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Through the Eyes of Victor McMahon: The Flute Band Movement in NSW Public Schools, 1938 to 1954

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The decision of the NSW Department of Education in 1939 not to systematically retain its archives has resulted in major gaps after this date in the historical record of state schooling in NSW. So inadequate are these records that not even the Department's Music Branch is afforded a reference in the official archives housed at the State Record Authority.

A chance conversation at the 2007 AARME conference revealed the existence of a private collection of documents of the late Barbara Mettam, former Assistant Supervisor of Music, then Supervisor of Music and later Inspector of Schools (Music) at the Music Branch. Tucked within this collection is a faded folder entitled 'Instrumental Music, V McMahon'. This file contains the Annual Reports of Victor McMahon in his role as Supervisor of School (Flute) Bands from 1938 until his resignation in 1954.

This paper traces the development of school flute bands in NSW public schools during the period of McMahon as reported by him in his Annual Reports. It determines the positive outcomes that can be achieved for music when an empowered advocate and an inspiring teacher work together to effect change.

Missing NSW Department of Education Records

Various writers have described historical research as a systematic process where data related to past occurrences is located, described, analysed, synthesised, evaluated and interpreted in relation to the topic under investigation.[1] Locating primary data related to music in NSW state schools became an unexpected challenge for the writer when it became apparent that, after 1939, the NSW Department of Education had not systematically retained its archives. As a result, no historical files relating to school music after 1939 are available in either the Department of Education or in the NSW State Archives. Therefore, in an attempt to gain some understanding of what had occurred in relation to school music in NSW in the post 1939 years, the writer worked through a variety of primary and secondary data sources related to NSW public schooling. One name that surfaced was Victor McMahon.

Data from the Internet

A subsequent internet search using the phrase 'Victor McMahon' revealed a speech in the NSW Parliament referring to a 1939 public school concert that featured a flute band of 300 children under the direction of McMahon.[2] The search also led to documents concerned with various Australian flautists who had been taught flute at some stage by McMahon. These included notable figures such as Don Burrows, Margaret Crawford, Linda Vogt, Geoffrey Collins,[3] Peter Richardson[4] and Jane Rutter.[5]

Transcripts of interviews with Burrows not only showed Burrow's repeated gratitude and indebtedness to McMahon but also provided some details of McMahon's work in NSW schools. For example, when Burrows was interviewed in 1999 for the ABC television program, *Australian Story*, he spoke extensively about his introduction to the flute and the positive influence which McMahon had been on his career:

> I'm am always you know, so grateful for the fact, that at Bondi Beach Public School all those years ago, when I was just into third class, when I was about eight, and the late Victor McMahon came to the school. And I can see him as vividly now, standing up there in the lunch shed with his old wooden Radcliffe flute. Then he said "I'm going to hand it all around the room all have a go lads one at a time". And suddenly there was not a soul there just me.

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1 William Wiersma, *Research Methods in Education: An Introduction*, 7th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), 218.; Louis Cohen, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 158-159.; Burke Johnson and Larry Christensen, *Educational Research: Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Approaches* (Boston: Pearson, 2004), 392.

2 Stephan O'Doherty, "Public School Charity Concerts," Parliament of New South Wales, http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/PARLMENT/hansArt.nsf/V3Key/LA19931111035.

3 "Music in Action: Grabbed by His Ears," http://www.musicinaction.org.au/print.php?sid=284.

4 "Richardson, Peter Alfred (1933-1973)," Australian Dictionary of Biography Online edition, http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A160100b.htm.

5 "Talking Heads with Peter Thompson: Jane Rutter," ABC, http://www.abc.net.au/talkingheads/txt/s1635922.htm.

> I nailed that note and Victor's reaction. It's a very special thing. It's a very kind of personal thing, it's one note you know, big deal; but it was a very auspicious beginning for me into true musicianship.
>
> It was a very short step with the acquiring of that little B flat school flute to playing before audiences.
>
> … I think the full circle was reached in 1972 because I had to play that little B flat school flute in Carnegie Hall in New York at the Newport Jazz Festival. As I was playing it I thought, boy you know from that little one note effort that first day to this. I'm very lucky. And that's why, the visit to the school by Victor McMahon, has always meant a lot to me. And I think in my heart it's the feeling that maybe I'm feeling like that to some of these children in these country school rooms and that, and it's a beautiful feeling to think you might be that important to anybody.

