

2001

# The future of tertiary music training in Australia

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## Publication details

Hannan, MF 2001, 'The future of tertiary music training in Australia', *Music Forum*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 14-17.  
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## **The Future of Tertiary Music Training in Australia**

**by Michael Hannan**

Paper delivered at the **Bach to the Future** Conference in Melbourne on October 21, 2000.

Published as:

Hannan, M. "The Future of Tertiary Music Training in Australia", *Music Forum* 7(3), 14-17, 2001.

In this paper I propose to talk about the present and future of tertiary music training. The focus will be on the tertiary sector in Australia, and on vocational training for musicians. To begin I would like to briefly describe my own involvement in this field as a way of putting my attitudes and observations into some context. In 1986 I was appointed to the Northern Rivers College of Advanced Education (now Southern Cross University) to develop a program in Contemporary popular music in response to the needs of the popular music industry in Australia. I'm still doing this job. Before that I held full time academic positions at the University of Sydney and at the Queensland Conservatorium. During the 1970 and early 1980s I also worked part-time at the University of New Wales, the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, and the Newcastle Conservatorium. In the same period I was also involved in the music industry as a commercial composer and arranger, rock performer, piano accompanist, music journalist and music editor. In keeping with the Bach theme of this conference, I should say that in the late 60s and early 70s I also fancied myself as a harpsichordist and continuo player.

Tertiary music education in Australia is facing a crisis. There has been an erosion of the funding base of universities over past two decades. This has affected all music conservatoria, faculties, schools, and departments. Some of the flagship music schools have managed to maintain relatively high levels of funding per student but there is still a universal decline, and it is continuing as academic pay rises are not paid for by corresponding government funding increases. The buying power of the Australian dollar is also a factor in relation to the purchase of equipment, software, books and journals.

The funding of Australian tertiary music schools is dependent on the internal arrangements of their host Universities and the discipline and research profiles of the Universities themselves. There is always internal pressure being applied by all the academic units of a particular university for a fair proportion of the funding pie, and many other resource-hungry fields such as science, medicine and engineering do not see why they should be subsidising a music school. The flagship music schools are therefore always under threat of losing the battle to maintain their historical funding advantages.

It is increasingly more difficult to win the funding allocation argument in the age of economic rationalism and of the enterprise university. There are a number of factors that make this so.

There are too many tertiary music training providers. The number of University music programs has increased slightly in the past decade; but the number of TAFE and private providers has increased dramatically. Many of these are now offering degrees and often possess more focused programs than universities. The increase in the number of providers naturally drives down the quality of students in each institution unless there is a corresponding increase in participation. Participation rates have actually declined in the last five years.

There is an oversupply of graduates. The traditional objective of the elite tertiary music school is to produce excellent performers who will take their places in the profession as orchestral musicians, opera singers, concert artists etc. It is difficult to make a case that even a small percentage of the graduates are finding this kind of employment. The subsidised sector of the music industry is itself in decline as public subsidy diminishes and there is increasing competition for the sponsorship dollar.

Music schools have been largely unable to make a case for the equivalence of composition and performance with traditional research. Thus by and large they have not been able to obtain major competitive research grants from the government and private sectors, and have not therefore benefitted from the flow-on effect of research funding within their own institutions.

The subsidised and commercial versions of the music industry have both been critical from time to time about the ability of the tertiary music schools to supply suitably trained graduates.

A catch-22 exists here. The ability of institutions to deliver quality graduates and research is threatened by the decline in funding. Funding is hard to argue for in the face of declining standards.

Just what is happening as a result of the decline in funding? The rationalisation of programs forces them to become too generalised. In the name of efficiency, academic management is always trying to introduce cheap cross-disciplinary core units (particularly in multi arts schools), and also to reduce the numbers of units taught in programs, thus reducing the potential of students to tailor their degree programs towards particular career goals.

The existing funding is not sufficient to cover all the skill bases to the extent that they need to be covered. For example in the popular music area, performers need to be composers and composers need to be performers. All musicians need to be music technologists. They also need to understand how to market their products and services. It is financially impossible to do justice to all these areas. Instead students are generally required to nominate one of these as a specialisation and to do far less work in the others in their degree structures.

