

LEADING MUSICIANS LEADING MUSICIANS CHALLENGES FOR CONSERVATORIA IN AUSTRALIA

[*A paper delivered at Queensland University of Technology, 2003*](#)

“Leaders are dealers in hope” (Napoleon Bonaparte)

Tertiary music institutions in Australia have experienced enormous change in the last fifteen years. The implications for conservatoria are many, and the impact on leadership significant.

I lived through these changes whilst leading an institution which had three different lives ranging from autonomous to being within not one, but two different universities, and neither should we forget the two-year transition during which the conservatorium answered to *both* universities!

The experience of starting from scratch, building a profile, struggling for survival, changing identity and image not once but twice, and changing university partners mid-stream was a constant process of transformation, reinvention, and validation. The fight for survival causes one to consider not only why one does something but whether it should be done at all.

“Change or you don’t survive” sharpens the mind wonderfully, it sort of washes away all the bits of irrelevance, If you don’t have that sort of knife-edge arrangement, then I think it’s a more challenging task really.

This experience has drawn me to research the role leadership plays within the conservatorium context; specifically, the connections between leadership, institutional direction and future.

The title for this (draft) paper echoes the conservatorium tradition of appointing a leading practitioner to the position of Director/Principal/Rektor in a music institution. The idea that a leading musician should lead musicians; that a respected practitioner (whether performer, composer or conductor) might bring with him/her (usually him!) the status of reflected success, the promise of a role model of the highest profile. The institution basks in the reflected glory of the individual.

Increasingly, this model is under question. In earlier times, leaders were able to continue their high profile public commitments whilst also leading the institution, but the contemporary context is much more demanding of a leader’s energies.

Different institutions have different ways of approaching the 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 from institution to institution. They include political appointments which bear no relation to management practice, elected positions which are temporary only, traditional appointments and administrative ones. In Australia, most positions are bound by the university context in which the schools exist, although generally, the leader is a musician.

Context plays an important role in determining the effect of leadership just as leader differences have been shown to affect the performance of an organization. In particular, certain kinds of leadership may have a positive influence on an organization in times of uncertainty. I’d like to come back to this a little later, because it is significant.

(At this stage I should indicate that my research does not intend judging quality of leadership.)

I’m hoping that this research may eventually be in a position to contribute to the way in which our music institutions conduct themselves within their individual settings. It has already been acknowledged in Europe for its potential to influence professional development and there may be some general principles which are worth applying to individual situations.

Hence the questions I posed to you! Admittedly, they were ones on which you might have spent weeks, when I suggested minutes only. That may seem ridiculous, but after almost a year of interviews with leaders in Europe and some in Australia, it has been my observation that the first few comments are usually those which reflect the most pressing problems facing

the interviewee.

I hope that, over the new few months, some of you may allow me the opportunity to discuss in more detail your individual situations. Meantime, let's look at the next knee-jerk responses.

There were two questions only.

What are the challenges for your institution?

What are the challenges for you as leader?

The questions were deliberately open-ended, to allow for the broadest of responses. Today we may have the opportunity to be more issue-specific on some of the common concerns, but in this initial stage, your responses might well have included anything pertinent to your special circumstances.

There were some striking factors which emerged from the compilation of responses:

1. For most of the respondents, there was little difference between the challenges for the institution and the challenges for the leader. Less than half expressed concerns about maintaining personal energy and morale. Perhaps that is considered a luxury! By comparison, more than half were concerned about maintaining staff and unit morale.
2. Funding and resource-based issues dominated the list of challenges for institutions, accounting for a staggering (but perhaps not surprising) 91% of the concerns expressed; this issue also accounted for 26% of the leadership challenges.
3. 54% of respondents expressed concern about leadership issues – their preparation for leadership, their ability to lead change, their leadership profile (within the institution and within the university)

You may be encouraged to learn that these results relate quite closely to those I have from extensive individual interviews in a wide range of institutions in Europe. And from some research into the history of some institutions, it wasn't much different 100 years ago.

Back to the Nactmus survey....