In a subsequent interview, Burrows recounted aspects of McMahon's approach to introducing school flutes at Bondi Beach Public School in Sydney. McMahon visited the school, demonstrated the flutes and invited volunteers to form a flute band. Participants were required to acquire their own flute that they could secure under a hire purchase arrangement:

> When I went to school at Bondi Beach in the thirties there was no class music. Then, an amazing experience changed all that. When I was eight-and-a-half years old, a remarkable man called Victor McMahon came to speak at the school assembly. He said that every child should have a musical option in school if they wished. He called for volunteers who would be interested in forming a school band (and of course a teacher to take the band. Ron Gaul was the teacher who volunteered). The students met with Victor McMahon, who played to us on his flute. I can hear and see it as if it was yesterday. This was electrifying. He asked if anyone was interested in learning the flute. For 18 shillings and sixpence, paid off at sixpence per week, we could purchase an instrument and learn. He introduced the Bb school flute to us. This opened up a whole world for me. My parents paid off my flute and encouraged me like mad.[6]

Don Burrows and Victor McMahon[7]

During a recent interview for the ABC television program, *Talking Heads*, Burrows provided more details about that first encounter and his early years learning flute under the direction of McMahon.

> I could tell you what he [Victor McMahon] had on [at that first day at Bondi Public School]. It was a cold day, he didn't even take his hat and overcoat off and he stood and played for us. Boy, I tell you, he played The Wind In The Trees, and he played the ... Carnival Of Venice and Variations. I've never forgotten it. It was just - woof. It hit me. Whoa, how can you get that good? How's he do that? …
>
> Victor McMahon started the music in the schools and where we used to rehearse was on a Saturday morning at Palings Concert Hall, after which I would go downstairs into the shop at Palings cos I

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6 "Music in Action: Grabbed by His Ears."

7 "Talking Heads with Peter Thompson: Don Burrows," ABC, http://www.abc.net.au/tv/talkingheads/txt/s2383877.htm.

> discovered my friends from the beach used to meet in there to jam. … So I'd play all the marching songs with Victor McMahon's band and then I'd go down and have a jam with the guys. And by then I was about ten.[8]

Other Data Sources

The journal *Flute Australia*, and its successor *Flute Australasia*, was also a source of information on McMahon. For example, in 1996 and 2003, John Steel recounted how, as a young child at Mosman Primary School, McMahon had introduced him to the flute.[9] An article, published in 2000, described McMahon's early years as a flautist.[10]

There was no doubt that McMahon appointment to the Department of Education, and his early success with school flutes, was a noteworthy event at the time. This is evidenced by the fact that it was included in the Annual Report on Education to Parliament.

> The establishment of Flute Bands was another important development in connection with school music. Mr. V. McMahon, Professor of Flutes at the Conservatorium, was appointed specially for the purpose of organising and supervising the bands, and his efforts are meeting with most encouraging success. There were thirty bands in operation at the end of the year, and others were in the course of formation. Arrangements have also been made for teachers to be given instruction in flute playing. [11]

Two Serendipitous Discoveries

It was chance conversation at the 2007 AARME conference that revealed the existence in the garage of a Sydney home of papers of the late Barbara Mettam. To then find reports by Victor McMahon tucked within these papers, was even more fortuitous. Both these finds provided an opportunity to fill some gaps in the historical record of music in NSW state schooling.

McMahon's Annual Reports cover the years from his appointment in February 1, 1938, until his resignation on January 29, 1954.[12] Missing from the collection are the reports for the years 1942, 1947, 1950 and 1953. Complementing the collection are two further documents. The first, written in April 1946, is McMahon's vision for school instrumental music in the post-war years. In the second document, written at the end of his term with the Department, McMahon reflected on his experience of instrumental music in NSW state schools.[13] All the documents in the collection used foolscap paper and appear to be originals. While the majority are typed neatly in old typescript, some are hand written in copperplate script using pencil, or blue or black ink. The remainder of this paper will examine instrumental music in NSW state schools during McMahon's period with the Department as reported by McMahon, himself.

