently different education systems precluded strong competition. Where the same system prevails, specialisation flourishes. Generally there is a healthy respect between institutions, each acknowledging their individual differences. Hence, for example, in the Netherlands seven conservatoriums exist in close proximity to one another, offering institutional concentrations on classical music, early music, world music, pop, jazz, and community music.

Current political strategies are causing radical change in European higher education, unifying the various systems to allow student mobility across participating countries. This has intensified the possibility of competition and consequently the likelihood of specialisation, which has the potential to attract quality intakes. The development of a unique profile has connotations of excellence, because resources are concentrated in one area.

The impact of political policy on Australian institutions over the past fifteen years has been huge. No music institution escaped the Dawkins Higher Education Policy (1988) unscathed, and it seems unlikely that the current Nelson reforms will pass them by. Through the elimination of Colleges of Advanced Education, the Dawkins reforms transformed the higher education landscape. The effect on music institutions was inescapable: if autonomous, they were forced to marry into the university sector, or as part of a CAE, they were hitched by default. Even those already inside universities were afflicted by resulting changes in governance. By contrast, the Nelson reforms may seem less problematic, but they come with a price: micro-management of the universities, rattling their funding bases in a way which will further transform their internal management.

What are the repercussions for leaders of conservatoriums? There are implications for student access: predictions of students challenged by increased fees, and scholarships more difficult to fund. Financial rationalisation will force leaders to continue their defence of the age-old argument about why music should be funded at a rate higher than other disciplines. Some universities understand; most don't. Given that the claim is based primarily on the cost of one-to-one teaching, the question of what music institutions should be offering looms large.

Whilst financial strain is present in music institutions around the world, Australian funding is lower on a relative scale than in established institutions elsewhere. The conservatoriums in the United Kingdom are a good example: they still complain it's never enough, but they receive the 'premium' level of higher education funding which gives them over three times more per student than the best-funded of Australian institutions. And that's *before* factoring in the dismal exchange rate!

By hiding Australian music institutions inside universities, the government has conveniently left the decision of what they're worth up to the individual university. The arrangements negotiated by music schools with their university partners vary

enormously. In some cases, it's an exaggeration to imply that the structure allows the individual department negotiating power at all. A few are respected for their flagship potential, but most fight for recognition amongst other disciplines. A lone voice is weak.

The shifts in university governance also trigger various 'big picture' challenges for leaders of conservatoriums. Structural change is by nature disruptive, and there is no shortage of research demonstrating resistance to imposed change. Change compels leaders to manage in a climate of uncertainty, often without experience, though it may well be argued that in the last decade, leaders of some Australian music institutions have become experts in dealing with organisational change!

In such circumstances, leaders confront different levels of uncertainty about how the environment is changing, the potential impact, the possible responses, and the value of those choices.[iii] The responsibility of deciding what constitutes a threat to the institution has long-ranging consequences, and it would be fair to say that such experience is not normally found in the CVs of music leaders. Clearly, the recent structural changes have placed a different range of expectations and responsibilities firmly before them.

A climate of financial constraint challenges leaders to position their institutions in a way which builds confidence amongst staff, students, university management, the music profession and the community. Few see beyond what has long been perceived as the core business, training for the (classical) music profession. Even among those who do see beyond the classical genre, even fewer are bold enough to abandon traditional methods altogether.

In Australia, those institutions which take a radical and (what they perceive as) futuristic approach to music training have often been regarded with misgivings. The choice to address specific training appropriate to the institution's own community may be acceptable in science and agriculture, but not quite so readily in music.

The local context may hold the key to the success of a music institution. In Europe, there are many excellent examples of deliberate strategies taken by conservatoriums to create distinctive profiles as an alternative to competition with their peers. Rotterdam Conservatorium's decision to build on the strength of the city's multicultural community by creating a World Music Centre is a shrewd choice, given that established traditional conservatoriums at The Hague and Amsterdam are within commuting distance.

