

ASME XXth National conference, Adelaide, 2015

Transcription of Keynote address by Richard Gill OAM presented on October 1, 2015

This morning I don't want to talk about the joy of music, what music does, what music is, its nature – I don't want to talk about any of that. I want to talk about politics in a very serious way. I want to start by saying, if we could fix three things in education, these are what I would fix.

The first thing is I would pay teachers properly. That doesn't happen in this country, and we need to keep that in the forefront of our minds, that we are worthy as teachers to be paid properly. I don't think money fixes everything but it is important that people are recognised financially for what they do.

The second thing is I would try to create a circumstance where teachers had more autonomy, where teachers were really autonomous. And the third thing is I would eliminate standardised testing permanently. [applause]. We all know about standardised testing – what do we know? It's a waste of time. We know that the results between 2008 and 2015 show a big fat 'rien' – nothing happened. Standardised testing is a waste of time. Once we fix music education up in this country, that's the thing we are going for next.

Based on the concept of pay, we might attract different levels of people to teaching and we might hold people longer in teaching because teachers burn out at a rate faster than they have ever burned out, particularly people working in creative arts and particularly if states adopt the idea that the music teacher can teach drama, and dance and visual arts – that is a crazy idea and it has to stop. We have to fight that at every level. But if we did pay people properly we probably would get fairly bright minds coming in to work – people such as yourselves. Now what separates you is you have a vocation. You would do it anyway because you wouldn't be here at this conference in school holiday time if you didn't have a vocation, if you didn't have a desire to teach. But we need to broaden that. We need to let people know that were we to reward them properly there would be people out there who would love to teach and who would be extremely good at it.

Autonomy – if you make the teacher autonomous, you eliminate the need for endless curricula and endless syllabi because a well-trained teacher who knows the repertoire, who knows the music, who knows what's going on, who knows how to teach, IS the best curriculum. The teacher knows best. The teacher knows how to test. It's through testing and teaching we know how to work with children, what do my children need to know, where do they need to go next. A good teacher tests all the time. And that comes with autonomy. You don't have great teaching when you have people constantly looking over your shoulder waiting for you to tick boxes, and waiting for you to fill out endless assessment reports and waiting for you to do thousands of clerical things that have nothing to do with teaching. [applause]. We have to fight that and we have to let governments know, we have to talk to politicians about it, talk to local members about education. It is the most important thing a child experiences, apart from circumstances at home whatever that might happen to be.

If we get rid of standardised testing, and my view is that we will, what will happen is we could change the nature of the way a syllabus is perceived and we could eliminate a lot of the rubbish that's in the primary syllabus particularly where teachers are asked to do all sorts of ridiculous things that have nothing to do with education. So if a child falls over in the playground and hurts his or her

knee on the asphalt we need 'asphalt education'. And if a child catches a finger in the door we need 'door education' and we hear it all the time. "The public needs education". It's not education. Education is about working on the child's mind and the child's mind is worked upon spectacularly when the mind is engaged with arts education and particularly with music education. And if I were in charge of education, I would mandate the arts subjects in order – and I would say, music and dance would be right at the top, and visual arts next, then drama. Now that is not popular at drama conferences, and it's not a thought they embrace. However, the reason I say it is really clear. It's because to understand what you people do with children, in order to understand music, children have to listen. And that concept of listening is potent universally. My view is we should constantly hold ideals. We should constantly strive for things to improve our circumstance and not dwell on the negatives. Keep moving forward as they used to say in the Gillard government and keep changing our directions or are aware that our directions need to change and that we need to be active politically.