McMahon's Reports

Considerations Leading to Appointment

In 1937, the then NSW Director of Education, George Ross Thomas,[14] initiated discussions with McMahon about the possibility of introducing a simple and inexpensive musical instrument into NSW schools. Thomas had seen fife-bands

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8 ibid.

9 John Steel, "Learning to Play the Flute," *Flute Australia* Autumn/Winter (1996).; John Steel, "The Victor McMahon Public Schools' Flute Scheme," *Flute Australiasia* Summer (2003).

10 Biographical information about McMahon the flautist can be found in Victor McMahon and Sophie Gill, "In Retrospect: An Australian Perspective," *Flute Australasia* Summer/Summer (2000).

11 *Report (Together with Appendices) of the Minister of Public Instruction for 1938*, (Sydney: Thomas Henry Tennant, Government Printer, 1938-39-40), 14.

12 Victor McMahon, "General Survey of Appointment and Extension of Position," (Private collection: circa 1954).; "Victor N McMahon - Department of Education Staff Card," (Sydney: State Record Authority of New South Wales, n.d.).

13 McMahon, "General Survey of Appointment and Extension of Position."

14 State Records give George Ross Thomas' surname as 'Ross Thomas', although in contemporary publications he is sometimes referred to as "Thomas". His period as Director of Education is given as from August 2, 1930 to September 21, 1940 "Future Director of Education," *Education* XI, no. 7 (1930, May): 223.. Accordingly to his eulogy, Ross Thomas left office in 1939, hence he probably went on leave prior to his actual retirement State Records Authority of New South Wales, "Archives Investigator: Person Detail: John Gordon McKenzie," http://investigator.records.nsw.gov.au/Details/Person_Detail.asp?Id=239.

successfully used in South Australian schools. At the time McMahon was a flute teacher at the NSW Conservatorium of Music and a member of the Prince Edward Theatre Orchestra.[15]

McMahon considered then rejected various instruments. He rejected the South Australian diatonic keyless fife, used in association with Tonic sol-fa, because of its musical limitations. He rejected violins because they had previously been abandoned in NSW schools due to their cost. He rejected mouth organs and harmonicas because he felt they had limited educational value. He overlooked recorders because, as he later said, they were virtually unknown at the time.[16]

The instrument McMahon settled on was along the lines of Ross Thomas' fife-band experience—a modification of the keyless fife, i.e. a chromatic keyed fife that would use standard staff notation and therefore had the potential to be played with other standard instruments. He named the instrument the 'school flute'.[17]

B flat School Flute and Larger E flat School Flute Designed by Victor Mc Mahon[18]

Appointment and Designation

After developing a draft plan for the introduction of school flutes, McMahon applied for, and was successful, in his application for a position with the Department. However, shortages in the Education budget, due to the effects of the world-wide depression, meant that it was February 1, 1938, before McMahon was appointed as Supervisor of School Bands. He combined this half-time position with his other half-time position as flute teacher at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.[19]

Alerting Schools to the Opportunity

Against a background of a state recovering from depression, a worsening international situation and growing criticism that NSW schooling was falling behind that in other countries,[20] McMahon's role required him to establish flute bands in a schooling system which, up to this point, had no instrumental music program and no flutes.

To create interest in flute bands, McMahon began by giving talks and demonstrations to Parents and Citizen Associations. As well, the Director of Education and he addressed a meeting of interested headmasters and teachers to elicit recruits for a teachers' class.[21] On February 28, 1938, using 100 old-style fifes borrowed from the Sydney music firms of Palings and Nicholsons, McMahon began afternoon classes at Fort Street Primary School with 100 teachers in attendance.[22]

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15 McMahon, "General Survey of Appointment and Extension of Position," 1.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 In the possession of the author.

19 Ibid.

20 M. MacKinnon, "New Education Conference: To the Editor of the Herald," *Sydney Morning Herald* 1937, July 14, 11. Note the in these Imperial days, other states were not the basis of comparison.