Few parallels exist in Australia. The oldest of the 'radical' departures happened in Lismore in the '80s when what is now known as Southern Cross University's music department developed a revolutionary (for those times) model for training contemporary musicians. It filled a void, and at the same time, positioned itself as unique within the tertiary music sector.

Another calculated approach to create a divergent profile is that of the Queensland University of Technology's music school. Long before QUT introduced its Creative Industries Faculty, Andy Arthurs was shaping the music department into one discreetly

different from that of either Queensland Conservatorium or the University of Queensland, both close by.

Similarly, Queensland Conservatorium's second campus at the Gold Coast also has a specific image, in no way resembling the original. Under the direction of Garry Tamlyn, the Gold Coast campus has developed a discrete profile focused on training in pop music and multimedia.

These examples are based entirely on a departure from traditional music training. Taking such an approach immediately disassociates the institution from the traditional intake, which has advantages and disadvantages for the conservatorium and its leaders. Parallel with the element of risk is the potential aligned with being first in the market, a concept well acknowledged in business,[iv] and even now in universities.

Of equal significance is the suspicion with which new technology is received amongst traditional conservatoriums. When Mark Walton began using video conferencing facilities to deliver music lessons from teachers in Sydney to students in regional NSW, his ideas were regarded with skepticism. By necessity it became a personal, rather than institutional, mission. In a relatively brief period, his work has created a statewide success, now operating as the Sydney Conservatorium's VideoLink program, connecting industry (Yamaha), with Sydney Conservatorium and regional communities throughout NSW.

Director of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music, Greg Whateley, a believer in 'first-mover' advantage, has led CQCM along a different technological path. He writes that "in order to compete in the new economy it is necessary for the (CQCM) to position itself firmly as an in part **eConservatorium** ('bricks and clicks' environment) with significant elements of eBusiness and eMusicianship…"[v] Yet, despite Whateley's substantial reporting on this, a discussion group at the *CONNECTing with…* symposium (Brisbane, April 2002) gave little voice to the concept, tending to imply a lack of interest and/or confidence in something with potential to revolutionise modes of delivery for some music training.

One wonders at the corollary between these examples of skepticism, and that which confronted Rex Hobcroft when he first introduced 'new' concepts like research and electronic music to the Sydney Conservatorium thirty years ago.

The argument that there are too many music institutions in Australia fails to address the potential for diversity between them. The claim has substance if institutions cling to tradition, but there is plenty of evidence that competition is *not* necessarily beneficial. The alternative of specialisation offers one solution to another of the challenges faced by leaders of music institutions: the need to address changing musical preferences and the growing diversity in musical professions.

Diversity threatens to fragment the core business of the music institution, and there is considerable discussion on alternatives to classical music, with some even brave enough

to ask whether conservatoriums should exist at all![vi] There is debate on how other genres might be embraced, whether they warrant programs of their own, or whether they belong in an institution at all. The alternatives imply arguments both aesthetic and practical. How, for example, can traditional training in Indian Classical Music be condensed into a 3 or 4-year degree program? And, why choose Indian rather than another non-Western form?

Pop music, especially, elicits arguments of both kinds. Each acknowledges that democratisation of music is more appropriate than elitism, that access is favoured over exclusion. The ideological argument insists that music institutions 'should challenge the aesthetic and intellectual monopoly of Western bourgeois art music canon',[vii] yet the practical acknowledges that there are problems associated with institutionalised training for pop musicians. The common theme of access is the rationale used by European schools offering pop music but research also concedes the existence of commercially-driven pop music institutions, offering the argument that they are better able to respond to rapid change in trends and professional practice.[viii] The dichotomy of these two positions demonstrates that, for the conservatorium, the choice is not a straightforward one; each alternative carries both potential and risk. Just one more dilemma for the leaders of music institutions.

