

LEADING MUSICIANS

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

3. SUCCESSION

“There isn’t a waiting list!”ⁱ

Changing leadership in some Australian music institutions provoked this series, which has thus far explored the context and challenges confronting music schools and their leaders. This final article analyses leadership succession in institutions over the past fifteen years: the rate of turnover, changing patterns of governance, succession planning and professional development, in parallel with leaders’ comments on the circumstances in which they operate.ⁱⁱ

Initial data collection for this article was through a survey distributed to all tertiary music institutions,ⁱⁱⁱ requesting information on leadership since 1988: details, reporting lines, appointment procedures, professional development and succession planning. Much of this is available on public record, but was more concisely conveyed through the survey. Participation was voluntary, and it is possibly a measure of general concern about leadership that there was a high rate of response, approaching 90%. Of those who didn’t respond, one was prevented from doing so by university intervention, and another willing but unable to meet deadlines. Each tells a story relevant to the findings.

The qualitative data enriched the quantitative with detail, context, and personal comment. Following initial analysis, 60% of the respondents were chosen for personal interviews. Sampling was selective, based on a range of institutions and contexts. All respondents, particularly the interviewees, gave generously of their time and were expansive in their remarks. Given that this research confirms the pressures on music leaders, their interest and involvement are appreciated.

Because the sector is small, and in order to remove associations of personality and organisational behaviour, the results and comments are here reported without identification. The exception is factual information quoted from public record. The significance of this research is that all leaders report parallel experiences, the size of the institution offering no differentiation. The findings carry sufficient weight without connection to specifics.

The results of the research confirm the impact of the Dawkins’ Higher Education Policy (1988), which shuffled the governance of most Australian music institutions. Recalling the context, Dawkins removed the dual higher education system and as a consequence, non-university music institutions were seduced or dragged into the university sector. There, some would argue, the rot set in. Universities have since endured enormous pressure from government, resulting in dramatic changes in governance impacting on all disciplines. One interviewee quoted the Director of the London Institute as saying that the “level of government interference in (Australian) higher education is dangerous, unlike any in other countries of the free world.”

Since 1988 Australian music institutions have changed leaders, on average, every 3.8 years.^{iv} The reasons include rotational leadership, resignations, retirements (voluntary and forced) and death. For each example of rapid turnover, there is another of minimal change. Public record indicates that the two oldest music institutions, Elder Conservatorium (University of Adelaide) and the University of Melbourne’s Music Department (and former Conservatorium) each have had only seven Professors of Music since their establishment. For Adelaide, that amounts to seven in 119 years, for Melbourne, seven in 110 years.^v The rate of change does not necessarily reflect consistent longevity. Adelaide University may have had only seven Elder Professors, but changes in university governance during the 1990s incurred an additional four non-professorial leaders,

taking the overall total to eleven leaders, seven since 1988. The rate of change at Melbourne University has taken a different pace, with only two leaders in the last fifteen years.

This is more the exception than the rule: only 18% of institutions have experienced two leaders in the last fifteen years. The greater majority (40%) have had four. Is this a problem? Not necessarily, it seems. The answer depends largely on the system under which they operate. Institutions which rotate leadership within the department (35%) argue that there is more stability, a sense of continuity, and empathy with the role. This is in common with those European countries which employ rotational leadership in conservatoires. However, rotating positions tend not "to invest too much political clout" in the leader, and are inclined to occur where management exists at a level higher than that of the music leader. More than one such system reported the problem of having too few people sufficiently interested or experienced, meaning that the role of leadership 'rotated' by default among a few, or in some cases, only one. The film *"Facing the Music"* (Connolly and Anderson, 2001) is an indictment of such a situation.

Why weren't they interested? Clearly, the pressures on leadership should assume some blame. One leader called the role "boring (and) bureaucratic", another "difficult and fatiguing ... (with) extremely high stress, diminishing resources, extremely long hours, massive expectations from both school staff and university executive". There was shared acknowledgement that leadership "disables (one) from keeping ... professional skills at cutting edge level"; that participating in leadership rotation brings a 3-5 year "interruption to (one's) career".