21 Victor McMahon, "Supervisor's Report on School Flute Bands No. 1 from Appointment to Position Feb 1938 to April 31st, 1939," (1939, April 31 (sic)). See also "A Pitiful Paradox," *Education*: 144.

22 Ibid.

May, the promised month for the arrival of McMahon's school flutes, came and went. It must surely have been frustrating to have some teachers ready and able to start their school bands, but unable to commence because of the lack of instruments. While waiting for the flutes, McMahon busied himself writing *School Band Primer No. 1 for B flat and E flat Flutes* and organising with Palings for its publication. At the same time, he prepared a series of teaching charts to assist his teachers commence teaching their bands. He also began work on a drum primer,[23] presumably envisioning a future where schools had their own drum and school flute bands, reminiscent of the traditional drum and fife bands (of Scotland, and of the American Revolution amongst other sites).

In August and September of 1938, in anticipation of the arrival of flutes, Palings lent more old style fifes to McMahon, but this time for the use by students. McMahon then visited the schools of some of the flute teachers he was training and gave talks and demonstrations to arouse the boys' interest. [24]

It was late October/November 1938 before McMahon's February order of 500 metal flutes finally arrived. In the meantime, impatient at the delay, Nicholsons had an inexpensive inferior quality metal flute made locally. When satisfactory wooden flutes also became available, but at half the price of his order, McMahon was faced with an ethical dilemma.[25] He explained:

> I ... feel responsible in part for their distribution, but point out the fact that the reason for their lack of favour, were due to late supply and the independent action of their agents in competing with an inferior instrument."[26]

As boys had to purchase their own instrument if they wished to learn the flute, music firms allowed flutes to be acquired through a hire-purchase arrangement, with the headmaster or a teacher taking responsibility for collecting the weekly payments.[27] For example, the young Don Burrows paid eighteen shillings and six pence for his flute, paid off at sixpence a week.[28]

By the end of 1938, flute bands of between 20 and 50 boys had been established in some 30 Sydney schools.[29] The following year, 20 additional bands were formed, with an average membership of more than 25 boys. As well, five bands commenced in country schools. This same year, McMahon selected 200 of the best Sydney flautists to form a Special Sydney School Flute Band that, thanks to the generous support of Palings, rehearsed each Saturday morning at Palings' Concert Hall.

By the end of 1940, the number of Sydney flute bands had increased to 56 while 17 country schools also had their own band. A highlight of the year occurred in April, when McMahon organised a Flute Band Festival at the Conservatorium and adjoining outer Domain at which all Sydney bands attended. At this event, the 1,500 boy flautists had the opportunity to play tunes together from the *Primer*. As well, the Special Band performed, as did other selected groups. Next the bands marched down Macquarie Street to the Domain itself where they participated in a marching contest and demonstrations. Beyond providing inspiration to young flautists, such public performances would have raised the profile of flute bands with both the general public and the various senior leaders who attended, including Ross Thomas (the retiring Director of Education), the Supervisor of Music and the Police Superintendent.[30]

The year, 1941, was the pre-eminent year for flute bands in NSW with bands in more than 70 Sydney schools and over 30 country schools.[31] As well, McMahon reported a higher standard of playing than in previous years in all but two schools. The Special Band, which by now averaged 100 players, continued to practise at Palings' Concert Hall and, during the year, made various public and radio broadcasts.

The major issue facing flute bands in 1941 was when the flute teacher departed a school and no replacement teacher was available; some teachers left to join the Armed Forces, others were transferred to another school. At the end of this

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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 In his 1939 Annual Report, McMahon reported that flutes ranged widely in price from a discount rate for schools and Parents and Citizen Associations of 18 shillings for B flat flutes, to a high of 27 shillings for B flat flutes and 75 shillings for the larger E flat flutes.

26 McMahon, "Supervisor's Report on School Flute Bands No. 1 from Appointment to Position Feb 1938 to April 31st, 1939."

27 Ibid.

28 "Music in Action: Grabbed by His Ears."

29 ———, "Supervisor's Report on School Flute Bands No. 1 from Appointment to Position Feb 1938 to April 31st, 1939.".