There is little focus on training for specific jobs. For example,

many music graduates will become private music teachers (even the ones who are successful as professional performers), but how much concentration on pedagogy and small business management is found in most performance courses?

I know that there are a few postgraduate courses in accompanying and an undergraduate program at the Flinders Street Music School but my research informants tell me there is still a dire shortage of good piano accompanists and répétiteurs. But how many piano performance courses concentrate on the skills needed to do this kind of work (eg high level sightreading skills, foreign language skills, score reading, continuo playing, playing conducted music, specific kinds of interpersonal and communication skills etc. etc.). It is just too expensive to teach it all.

Since the creation of the unified national system in the late 1980s it is now standard for professional musicians to get a degree in a university. The fact that this training takes place in a university context has created a tension between academic requirements and practical music requirements. Academic processes demand that a good percentage of any vocational degree course is academically oriented. This requirement takes the focus off performing or composing, and reduces the time available to develop practical skills.

It is probably true to say that the academic rigour of the academic units in music degrees is generally not of a high standard anyway, especially when compared to courses done in the humanities. Often advanced skills in music performance are acquired (from a young age) at the expense of intellectual development and cultural literacy.

Since the mid-1980s there has been a trend in tertiary music institutions to diversify. There has been a growing realisation that the traditional offerings of conservatoria and university music departments were too narrowly focused. A significant number of music institutions have developed a more contemporary approach. Some of these programs like my own at Southern Cross University are dedicated to commercial popular music, some are a blend of the classical and popular, some concentrate on music technology or new media, some on music business.

These programs may be more relevant to mainstream music making in society but they probably suffer from the same problems as their conservative equivalents. How relevant are they really to the industry? Do they really provide the right sort of preparation for actual jobs in the industry? Are they ahead of the game, or just years instead of centuries behind? Are they providing strong generic skills expected of university education including critical thinking, problem solving, written communication, and interpersonal understandings? Are they providing an appropriate grounding for further study in research degrees?

### **The future:**

As the public funding of education gets leaner, there has to be some adjustment to the status quo. Universities, particularly small ones that cannot afford the cost of running

meaningfully-resourced practical music programs, may have to shut them down, along with other resource-intensive programs, for example in the sciences.

With the globalisation of industries, Australia's situation has to be considered in the context of other countries, particularly the US and continental Europe. In the US, music education is heavily sponsored through industry and private donation (especially through alumni organisations). In Europe music education is still heavily subsidised by the state. These kinds of resources are not generally available in Australia.

The greatest fear is that diminishing public funding levels will cause the sacred cow of music training (one-on-one teaching) to disappear. If this happens (and all indications are that it is indeed possible) then tertiary-level music training institutions are going to have to completely rethink their role and their staffing profiles.

Is university the best place to study performance or composition or production? Should every musician have to get a degree by attending university for three or four (or more) years? How do musicians learn what they really have to know?

In my research into the diversity of job categories of the music industry, virtually all respondents have cited on-the-job experience as the most effective way to learn, and often the only reliable way.

But at the same time specific skills need to be acquired. Traditionally these skills have been gained through having a teacher or mentor who could guide the student through what is essentially a self-directed learning program. Much of what is required has to be learned through intensive individual practice and research. There are no easy ways to acquire the skills. Thus the formal learning environment of a university is only a starting point for what is needed.

The rock star, David Byrne (of Talking Heads) characterised college as 'an expensive way to meet like-minded people.' It is also a good way to become exposed to a different range of obsessions through contact with teachers and fellow students. The realisation that a lot of people can do a lot of things better than you, can sometimes be demoralising, but it can also be challenging.

I would like to tell you a story relating to part of my own musical development, again in keeping with the Bach theme of the conference. As a teenager I was asked by my piano and harpsichord teacher, Dorothy White, to turn the pages for her in a performance of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. I was amazed by her inventive realisation of the figured bass part of the full score. It inspired me to purchase a copy of the score and begin to learn to realise figured bass. I became obsessed with this task, working slowly through the score and then starting again at the top, repeating this until I could do the whole work in one sitting. In the process I learnt a lot about harmony, score reading and improvisation. Some years later when Dorothy tragically died at an early age I took over her job teaching keyboard harmony at the University of Sydney.