In summary, although it required some degree of generalization, the various issues were broken into four basic categories: resources, future direction, structural issues and quality concerns. Within that generalisation, I allowed for the fact that some issues relate to more than one of the summary categories, so the total percentages will exceed 100%. On the basis of this summary, the institutional challenges are as follows:

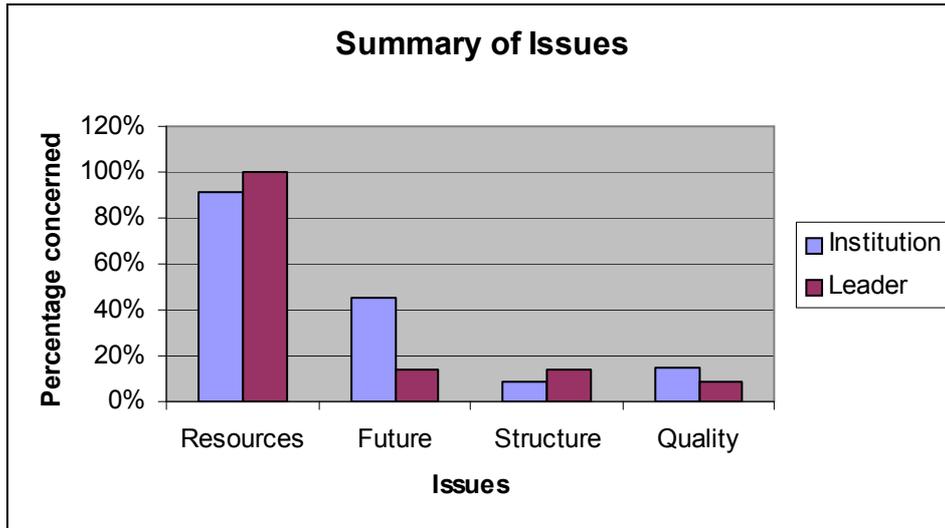
Resources:	91%
Future Direction:	45%
Structural issues:	9%
Quality concerns:	15%

Adapting the same general categories to the leadership issues, there is an interesting adjustment.

(For the purpose of this exercise, I have included under 'resource' issues, such concerns as staff and personal morale, which in my opinion have a bearing on the leadership resource. Quality refers only to quality of product as opposed to quality of leadership.)

Resources:	100%
Future Direction:	14%
Structural issues:	14%
Quality concerns:	9%

Chart 1: Summary of issues



It would seem from this comparison that, whilst respondents have common concerns for the institution and their leadership, the emphasis given to these concerns is different, possibly depending on how each of them affects that particular role.

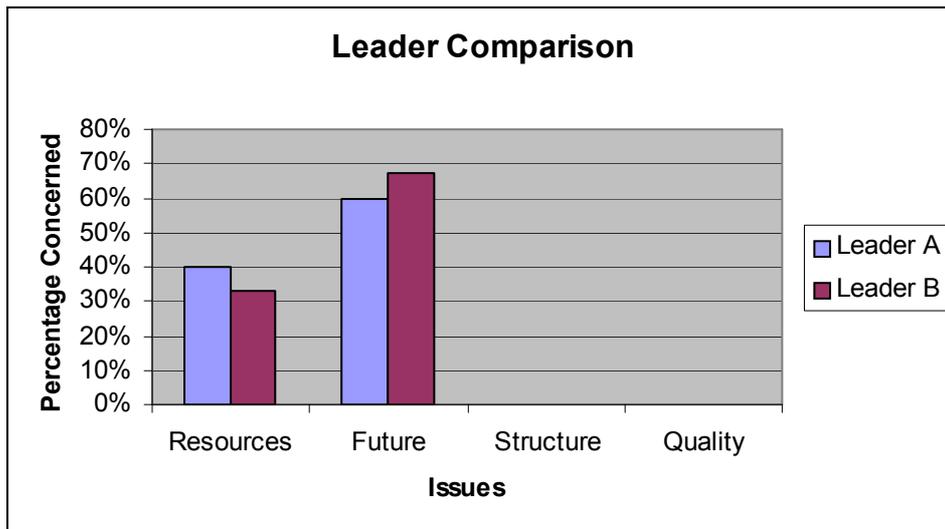
The sizeable difference in respect of concerns about future is significant, given the expectation that leaders should provide vision for the organization. This may be influenced by the fact that a percentage of respondents may operate within a structure which does not have the expectation of vision.

In the cases of some Nactmus institutions, I received responses from more than one person having responsibility for leadership at some time. Taking one (anonymous) example, where the two respondents represent a leader and acting leader, the level of consensus is high, but the emphasis slightly different for each. You will note that, for this particular institution, two of the areas did not apply. Each of the leaders recognized this.