30 Victor McMahon, "Supervisor of School Flute Bands. General Report for 1940," (Private collection, 1941, July).

31 ———, "School Bands. Supervisor's Report for 1941," (Private collection, 1942, February).

year, in addition to his other responsibilities, McMahon temporarily took on the directorship of four school bands—hoping a replacement director could soon be found.[32]

Signs began to appear in McMahon's 1943 report that the flute band movement had begun to decline, but also that interest in a new musical instrument—the recorder—was emerging.[33] McMahon explained:

> Instrumental music in the schools during the year 1943 may be described as having been maintained in a state of balance, the decline and failure of some of the primary schools' flute bands having been offset by progress and development of recorder classes, and mixed instrumental ensembles in super-primary schools. Failure of the supply of new school flutes and the impossibility of replacing many band teachers were the only causes of decline.[34]

As in previous years, the Special Band—now referred to as the Combined Flute Band—continued its Saturday morning practices even though it had decreased in size to approximately 80 players. The Band's major performance for the year was at the Thousand voice Choral Concert, on November 15, 16 and 17, at the Sydney Town Hall.[35]

In December, in recognition that instrumental music in schools had extended beyond school flutes, McMahon's position was redesignated as Supervisor of Schools Bands and increased from half-time to full-time. As a consequence, McMahon resigned from his half-time position at the Conservatorium.[36]

As a result of the ongoing dual challenges of flute teachers who were not replaced and the difficulties in procuring and repairing instruments, the number of school flute bands decreased in 1944 and 1945 to approximately 40 bands in Sydney and 20 bands in the country schools. Once again, it was McMahon himself who took on the responsibility for many directorless Sydney bands.[37]

Despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges of an increasing number of bands which had no teacher to conduct them, in 1944 the Combined Flute Band became two bands—the less experienced players attended on a Saturday at 9.30am, while the more advanced players rehearsed at 10.30am. The total number of boy and, for the first time, girl school flautists in attendance was 100. As well as performing in various concerts during both 1944 and 1945, the Combined Flute Bands made a series of folk dance disc recordings for use in the state's schools.[38]

The end of the Second World War triggered positive happenings for the school flute movement in NSW. In November, Palings finally received a supply from England of long-awaited school flutes. The 300 flutes immediately sold out. As well, the shortage of flute teachers was relieved to some degree when some excellent teachers returned from the Armed Services and recently trained teachers were appointed to schools.[39] The following year, eight new bands were established in Sydney and twenty in the country.[40]

Two years later (1948), a further five flute bands were formed in Sydney, one of which comprised a record number of 140 boys. This resulted in a total of 42 flute bands in Sydney schools. McMahon was aware of 28 flute bands in the country schools, although he expected the number to be higher as many schools did not necessarily inform the Supervisor of their activities. It therefore appeared that finally the school flute movement in NSW schools was on the rise.

Notwithstanding this, McMahon reported a decline in the standard of some flute bands. He attributed this downturn to an increasing reluctance of teachers to engage in a task which they looked upon as difficult and for which they often received neither consideration nor compensation. McMahon's disillusionment showed through in this copperplate hand written report where he lamented:

> Very often band lessons have to be given entirely outside school hours and under difficult circumstances. Relief from playground or other extra duties is sometimes looked upon with disfavour by members of the staff. The teacher taking the band is often the young and "willing horse" who finds himself saddled with numerous extra duties such as the choir, sport, bank etc.

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32 Ibid.
33 McMahon's 1942 Annual Report is not available.
34 Victor McMahon, "Supervisor's Report for the Year 1943," (Private collection, 1944, circa).
35 Ibid.
36 "Victor N McMahon - Department of Education Staff Card.", Victor McMahon, "Supervisor of School Bands. Annual Report, 1944," (Barbara Mettam Archives - Private Collection, 1945, circa).
37 McMahon, "Supervisor of School Bands. Annual Report, 1944.", 1945 report
38 Ibid.
39 {McMahon, 1946, circa #1265}
40 Victor McMahon, "Supervisor of School Bands. Annual Report for 1946," (Private collection, 1947, May).

Some headmasters cannot or will not grant a practice during school hours, though generally little complaint can be made against the attitude of headmasters.