Advocacy – is obviously a big part of that. So who are the best advocates? The best advocates are peers. Children are the best advocates for children. "Are you in the choir? I go to choir with Ms McLoughlin and it's fantastic. You should be there." That's a child advocating for a child to go to Heather McLaughlin's choir. "I go to Moorambilla Voices with Michelle Leonard. She's crazy but I love it". That's advocacy. Parent advocating parent. Mother says "my son is learning music at school. What's your daughter doing? ... Oh, they don't have music at her school? Really? That's interesting because the enrolments at the school with music are going up. That's interesting because the enrolments at the school without music are going down". Parent advocating for parent. Teacher advocating for teacher. Principal for principal – because when I stand up at a principals' conference and say "Principals, you should all be doing music", they say, "Yeah, well stick it in your left nostril. We've got lots of other things to do". That doesn't carry any weight. Principals need to advocate for principals. Why is it in 2015 do we still have kids in this country who receive no music? And that is happening, it's true. So we have to ask ourselves a whole lot of questions. What do we teach kids? What constitutes a music program? What should be in that program that will hold kids' attention in music? Should we teach only pop music? And I know teachers who say "I teach pop music to my kids because they love it". That's like saying "I give chocolate to my children because they love it". There is nothing wrong with pop music but there is more to music than pop music. So we should be aiming for a broad repertoire of stuff to teach children from which they learn about music. I'm going to give an example. Recently in an inner western area of Sydney I was working with a trio of HIP – historically informed performers – playing on original instruments, 17th century violin and cello, and a classical clarinet and we played Schubert and Mozart and Beethoven trios to about 1500 kids over the course of a week in 11 concerts, and the classes went from Kindy right through to year 12, so we had a large range. And it was very interesting because teachers said "We've invited you to the school because we think the children should have this experience but we don't think they are going to be very interested in Schubert and Mozart and Beethoven" and I thought "Fine". It was not Schubert and Mozart and Beethoven they were interested in – it was the music, so when the Kindy kids heard the music they reacted immediately to the instruments. Once they heard the sound we could engage them in questions about the sound and they could answer lots of questions about what the cello did, what the violin did, what the clarinet did and they could sing numbers of the themes. So that program went through til when we got to Year 12 we could talk about Schubert and Mozart and Beethoven and we could talk about differences in style. So it isn't the music that is the issue, it's how

you teach it. All music will have some value, somewhere, that you are responsible for. That's what you have to decide and to make sure that the children get as broad and as rich a program in music as possible and there is so much out there. So material is not an issue. There is repertoire for days. What are we really lacking? – Teachers. We don't have enough teachers.

It was in this room three years ago at the Kodaly national conference that I looked out onto this room in the middle of an address and I said "Wouldn't it be amazing if we could harness all of the energy in this room, and every teacher in this room became a mentor teacher and looked after other teachers". And that was the moment that the Music Teacher Mentoring program was born and it's happening. We now have mentor teachers in New South Wales, Victoria and WA. Some of you know about it because I've spoken about it at Maryborough or AUSTA or wherever but it works like this and I think it is important for you to know. Each state has identified half a dozen or more teachers who have strengths in working with other teachers, in other words, they are strong mentors. Schools have been invited to nominate teachers who would like to take part in the program. The program has vocal material along with conceptual material where the mentor teachers in front of the participating teacher, the participating teacher repeats that lesson, and so on, and it shifts backwards and forwards between mentor and teacher. Now later on today Margaret Barrett and Bernadette McNamara are going to talk about the National Music Teacher Mentoring Program. Bernadette is the National Coordinator and Margaret is helping with research on this so we can have data – evidence - that we can present to government. And already the evidence we are getting from programs is very, very compelling – but it's not a surprise. It's not a surprise to know that in certain areas school retention rate has improved. It's not a surprise to know that some children like to come to school on the day where there is music. That isn't a surprise to us. We know that. But does the general public know that? No. Do politicians necessarily know that? No. That's why we have to hold this advocacy at a political level. Is the mentoring system a panacea? Is it going to cure all music education problems in Australia? No. What will? I'll tell you what will. Nothing will replace the idea of a thoroughly qualified, trained teacher in front of a group of children on a regular basis. Classroom teachers can assist but in the end we really want properly trained teachers. The mentoring program is working – we know that. We are starting to get the evidence and I'm hoping that it will increase. It started because I got political. I went to Brandis, and then I went to Christopher Pyne. George Brandis is no longer Arts Minister, and Christopher Pyne is no longer Education Minister, but that doesn't matter because the government which is funding the program is still in power and so we have to re-lobby with Fifield and Birmingham, so we'll do that. I will go and see Fifield and I will go and see Birmingham. Unless you tell these people, they don't know. They are not mind readers. Your local member needs to know. We don't play politics with them because they are better at it. We just tell them the same thing over and over and over until they repeat it, and then you say "what a good idea" and that's really how it works because they hear thousands of people wanting things. So this concept of advocacy and going to politicians is vital. So how do we do that nationally?