To be good at something, the hard yards have to be put into all the skills that are involved in doing it. The hardest thing about learning is realising this.

## **Solutions**

The full range of opportunities for employment in music has to be recognised by music training institutions, and the specific skills of each occupation need to be available to students attempting to enter a particular field. The tertiary training sector has lagged behind in this for jobs that have existed for years. Now new jobs are being created on a regular basis particularly in the interface between the arts and new media.

The traditional music school or university department is not well equipped to provide this kind of service. It is limited severely by the credentials of its particular academic staffing profile.

However a consortium of online delivery providers might be able to develop a large number of industry-relevant study modules that can be packaged to service particular occupations. This is already happening in partnerships of universities with other industries, so why not the music industry.

There are currently impediments to the workability of online delivery of music courses but they will soon be solved. The main problem that currently exists is with the licensing of recorded and printed music products for educational use. These are currently being worked on by AMCOS and ARIA.

The online delivery of relevant modules could take place in conjunction with on-site work experience or apprenticeship. Specific educational awards could be developed with industry that combine online study with practical industry experience. The curriculum of job specific and generic skills required would be worked out by the industry partner in collaboration with the education consortium.

This may not be ostensibly suitable for freelance professionals, as compared to individuals working for organisations. But there is no reason that freelance professionals could not also get involved in this process of the training of new personnel for their particular part of the industry through a kind of apprenticeship scheme. For example the contemporary classical composer Peter Sculthorpe has employed a series of assistants (myself included) who have helped him prepare his scores. Matthew Hindson is currently working with Ross Edwards on the same kind of basis.

Large organisations or professional advocacy groups representing different sectors of the music industry could become credentialing organisations. This is already happening in other industries. There is a MacDonalld's University specialising in training managers for the fast food industry. In California, a consortium of computer games companies has set up an elite training institution for computer games designers and programmers.

## **Combined degrees**

If formal degrees are the way to go, then maybe the way of the future is the combined degree. One of the constant pleas of the music industry is for business and legal training for its operatives. Thus the combined degree is a good option for people who wish to study music.

A few suggestions are:

Music/Law (with an intellectual property specialisation)

Music/Accountancy

Music/Marketing

The other plea is for technology training. Thus combined degrees in the following would be useful.

Music/Information Technology

Music/Multimedia

Music/Software Engineering

The combined music with 'something more useful' degree will be popular with parents, and practical when it comes to making a career.

With the convergence of computers, media and publishing the multi-arts degree focused on collaborative new media production is the way of the future. I can envisage academic departments that combine writing, visual arts, music, design, film and video with IT and multimedia production and other disciplines like educational design, and marketing.

## **Research and development**

Very little applied music research or research consultancy currently takes place in music in Australia. Compared to the sciences and social sciences most music academics are not focused on this kind of work. Musicologists are still focused on the texts of music, mostly music of the past; and popular music researchers on the cultural and political contexts of music consumption. Little research is done to assist the music industry to be internationally competitive or to solve social and economic problems related to the production and consumption of music in Australia. Australia is not competitive with the US and Europe in the invention of music software and hardware.

A more socially and economically productive approach to music research will need to be pursued in the future.

## **Conclusion**

In the future I believe there will be a greater flexibility in the way professional musicians and other music industry operatives learn their craft. This will recognise the specific

nature of the occupational field by tailoring units of learning to the needs of each student. It should involve cooperation of training providers with industry and may also involve an integration of on-the-job training with online delivery of relevant areas of study. The ultimate responsibility of the training of a musician rests, however, squarely with the individual because of the time and personal discipline involved in reaching a professional level of competence. The educator's role is to provide an environment where this learning can flourish. This will ideally happen through a real or virtual provision of relevant skills as well as productive cooperation with industry resulting in work experience and mentoring.