Less than 50% of teachers trained for flute band work are entirely willing and desirous of continuing. Some continue half-heartedly in a sense of duty or dogged spirit of "seeing a thing through". Many are discouraged by results, brought about through badly organised methods or a half-hearted or diffident approach, or again by lack of appreciation and sufficient motivation. Some are too dependent on the 'revivalist' visits from the Supervisor [McMcMahon].
...
The expressed attitudes of some headmasters may be summarised: "I would like a band, but have no teacher on the staff capable of taking it; I am not prepared to ask a teacher to attend lessons; the only potential teachers already have many extra duties or are attending University courses"; "I cannot give a period for practice during school hours as I have a class myself and there is no-one to relieve the teacher": "There is no room suitable for practice during school periods, and the noise is too disturbing to other classes": "There is no guarantee that the teacher will not be moved at any time and that a successor will be found"; "This is the job of an expert, not of an ordinary school-teachers" (quite fallacious).

Most damaging and usual of all headmasters negative attitudes is one of half-hearted support or complete indifference. This is most common where a headmaster transfers to a school with a previously formed band. For any band to be a success in any department, the principal's support must be positive, directive and stimulating. [McMahon's underlining].[41]

A School Flute Band in Sydney circa 1950. Note there is one girl in the band—the tallest flautist[42]

Still, the combined flute band continued its rehearsal each Saturday morning at Palings during Terms 1 and 3, although McMahon gives no explanation for why the band was in recess for Term 2—probably for the only time since its establishment a decade before. Possibly McMahon was exhausted from his additional role as the Director and Producer of the 'Cavalcade of Education' pageant and other associated events that were held in April to celebrate the centenary of public education in NSW.[43] The following year, Saturday morning rehearsals continued throughout the three school terms.[44]

Further indications of a decline in the flute band movement can be found in McMahon's report of 1949, a handwritten, tightly penned, less legible document than either his 1948 or (later) 1951 reports. Here, McMahon attributed the decline in the school flute movement to factors which he had previously described—that is, suppliers that could not meet the demand for instruments and hence now some schools were commencing recorder bands over flute bands, directorless bands due to the transfer of teachers, and a growing unwillingness of some teachers to take responsibility for a band.[45]

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41 ———, "1948 Annual Report of the Supervisor of School Bands," (Private collection, 1949, February 22).
42 McMahon, Victor, and Ken Hall. "Music in Our Schools. 1950.
43 Ibid, "Centenary Celebrations," *The Education Gazette* XLII, no. 4 (1948, April): 113-114.
44 Victor McMahon, "Instrumental Music [1949 Circa]," (Barbara Mettam Archives - Private Collection, 1950, circa).
45 Ibid.

In April 1950, a total of 42 flute bands came together for a combined band festival as they had on previous occasions. This provided the opportunity for massed band playing, a demonstration by the Combined Schools Flute Band and solo performances by four young professional musicians whose musical training had began in McMahon's school flute bands. The Police Military Band and a Police Boys' Club Band also gave marching and drumming demonstrations.[46]

The section on flute bands in McMahon's 1951 report reads almost like a eulogy for the instrument. Here McMahon pensively reflected on its achievements and challenges since its introduction to schools in 1938. McMahon concluded:

> The flute is generally regarded as having a particular appeal to boys, but ~~in some girls schools~~ [McMahon's deletion] where it has been introduced to them girls often do better than the boys.
>
> Compared with the recorders the flute band offers as compensation for its greater difficulty, its fine usefulness for 'outside' work (especially marching), a greater sense of achievement ~~in those who play it well,~~ where it is well done and its more immediate leading of talented boys to standard wood-wind instruments.
>
> After some years of experience the Supervisor has come to the conclusion that the school flute is too difficult an instrument for many teachers and pupils under present conditions and that the recorder is more suitable for general purposes. This ~~by no means~~ does not mean that the flute should be discarded in favour of the recorder but that it should be issued for the more competent teachers and selected pupils.
>
> Efforts should be made to improve the instrument. The original aim of combining the school flute with concert flutes, clarinets and saxophones in boys' Secondary schools has been baulked by the economic factors.
>
> When ~~music~~ specialist teachers in music have been appointed to all secondary schools and some consideration has been given to music & sound-proofed rooms, only the 'cost' considerations remain for the realization of such bands.[47]

