

STRATEGIC ADVOCACY FOR MUSIC EDUCATION

Richard Letts, October, 2009

Address to International Music Council World Forum on Music

Dear friends

It is an honour to be invited to speak on this session's vitally important subject of advocacy for music education. To fit the gravity of the topic, I had come to Carthage with an extremely worthy but boring prepared speech.

And then the good Lord sent me our preceding speaker, Dr Wayne Bowman. Wayne has offered many observations both astute and provocative, and set me thinking. So I threw out much of my original speech in favour of a right of reply.

Let me paint you the picture. Up there, way above, kissed by the sunshine, their cheeks touched by the breeze of truthfulness and virtue, float the philosophers, a small flock of which Wayne has the good fortune to be a member. They wheel gently and gracefully, observers of all that rages below.

Down here are the advocates, their toes licked by the flames of hell. As the director of a national music council, I find myself to be a member of this unhappy band. The cost in shoes alone is equal to a philosopher's annual salary.

Wayne offers some perceptions about the role of the advocates. Firstly, he is not sure whether school music education is in any case a good idea. But assuming that it is, if it were doing its job, there would be such a demand for it that there would be no need for advocacy. Music education obviously is not doing its job, but there is still no need for advocacy because advocates would only be arguing for something that, overall, is not successful. So Wayne has saved my burning toes – by cutting off my legs.

Let me make an observation about the success or otherwise of music education. My music council's research has shown that in our country, in only 23% of government schools is music taught by someone with any competence. In most primary schools, music is supposed to be taught by the classroom teacher. We have done some more research that shows that on average, trainee classroom teachers receive 17 hours of music education. That is out of about 1100 total hours in the degree. With 17 hours of music training, they are supposed to be able to teach music for seven or eight years. A colleague of mine gives some music training to primary school teachers who volunteer. She

says many cannot even walk in time to the music. Perhaps they became teachers after being rejected by the army.

I ask Wayne how in these circumstances, which I am sure are not unusual, school music education can be said to have failed. It was not even attempted.

By the way, these statistics are fantastic for advocacy. We only have them because we did the research. Advocates need the facts.

Speaking of facts, Wayne says that whereas philosophers are always interested in intellectual flexibility and new ideas, advocacy is, quote, "conservative, a plea for the status quo". Do you find this statement as astonishing as I do?

But perhaps Wayne is describing a particular situation in North America, where school music education is so beleaguered. Does advocacy there tend to promote music programs of the sort that have been strong for many decades, but are now being lost. If so, there might be very good reasons.

A general possibility occurs to me, and that is that when music education is so consistently under threat for so very long, people may feel pushed back into the known and reliable. If there is no growing edge, it may not seem to be the time for proposing innovation and risk. And advocacy must be nothing if not strategic.

This comes to mind because of something I see in the situation in England. There the government is pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into new ways of delivering music education.

There is an organisation called the Music Manifesto that describes itself as a "campaign", presumably with government as its target. But given the government's generous funding of music education, rather than campaign for funds, Music Manifesto seems to be involved in proposing and in some way taking responsibility for innovative programs: for instance, Sing Up, which has the objective "to put singing at the heart of every primary school"; and a counterpart of Venezuela's El Sistema, called In Harmony; and David Price's Musical Futures, about which we will soon hear. What is striking is the amount of genuine experimentation and honest evaluation. In countries where there is little change in music education, one hears the same old arguments repeated for years. In the UK, where there are resources, they have fresh and constantly changing discussions about the nature and effectiveness of programs.

Effective advocacy strategies match their context.

I do agree with Wayne that advocacy is inherently political and it attempts to persuade. Its arguments have to be matched to the interests of the listener, and the listener's ability or interest in absorbing complexity. They need by and large to be very clear arguments. One does not spend one's twenty minutes with the government minister for education in putting forward an argument and then giving ten reasons that in certain circumstances it may or may not be true. Wayne has given us a philosophical argument which in many ways was very interesting but when he had finished, I was not quite sure what he wanted. That is a perfectly good discussion to put before this meeting but it would be more or less useless to put it before the minister if you are wanting a result other than to paralyse action.

I do agree also with Wayne that we have to be careful what we claim for music education. I share his concern that some of the research we cite about effects of music training on academic outcomes, socialisation, self-confidence, truancy etc etc may not be very strong, or claim too much. However, I don't know that I would be so bold as to say, as does Wayne, that "none of these research claims are true": but perhaps he was simplifying in the interests of advocacy. Advocacy does tend to take a rather too sunny view of the research that supports its arguments, risking, eventually, its credibility and integrity.

There is much more in Wayne's paper that we could argue about and I admit, much with which I agree. But at this point I will revert to my original boring paper.

One of the more resilient pleasures of being in the music education world is that almost all of us can complain about our dire circumstances, about being underfunded and overworked. This is deeply satisfying and certainly brings us all together. What's more, it has the advantage that it will cause no change at all – so we can enjoy doing it far into the future.

But if we do actually want to cause change, we have to stop just talking with each other. We have to take our case to people who are empowered to make the decisions that will give what we ask for – the politicians and bureaucrats.

What we will really want to say to them is that music is wonderful, important, beautiful, one of the great reasons for being alive. Those are the reasons that everyone should learn to make music.

The problem is that with a poor education system, the politicians themselves may not have had that experience of music. We need to think about their circumstances, their interests. We need somehow to

make OUR problem THEIR problem and THEIR opportunity. We have to present arguments that show how better music education can help to address the priorities they already hold.

It also would be helpful if we can confidently forecast to a politician that any action he or she takes to support music education will be immensely popular. We don't want her to be afraid that there will be a flood of letters to the daily papers condemning her, for instance, for spending money on frills when people are starving.