In the case of non-rotational systems, the situation is noticeably different. One leader noted the importance for "all types of musicians (to) have equal access to higher levels of appointment. The current research-based promotions system tends to favour musicologists over performers and composers. This is not necessarily a good thing for music institutions." Current higher education funding models supplement funding relative to research quotients. Given that the Australian system has consistently refused to acknowledge music in research terms, it remains up to individual universities to decide whether additional funding is appropriate. Very few do.

Still, it can't be all bad. Internal promotions aside, when positions are advertised, they still attract applicants. However, the advertisements indicate changing times. Whereas once it was sufficient to have been a successful musician, now leadership and management experience is also required. Most surveyed institutions reported selection criteria emphasising artistic experience, but in 20% of cases the criteria favoured leadership, management and entrepreneurial experience over artistic skills. A long-serving leader noted that "many aspire to the position who don't think the 90s have happened. ... Candidates need to be more business-savvy, (to) have a clear understanding about the educational environment." Nonetheless, the same leader also acknowledged the need for a "distinguished career in music".

Overall, 92% of respondents supported frequent leadership turnover, 'frequent' being taken to mean approximately every five years. Their reasoning was principally because it "allows staff to pursue their own careers", gives "time to carry (matters) through", because "people run out of ideas", and "there is nothing left of the person!" But they shared concern about lack of continuity, more than one leader specifically noting organisational health and fragility as issues relative to frequent turnover. "From the larger institutional point of view it is refreshing, but on the ground it can be disruptive." There was agreement that continuity protects against university-imposed change, "assuming (such change) is negative, and ... the odds are (that) it may well be!" In some cases, universities have also been known to capitalise on leadership turnover, delaying the appointment of a replacement until securing change which would otherwise have been contested.

Preferences on internal or external appointments were divided, ranging from the notion that an external appointment carries a sense of mandate, without which there is "no strong moral case for doing things", to a general sense of "paranoia that ... an outside appointment will be made with dire consequences for the future of the School and its programs." There was a sense amongst some that the culture of the university is such that it is "disruptive to be bringing in new ones all

the time”, that “universities are collegial institutions” without hierarchies. They may have been, once.

Some indicated that “it needs someone who knows the organisation”. But perhaps all it really needs is someone who understands the *nature* of the organisation? Simply knowing the organisation doesn’t automatically inject creativity and energy; and might not entail appreciating the potential, which may look different from outside.

The larger university perspective is relevant to the current predicament of music institutions. Post-Dawkins changes in governance have removed effective budgetary management and decision-making from most music leaders. “If you can’t control the budget, there’s nothing much you can do”, said one of the few fortunate to retain such control. Initially, 62% of the respondents confirmed that they control their budgets, but 40% of the group admitted to having no real discretion within the figure allocated. For them, ‘control’ equates to distribution of an amount which is actually controlled at a higher level, usually that of Executive Dean. Notably, distribution has to account for the fact that a sizeable proportion of the devolved figure is usually locked into salaries and salary increments. One leader referred to “shuffling priorities”, another to having “no sense of control over what we’re doing”. Others indicated that so little (discretionary funding) was available, it didn’t mean much. “We’re not talking massive amounts here!”

The reality is that less than 20% of music institutions have effective control over allocation of their funding. It is significant that these same institutions are also the most resourceful in generating external funding, and, more particularly, that their leaders have senior management roles within their respective universities. It’s as if most institutions maintain (or have returned to) the way in which music schools were originally managed, when even the autonomous schools were administered by a board of governors or a government department. The expectation of effective management, including jurisdiction over resources, is relatively recent; an outcome of continually-diminishing subsidies. “The begging bowl is (gone). Get over it,” said one. Realistically, there has always been the need to supplement government subsidy, and the history of each institution has to some degree reflected each incumbent’s response to that need. But the last decade of declining government funding has hit the university sector as a whole, and music institutions struggle to justify the higher costs of one-on-one teaching and expensive equipment. “Most music schools that have been interfered with have been in desperate financial straits.”