The level of consensus suggests a high degree of communication of all factors pertinent to leadership. I'll come back to the importance of having this understanding at various levels within the institution.

Chart 2: Leadership Comparison

In this case, Leader A is the Director/Head of the Institution, and Leader B is the Acting Director when/as required.



This result was quite different in Europe, where interviewing the deputy in a significant number of cases meant finding someone who did not see the position from a similar viewpoint. There were varying reasons for this, but the most common of them was a lack of awareness of relevant detail – financial, regulatory or otherwise. This creates a less than sympathetic ‘second layer’ and one which is not in a position to make informed decisions if required to do so.

From the Nactmus survey, some of the specific results may be of interest.

Whilst funding ranked highest amongst the challenges for the institution, there were some other common concerns. Issues regarding the establishment of research, connections with industry and maintenance or improvement of quality all ranked equally at 15%.

By comparison to concerns expressed in this forum ten years ago, issues related to structure of the institution now rank much lower, at only 6%. This may imply that most leaders have learned to live with the new structural fit, or that most ‘restructuring’ is now complete. Or perhaps it simply means that leaders now accept restructuring as part of the norm? That deserves further exploration.

From the leadership challenges:

- Whilst 20% expressed concern about issues related to increasing workload, only 6% did so relative to their ability to maintain a personal performance or research profile. In the case of temporarily-held positions in Europe this is not uncommon, because personal performance is put aside for the limited period in which the individual is leader. However, in Australia, the position is generally longer-term, so I would consider this significant.
- Vision accounted for only 6% of the issues expressed, and whilst I’ve noted the possible variables here, one would generally expect that a leader would have some thought to the future, some imagination about how the institution might position itself. It’s something of a paradox to be leading but also working behind the front line.

As much as it is about facts, great leadership is also about concretizing ideas and about having the vision that feeds those ideas, and it’s about tending and managing both the facts and the vision simultaneously.

- Another 6% was registered about matters which were genre-specific. This may be that the Nactmus institutions have already positioned themselves in respect of genre, but it may also have some relationship to the limited concentration on future direction.

I quote the data in order to focus attention on the issues. What is their significance? What

lessons might we consider from the implications?

Some concern should be expressed about vision.

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.

As much as it is about facts, great leadership is also about concretizing ideas and about having the vision that feeds those ideas, and it's about tending and managing both the facts and the vision simultaneously. What's the margin, yes. But also, how can we relax the margins long term so that we can take more share? And what do we have to do in the long term to assure that the fact-set we are operating from then is different from the fact-set we are operating from today.

If a leader is custodian of one thing about everything else, it is that sense of the fact-based present disappearing into an obscured future where probability tells us everything we know will be turned on its head.

The simple fact is that without a vision based on an ideal, a leader will never get us there.

On the positive level, Australian institutions are in many ways ahead of European conservatoires, having faced major upheavals as a result of the Dawkins reforms twelve years ago. Europe is now facing similar turmoil, with political deadlines forcing them to consider student/staff mobility, credit point systems and access policies, all very new concepts to most European institutions.

I'm going to detour from leadership for a few minutes to outline some of these changes because I believe they will have significant implications for non-European institutions.

In the UK, the Blair government has presented some interesting challenges, some of which are already surfacing in discussions on the future for higher education here.

- The recent 'access' policy requires that university/college entrance statistics are representative of a broad spectrum of postcodes, locally and otherwise. This will challenge institutional audition processes as well as curricula. Some of the institutions at the top end of town are directing this policy only to the pre-tertiary level – a wise choice perhaps, given that access problems can't be addressed at the age of 18. The junior programs are best placed to influence trends amongst the applying students. However, there still exists the question of *what product it is that they are accessing. Is it appropriate to them culturally and professionally? Will a disadvantaged student be able to afford the sort of long-term training which results in a successful audition? Will a multi-cultural society produce applicants appropriate for conservatory programs?*
- The 2002 Comprehensive Spending Review announced in July promises an increase in funding to education coupled with a warning that schools, colleges, universities and education authorities which perform poorly will be 'subject to takeover by new leadership or closed'. Conversely, those which perform well will be rewarded for their 'leadership'.
- Something which may seem unlikely to happen here but in fact has been raised in discussion on a regular basis: About 2 years ago the Higher Education Funding Council of Britain offered the music schools premium funding (£13,000 -14,000 instead of £4,000 p.a.). The attached condition is that 75% of the student output would be in the performing profession within 5 years. Mind you, nobody is defining 'performing profession', so there are some pretty broad interpretations.
- As a result of this, Youth Music – a national lottery-funded organization commissioned a report which (despite a mixed reception from institutions) has been published in September last year. The author, Rick Rogers, interviewed on the one hand students and recent graduates, and on the other, industry (agents, employers, promoters of all