So it would be good also to have an advocacy campaign to persuade the general population that music education is a good thing.

So what are the politicians interested in? Of course, they would like to be popular and get lots of votes. Let's look very quickly at some of the other issues.

The economy. There seems to be no politician that is not interested in the state of the economy. For one thing, if it's poor, they will be blamed.

Music's contribution to the economy can be very significant. I'm told that music is the UK's second largest source of export income, for instance. Music's ability to generate export income is especially fascinating. It has this potential, including for developing countries.

We can calculate the value of the music economy in a similar way to finding the value of the tourist industry. I leave you to think about that. Bigger is better, provided it's credible.

Employment. There is an implication here that if music is valuable to the economy, then music education's role is to train people to work in the music sector. Music is a significant provider of employment. You may be able to get some statistics.

However, we must not argue for music education only as a form of vocational training. That would leave out most of the population. We want everyone to have the opportunity for a good music education.

Effects on non-music outcomes. We have decades of research (of varying credibility) showing that a continuing, competent music education has positive effects on academic outcomes in subjects such as maths and literacy. There is research into brain development along similar lines. This can be useful in gaining the attention of people who think the only worthwhile educational subjects are the three R's: reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic.

Within the profession, there are those who say that we should not be making so much of these "instrumental values" of music education, leading to non-music outcomes, as opposed to its "intrinsic value" –

the direct benefit to the individual's musical life. One thing seems very clear: if the music education offered is not strong on the intrinsic values, then the enhancement of academic outcomes is unlikely to occur.

A lot of the research into the non-musical outcomes of a music education turns up evidence of other benefits, such as increased individual self-confidence, improved self-discipline, better social skills, and in particular circumstances, reduced truancy, reduced delinquency. The research and anecdotal evidence is abundant and any of this information can be brought to bear. The strategy as always is to discover the interests or responsibilities of your target audience and choose your arguments accordingly.

Music creativity. Many governments have a new interest in the innovative capacity of their country as the key to its future. It follows that education should be designed to foster creativity.

Well, aren't all artists creative? Music education must be a natural.

But I would ask whether we actually teach in a way that fosters creativity. I would say that by and large we do not. It seems to me that some of the experiments in self-directed learning, such as those described by Dave Price, show one possible type of approach.

Can we show that if we foster musical creativity, the creativity will transfer to other realms? I must admit that I don't know of research that would demonstrate this – but that might be ignorance on my part.

Inequity. Left wing politicians, especially, are interested in equality of opportunity. As of course are we.

In Australia, the Music Council has done research that shows that 88% of independent schools offer a continuous, sequential music education. The figure for state schools is 23%. So independent school kids are four times better off! Your left wing government should be ashamed.

The only source of sufficient funds to remedy this situation is government.

Attitudes. Need politicians worry that provision of music education in schools would face popular opposition? Here are two of the statements put to respondents in an Australian survey.

"All schools should offer instrumental music instruction as part of their regular curriculum." 91% agree.

Second statement. "Music education should be mandated by the states so that every child has the opportunity to learn music in school." 87% agree.

Advocacy gold!

I have seen similar figures for the USA.

A cautionary note. We make these arguments – for music's value to the economy, or to academic outcomes, etc., in order to persuade others who do not share our values. But we can start to believe our own propaganda. We started to talk about the music industry when we wanted to persuade governments of music's economic value. The other day I heard a young opera singer talk about her future career in the opera industry. The opera WHAT!!!!? Let us not forget that the main reason for music education is not that music is good business, contributes to the economy or improves maths scores. Music is an art form. Its primary value is artistic, spiritual, not as a source of profit.

Our music council's efforts in advocacy may give you some useful ideas.

We have set up a national campaign for music making in schools and in communities, called Music. Play for Life. It has 5,500 members. While we do take our advocacy to politicians, this is mainly a grassroots campaign. We have general, ongoing activities such as newsletters, we have five websites, posters, stickers and so on. We set up research projects such as those I have mentioned already. We also have high profile projects which may not look like advocacy projects although that is their purpose.

The Flame Awards go to the most inspiring school music programs. We persuaded the national state broadcasting network to become a partner. We bring media attention to these school programs to create a good aura around school music generally and to set up models for emulation by other schools and their parents' organisations.

Our biggest program is called Music. Count Us In. We stole this from a Canadian project called Canadians' Music Monday. We did. They are flattered and advertise that we copied them.

We commission a pop song from some school kids, mentored by a famous pop musician. This is then arranged for every conceivable sort of school ensemble. Then we recruit schools to perform it all at the same hour on the same day – in fact, just 34 hours from now. Last year, the second year, 460,000 kids sang in about 15% of schools nationally. We got an estimated 54 million media exposures. As part of the program we are giving music workshops to primary school classroom teachers – this year, about 1200 of them, so they can run the program in their schools. We have many many testimonies that schools are just taken over by this event, that new choirs are being

formed, that school principals are finding money to hire music teachers. There are all manner of new developments.

The core funding for Music. Play for Life comes from the Australian trade association for the merchants and manufacturers of musical instruments and equipment. It gets its members to pay a levy and from those funds it can support our program. The more successful we are, the better it is for the instrument sellers. A symbiotic relationship. If you would like to run an advocacy program for music education, you could do worse that talk to your instrument sellers and manufacturers' association.

In conclusion, a couple more points. To some extent, it's a numbers game. We enlist allies among music organisations. We enlist lots of individual supporters and give them work they can do. We do concentrate on the grassroots but there is no escaping the need to talk with politicians and bureaucrats and their committees, face to face. We have to give them clear, focussed messages that fit in with their priorities. It is very important to present a united front, a single voice, with numbers behind it.

And we must never give up!