Underlining (or some might say, *undermining*) the challenge of change is the fundamental burden of resourcing change. The reality is that most conservatorium leaders are finding it more difficult to support existing programs, much less equip new ones. Neither are the latest trends necessarily cheaper options. Associating high costs only with classical music is misleading. Funding problems are incurred in the delivery of many different programs. Michael Hannan explains the financial challenge of covering all the skills required in popular music, given that performers need to be composers and composers need to be performers, whilst all need also to be music technologists and to understand marketing. Astutely, he notes that many performance graduates become private music teachers, and questions the level of concentration on pedagogy and small business management in performance programs.[ix]

Australia has never enjoyed easy access to a philanthropic mindset. Even so, the demanding workload imposed on music leaders makes finding the time to enlist and maintain sponsorship difficult. This leaves the leader in the unenviable position of having to make difficult decisions which will impact on the future of the institution, consequently on the next generation of musicians, and hence on society. The decisions may require abandoning some programs in favour of others, despite the inevitable repercussions.

Economic decisions need prudent consideration. Clearly, they carry artistic implications and must therefore be the responsibility of the artistic leader, but there is good argument for embracing non-artistic personnel in reaching economic conclusions. Faced with constraint, reduction within the original framework is more probable. Reduction may produce intensification, perhaps improve quality, but not unless access is reduced to match.

Strategic thinking is required. No longer is it a question of trying to do more with less (or even *the same* with less), a comment high among current complaints. Instead, the leader needs to ask what might best be done with what is available. Developing, rather than modifying, is more likely to result in creative outcomes.

A 'creative outcome' does not necessarily imply that traditional forms should not exist. Of equal challenge to leaders is the assertion that they are also responsible for upholding traditional forms, for ensuring their continued existence. Most challenges facing music leaders spring from the tension between ensuring the existence of *all* genres of music, whilst coping with all manner of constraints. Clearly, they're more challenged if they try to do it alone. Institutional leaders need to consider working together, reducing competition, developing and respecting individuality. More than ever, they need networks outside their institutions, strong connections with professional and social communities. Most particularly, they need a persuasive united voice.

Such choices require vision and courage. They are based on the assumption that there is the decision-making capacity and support for what may amount to radical change. True flexibility is not achieved by adjusting bits on the periphery and reworking the known, but rather through committing to the new, no matter which genre the 'new' might address. Re-shaping creates soft edges, and in business this would be a recipe for disaster. As Whateley quotes from Hamel and Prahalad, "…any company that cannot imagine the future won't be around to enjoy it."[x]

The third in this series will focus on leadership turnover, drawing on research currently being conducted with leaders in Australian music institutions. What is the rate of turnover in our music schools? Are the current contexts and challenges contributing to leadership turnover?

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[i] Ray Weekes, Director, The Brisbane Institute (2003). Lecture, Griffith University.

[ii] Interviews with leaders in the writer's research.

[iii] Frances J. Milliken (1987). Three Types of Perceived Uncertainty About the Environment : State, Effect, and Response Uncertainty. *Academy of Management Review 12/1.*

[iv] Dean A. Shepherd (2002). *New Venture Strategy: Timing, Environmental Uncertainty, and Performance.* St Louis: EMGE.

[v] Greg Whateley (2002). *From Concept to Reality – the Development of an eConservatorium Entity at Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music.* Unpublished.

[vi] Steen Nielsen (2002). Are Conservatoires Really Necessary? *CONNECTing with…*, Queensland Conservatorium. Unpublished.

[vii] Garry Tamlyn (2002). Contemporary Directions: Popular Music. *CONNECTing with…*, Queensland Conservatorium. Unpublished.

[viii] S.Posthuma et al. (2002). *Professional Jazz and Pop Music Training in Europe. A survey conducted as part of the project 'Music Education in a Multicultural European Society'.* Utrecht: AEC.

[ix] Michael Hannan (2001. The Future of Tertiary Music Training in Australia. *MCA Music Forum 7/3.*

[x] Whateley (2002). op.cit.