genres), finding a high degree of mismatch between the two. One statistic has a conservatoire with 40% of the first-study pianists not employed in music, whilst noting at the same time that the UK is short of music teachers and accompanists. Whilst not saying that these particular students should become teachers, what it does say is that money is being put in places where it is not needed. That the needs of the profession and those of the institutions need to merge.

Since the results of the report were made public early in 2002, one well-established conservatoire has “not without pain” made considerable cuts to the intake of undergraduate pianists – from c.80 to 2!

In Europe, the European Commission is encouraging (and funding) projects which require the various countries to work together in order to access funding.

To give a few examples, there is funding to support higher education reforms, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. There are proposals for eLearning programs, there is support for bridging between training and the professions, for community extension work, for multicultural projects, for lifelong learning, for intensive learning programs.

Some that have potential to impact on Australia include **MusicWeb**, an eLearning program which is developing common network access to music-educational materials at all levels of learning. It is designed to facilitate integration into a wide variety of music courses and independent learning scenarios, to unlock specialist skills and resources (such as specialist collections of instruments) available within individual institutions so that they can be exploited to the benefit of the community at large. Among its many projects is the development of interactive modules for music theory accessible through the internet.

ERASMUS World, the European Community's first global higher education scheme, proposes a budget of 200 million Euro over 4 years 2004-2008 to support a wide spectrum of cooperative measures. The core element is the **European Masters Courses**, which will provide about 2000 scholarships for third country postgraduate students (“European Fulbright”), and about 500 scholarships for “visiting scholars”. There is also a set of measures to create partnerships between European higher education institutions and their counterparts from all over the world, amongst them grants for outgoing faculty mobility. And support for the marketing of European institutions, and improvement of services for foreign students. All European students will have an ERASMUS “mobility” card from 2003.

Even more significant is a commitment made outside the confines of the European Union. The **Bologna Declaration** of 1999 was signed by 29 European Ministers of Education, and another 10 have joined since. It intends to reform the systems of higher education so that they will be more transparent and allow more student/staff mobility across Europe. It is not simply a political statement, but a binding commitment to action, with a deadline of 2010 and set of specific objectives.

The common goal of the Bologna Declaration is to create a *‘European space for higher education’ in order to enhance the employability and mobility of its citizens and increase the international competitiveness of European higher education*. It requires the adoption of comparable degrees, establishment of a system of credits, promotion of mobility and quality assurance, promotion of inter-institutional cooperation and integrated programs of study, training and research.

In short, these initiatives are transforming the landscape in European higher education and they have significant implications for us. For non-European students wishing to study in Europe, there will be easier access, and scholarships. For European students who might otherwise have considered study outside Europe, the new climate of access, integration and cooperation in Europe might make it less attractive for them to leave.

It would seem that even our low dollar may lose its gloss for potential European students.

Significant in the application of these initiatives has been the growing influence of the Association of European Conservatoires, which now has around 180 member institutions. Whereas once the conservatoires were all different, very regionally-based, perhaps not even

recognized outside their own area or country, now even the smaller ones present a formidable force with the AEC behind them supporting and promoting good practice.

With those thoughts to get you focused on the future potential for your own institutions, let's return to the survey and leadership.

It seems that, whilst Nactmus institutions may have reinvented themselves in various ways over the past decade, amongst the leaders surveyed, there is a sense of desperation rather than hope; pessimism rather than optimism.

I refer back to my earlier comments about uncertainty. An interesting study by Milliken (1987) acknowledges the effects of three different kinds of uncertainty:

- **state (or perceived environment) uncertainty** where one does not understand how the environment is changing;
- **effect uncertainty**, which relates to predicting the impact of events or change; and
- **response uncertainty** associated with understanding potential response options and their relative value or utility.

Each of these different forms of uncertainty is important to the leader who is leading by intuition, which was certainly my own experience. Milliken emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which one operates. Let's have a look at some ways in which this might be directly relevant to Nactmus members.