Despite the problems, in the following year there were still 40 flute bands in Sydney schools and an unknown number in the country. However, due to Government import quotas and increases in sales tax, the problem of the supply of instruments came to a climax in the second half of 1952. No new flutes were available for sale in Sydney and each music firm had orders for up to 300 flutes that they could not supply.[48]

McMahon resigned from the Department on January 29, 1954. Although satisfied that good work was being done with instrumental music in NSW schools, he was disillusioned about the prospects for him to bring about further developments.[49] Despite his departure, the school flute band movement continued in NSW schools until at least the 1960s.

Conclusion

Credit for visioning an instrumental music program in NSW public schools must be given to George Ross Thomas, NSW Director of Education, who saw fife-bands used in South Australian schools and wanted NSW children to have similar opportunities. Firstly, at an unlikely time when NSW was recovering from the depths of economic depression, Ross Thomas initiated discussions with the professional flautist, Victor McMahon, about the possibility of fife-bands. Second, when McMahon proposed a different instrument—a made-to-order chromatic fife that he still had to design—Ross Thomas recognised the potential of both McMahon and his ‘school flute’ and established a half-time position for McMahon as Director of School Bands. Third, from his influential position as Director of Education and until he left office in 1939, Ross Thomas advocated to headmasters and teachers for the establishment of school flute bands. It is clear that the school flute program would not have begun at that time in NSW, or perhaps ever, without the foresight and determination of the empowered advocate, George Ross Thomas.

The work of McMahon from 1938 to 1954 in establishing school flute bands in NSW schools can be seen as a case study of pioneering work. To begin with, he researched, proposed, designed, then negotiated the production of the instrument he saw as offering the greatest musical potential for NSW school children. Further, McMahon worked

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46 Ibid.

47 ———, "Instrumental Music. 1951 Report," (Barbara Mettam Archives - Private Collection, 1951, circa).

48 ———, "Report of School Bands and Instrumental Music in Schools, 1952," (Barbara Mettam Archives - Private Collection, 1952, circa).

49 McMahon, "General Survey of Appointment and Extension of Position."

tirelessly to establish school flute bands despite initially being faced with the multiple challenges of no previous culture of instrumental instruments, no school flutes, no primers, no students and no teachers trained to teach flute.

Despite these challenges, McMahon single-handedly developed the school flute band movement between 1938 and 1941 such that by its peak year of 1941 there were over 70 flute bands in Sydney schools and more than 30 in country schools. After that year, the number of bands in Sydney schools decreased to approximately 40, although the number of country bands remained constant.

Five difficulties led to the decline in the flute band movement, none that were of McMahon's making. First, the wartime and post-war import restrictions meant that the supply of new instruments could never equal the demand. Hence, many instruments were less than satisfactory. Second, when the band teacher left a school—to join the Armed Forces, or due to retirement or transfer—often no replacement teacher was available. Third, often practice times in schools were outside class time and in unsatisfactory accommodation. Fourth (in 1948), there was a growing disinclination of teachers to engage in a task they considered difficult and for which they were not often compensated or rewarded. Finally, the task became even more onerous in schools where the headmaster was not supportive.

The evidence suggests that Victor McMahon was a excellent flautist and an inspirational, hard working and innovative teacher who had outstanding problem-solving, organisational and leadership skills, and who was committed to passing on his love of music to students who might not otherwise have had the opportunity to experience the pleasures that music can bring. Why else would some of his former students, such as Don Burrows, still speak of him so appreciatively and repeatedly some 70 years after their encounters. For example, in his October 2008 interview on the ABC television program *Talking Heads*, Burrows recalled emotionally the first occasion on which he blew a note on his little school flute:

> It must have been 40 years later, I had to do it. I had to go back, and I went back to the school, it was an end-of-year celebration of some sort, and I had the [original] little flute hidden in my coat. By now I was a pro, you know. ... And I went, when there was no one in that spot I went and I did that note again. Oh! I tell you, my eyes filled with tears. It was the same sound, I still carry that sound. I can still hear that C-sharp.[50]

About the Author

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