Changing governance patterns have also reduced decision-making power for most leaders, yet 85% of participants were confident that they were making a difference, although the assertion was qualified. In the main, concerns related to the capacity to make a difference within the management hierarchy. Such comments as “it depends on the Executive Dean”, “in academic leadership only”, “very constrained by the cumbersome, oppressive environment”, and “the only control is over quality in teaching” indicate limitations to effective power. Others suggest that having a senior management role within the university is beneficial, although even in that situation, it remains “up to the person” as to how much is realised. “You have to fight for those things,” asserted one.

And fight, they have. Some institutions have struggled through change of more than one kind in the past fifteen years. Without exception, they have all experienced university-imposed restructures resulting from changing management frameworks. Most restructures have meant a change in role (and possibly title) for the music leader, 40% of whom now answer to the Executive Dean of a mega-faculty and 20% to a Head of School who in turn answers to the Executive Dean. Only 15% report directly to the Vice-Chancellor, and another 15% report to another member of the university executive. Having a direct line to chancellery makes a difference in acknowledgement of the school and leader within the overall university structure.

Some institutions have experienced amalgamation, a few of them more than once. Public record has Elder Conservatorium experiencing two institutional mergers since 1991, likewise Central Queensland Conservatorium, which had the dubious honour of belonging to two different

universities over a one-year period of transition in 1995. Some have been subject to so many shifts in governance that they might be considered experts in change management. On record, since the establishment of Southern Cross University in 1994, its Music School has had four changes in structure and name, and the University of Western Sydney's Music Department has experienced two university-imposed restructures since 1996. Other institutions, responding to various external pressures, have even imposed restructures on themselves. Some expect more impact as the Nelson reforms take effect from 2004. "If we don't meet (projected student) load, we'll be (affected) quite heavily."

With so much at stake for institutions, there is surprisingly little planning for leadership succession. Less than 50% of responding institutions foster potential leaders, regardless of whether leadership is sought internally. Only one institution reported a formal process of identifying suitable individuals and offering a 'shadowing' process. The other extreme was the appointment of a 'dogsbody' who might learn from proximity to the leader rather than actual involvement in decision-making. Most comments referred to the need to identify potential leaders early, preferably mid-career, because they need energy to bring to the role. One idealist suggested that organisations should invest in succession, providing a salary to support the grooming process after a new leader is identified. Others thought nothing would prepare anyone for the shock!

"I would have enjoyed something more than a letter of appointment and a duty statement," lamented one about the lack of an induction process, a situation reflective of the practice of 10% of institutions surveyed. The remainder confirm their university's 'proactive' approach to professional development, with huge variation in the relevance of what is available. Structured programs are offered in 15% of organisations, not always matching the specific needs and backgrounds of music leaders. "What works well in the rest of the university doesn't necessarily work in music." Individualised programs, mostly available on request, are provided by 40% of universities to music leaders, arguably allowing the individual to supplement his/her experience as appropriate, if it is a priority.

Ask leaders to suggest the type of professional development required and 75% indicate the need for financial skills, "understanding *other people's* spreadsheets", with an overlapping 60% considering management training important. A further 25% strongly support people-skills, specifying conflict resolution skills and crisis management. "You become a specialist in fixing up other people's messes." For 30%, being "thrown in at the deep end" is the only solution, a method reflective of their own experience. "If you're not good at it, you're not made better by (management training)."

The reality is that all current incumbents *have* at some stage been inducted in the deep-end of the pool, implying that 70% of them don't consider that approach satisfactory! One comment that "it's not the way I would do it next time" is revealing.