Erica McWilliam (2002) relates the need to understand context specifically to the film 'Facing the Music', where 'a small group of ageing academics (strive to) hold high the disciplinary standards of their shrinking department while being constantly buffeted by the chill winds of change (economic, technological, administrative) coming from "above" '.

McWilliam makes the case that a strong grasp of disciplinary-specific knowledge is no longer sufficient for the 'professional expert'. 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.'

And what of the 'large organization that is the university'?

Simon Marginson relates the changing culture in Australian universities directly to Canberra's determination to make its dependents 'do more with less'. He notes 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'.

Marginson's description of the new governance in universities is significant for music institutions. He notes that executive power is now separated from the disciplines, and that in the spirit of devolution of decision-making, faculty management may itself be separated from those various schools which exist within the faculty. In the cases of super-faculties, this may reduce the significance and weight of the specialist discipline within the structure.

Familiar? There's more.

In this seemingly democratic environment, the decision-making is devolved to the faculties, and thence to the schools, but the decision-making doesn't allow for flexibility. The money is devolved, but not the budget flexibility.

Why do I state the obvious?

Because, in the style of universities reflecting government, and faculty management reflecting university governance, I've recently seen examples where similar devolution occurs at the

conservatorium level.

A word of caution. Operating within a fixed budget doesn't allow for flexibility unless there is the possibility of total reinvention. Faced with choosing strategies without budget flexibility, decision-makers may interpret the situation as a 'more with less' option. Using this analysis, 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. It is not compatible with the 'do more with less' strategy. When this is 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'. Whilst this objective may have been the preferred option for traditional conservatoria, it is incompatible with current strategies for increased access and the practice of enrolling more students because of the dollar value they bring to the school.

Dollar value is not to be ignored. But making informed decisions which relate to the bigger picture is important. For example, changing to meet a current market trend without understanding the longevity of that trend may well result in long-term failure. In "Built to Last", Collins notes that building a company is a design problem and great designers apply general principles, not mechanical lock-step dogma. Companies should be close to market demand, but never at the expense of their core value.

Understanding such principles might assist in how the leader in a music institution applies the responsibilities devolved to him/her.

Perhaps conservatoria should consider whether the all-consuming concern about budget constraint is prohibiting our consideration of the future direction of each individual institution; whether a tight budget is about 'doing more with less' or whether it provides the opportunity to reinvent the way things are done; how to approach the paradox of wanting to specialize whilst at the same time believing that the institution needs to be holistic.

Trying to be all things to all men in a tight financial environment leaves the institution open to spreading its resources too thinly. New initiatives don't have enough to work at any level of depth, and without additional external funding, they run the risk of skimming finances from the more established areas. Then everyone risks superficiality.

There was only so much that any director could do in the face of parsimonious government.

It's worth noting the recurrence of the word 'enabling' in the current context. Peter Renshaw makes reference to the need for leaders to enable an institution to adapt to change and so too have a number of those I've interviewed in recent months.

Enabling is relevant when leaders share or devolve responsibility amongst those with whom they work. To *enable* them to realize the responsibility given them, they must be given sufficient understanding of the whole picture, including financial consequences.

But, to digress just a little, the word is also relevant in a broader context.

One of the interviewees put it very well in saying that, realistically, current students are being prepared not just for the next decade, but for twenty or thirty years hence. Given the current rate of change in musical environment and practice, how can leaders of the current generation begin to imagine what those practitioners will encounter?

Accordingly, there is an increasing trend towards a more flexible approach which enables students rather than directs them.

Johansson (1996) suggests that the task of music institutions is to teach musicians to be well-functioning in a musical life which is based on short-term projects in whatever genre is their choice, or indeed, in a variety of genres, and where they have to act as businessmen and contractors.

That takes us into future directions, which is not the topic for discussion today, but it does remind us that the leader needs time for the future as well as for the present; for design, as well as mechanics.

In the end, leadership is not about being "in charge". It is about "leading the charge".

Before I open this to questions, I've prepared a brief questionnaire which I shall distribute now, and ask you to return later today. I'd like to compile the results of this questionnaire and use them to compile some comments which may be helpful to the work of Nactmus leaders. In order to be able to use the questionnaire, I need your identification on the document, but I assure you each of your individual and institutional anonymity. The documents will be confidential, and no person or institution identifiable in any resulting publication.

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