With all the frustrations, it might be easy to forget that music should be the prime focus. Therein is the dilemma. Music is not a monoculture, and future musicians may not appear as they do today. Music institutions have always carried, but haven't always upheld a responsibility to their communities. After all, it is from there that will emerge future graduates, audience, employment and support. Leaders need first to be musicians, but flexible enough to absorb a diversity of experiences which will nourish the creative needs of their institutions and foster ways in which those needs might be realised. Leaders need to generate energy and excitement in the present; whilst thinking always in the future. Vision is important.

For most institutions, artistic credibility generates respect, but experience demonstrates that it's not automatically associated with leadership strength. "More often than not, the charismatic (musician) has been an unmitigated disaster." Leading musicians is about respecting and nurturing the individual strengths of others, keeping creativity alive at all levels. Creativity is fired by inspirational vision.

Ask music leaders to comment on the role and there's almost a generic response that "the position is quite impossible." So it may seem, but it's the same across the world. Recently, one American leader likened advertising for a music leader to "searching for Jesus Christ."^{vi} Clearly, Australian leaders are frustrated by change and lack of supporting resources. "You never feel you have an opportunity to do a good job."

Reflecting on selection criteria, one leader suggested: "Superman: nerves of steel. Good with very little money. Even better with a little money. Affable, even though there's never enough money. Good musician with a wide grasp of music types and a healthy attitude to all music. Prepared to put aside own career to fan the sparks of others. A respected teacher. Strong interpersonal skills. Industrial relations understanding. Corporate citizen. Good community skills. Knowledge of the discipline and the industry. High standing in the sector."

And a sense of humour, perhaps?

When this series of articles began, five institutions were seeking new leaders. The University of Western Australia appointed Darryl Poulsen as Head of School before the first article made it to press. Since then, Allan Marett scored the triple role of Professor of Musicology, Head of the new Research Centre and Chair of the Music Department at the University of Sydney, commencing 2004. More recently, the CEO of The Queensland Orchestra, Julie Warn, was named the new Director of WAAPA (incorporating WA Conservatorium). Queensland Conservatorium has widened their current search for a new Director, and the hunt has begun for a new Principal at Sydney Conservatorium.

Meantime, Greg Whateley has departed Central Queensland Conservatorium, his resignation effective January, and the university has yet to advertise for a replacement. Time for another restructure?

The recent leadership turnover may imply a sinking ship phenomenon, but response to this survey indicates that it's more likely natural attrition. Nonetheless, over the past decade 35% of music leaders have departed their positions as a direct consequence of the 1988 reforms. The percentage indirectly affected by changing pressures is harder to measure. Experience would suggest that "voluntary resignation/retirement" might cover a multitude of reasons, and this was implied by some respondents.

Changing environments offer potential for new initiatives, but the challenge of resourcing that potential is overwhelming for many incumbents. This is particularly inopportune when the comparable landscape of higher education in Europe has given high priority to funding change. A brief window of opportunity to take advantage of temporary instability overseas has passed, with leaders of most Australian music institutions confronting diversions at home.

One can only wish them all well. After all, "it can be quite breathtaking!"

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Interviewee, October 2003.

ⁱⁱ Fifteen years, in order to test the theory that the Dawkins' Higher Education Policy of 1988 had a substantial impact on all institutions and their leadership

ⁱⁱⁱ In order to obtain consistent sampling, private/commercial music institutions were not included in the data analysis, although it has been otherwise established that there is a degree of similarity in some of the challenges they face.

^{iv} This figure includes all Australian music institutions, whether participants in the survey or not.

^v Helena Lauer (1998). The role of the first five Elder professors in the development of music in the Elder Conservatorium 1885-1985. Unpublished thesis, University of Adelaide; and Peter J. Tregear (1997). The Conservatorium of Music University of Melbourne. An Historical Essay to Mark its Centenary. Melbourne: Centre for Studies in Australian Music.

^{vi} American interviewee, Germany, November 2003.