Well, with ASME, I remember the first meeting of ASME in New South Wales and it was in August 1967 in the Sydney Teachers College Hall at the University of Sydney and I went along because I was asked to provide some students to play original music at the beginning of the first ASME event ever. It was very interesting because there were two people up for presidency – one was Terence Hunt, the Inspector of Schools in charge of music, and the other was Professor Donald Peart who was the foundation Professor of Music at Sydney University, the first music professor at Sydney Uni. So the

room was divided. There were the university types, and there were the education types, as if university and education were mutually exclusive ideas, but when it came to music, they were, and I'll tell you why. The university people believed that in schools we weren't teaching music properly, the way they thought music should be taught, and the Department for Education believed that the University didn't have a clue about how you teach music. So there was already dispute at this incredibly narrow level. As a young teacher I found that really interesting. Because I started teaching in 1963, so this is my 52nd year of working in education and I still find it incredibly interesting. But we had a syllabus meeting about two years after the syllabus came out and Professor Peart and Terry Hunt were there at the table and were about to re-write the syllabus. Terry Hunt said "I think the opening line of the syllabus should be 'Music is a language'". Professor Peart dropped right in and said "Oh, Terry, do you think so? How do you say 'I want a cup of tea' in music?" And Terry said, "Oh, for Christ's sake, shut up!". So we were off to a lovely healthy debate. As a young teacher, I thought this was fabulous. But I was on Peart's side. How do you say 'I want a cup of tea' in music? And the answer is, you can't. And it's why we teach music because it's precisely not a language. Anyway, the election happened, and guess who became president – Donald Peart. He was the first NSW chair, and then Frank Callaway from the University of New South Wales became the first ASME National President. So everyone looked to ASME as being an association that could help us and represent us. And what happened? ASME lost its way – it really did, because it became divisive. There was in-fighting, there was argument, and what had happened was the principal goal, the principal aim had been lost. It was not an Australian Society for Music Education. It was an organisation for people to argue and in-fight – it was exactly that – and I know because I went to lots of meetings and then I stopped because I thought "this is pointless". And what was in Australia at the time? Nothing. Music Teacher Associations – MTA's – and I've looked at the history of MTA's all over the country and they were doing really good work. Music Teacher Associations were having Summer Schools, they were talking about how you teach the 5th grade syllabus, how do you teach aural training, how do you teach children general knowledge, it was stuff that studio teachers really wanted to know about. They were incredibly useful. Then what happened in the late 60's and early 70's was that associations began to evolve with particular methods. So we had the Orff association, the Kodaly association, the Suzuki association, the Yamaha association – all of these organisations started to emerge and we saw in Australia a massive change philosophically. People started to advocate for particular methodologies, so you had Orff fanatics, Kodaly fanatics, Suzuki fanatics, and unless you were doing Orff exactly the way Orff prescribed it (which is interesting because he didn't prescribe anything) you weren't an Orff teacher. And unless you were doing Kodaly going [singing soh and me] "Hello how are you, lovely day, nice to see you" you weren't a Kodaly teacher. And all of that stuff happened. And we fought, and we argued and it was all silly. Then we had – there's only one way to teach the violin – Suzuki – every other violin method out the window. So what happened it Suzuki alienated rafts of string teachers who had been trained in European traditions who understood for example the way the Russians teach, the way the Germans teach, the way the Hungarians teach – so that was all alienated. And so what grew up in Australia was a series of islands. So we have all of these associations, but they are inherently good because they all have one thing in mind – music. They're all united by the idea of music. They all contain good people. They all contain passionate teachers. They all have people who are committed to the idea of music education and they fight for their beliefs and they fight for their principles and they fight for their ideals and go to conferences and they become part of the faithful and they evangelise, and all that stuff that is in essence good. It's good and it shouldn't stop because it promotes debate, it promotes argument, it promotes

thought. In Australia, I think we're changing where we can actually say "I think I'll do this from Kodaly, I'll do this from Orff, I'll do this from Dalcroze – I love this bit about Dalcroze, I love this bit from Suzuki" – so we are eclectic teachers where we take the best of all these things and make them our own. We don't want to be like Orff teachers in Salzburg, we don't want to be like Hungarian teachers – we'd like to have their skills and abilities and all the fabulous things they can do musically – but we have the capacity in this country to have the best of every world – we have that capacity. And that capacity, ladies and gentlemen, resides in ASME. I'm proposing today work as hard as it can at the national level to establish a corporate for every music association and society in the country so that every music association, every society, everybody, from the partially left-handed nose flute players to Yamaha and music industry join ASME. Why? Because as a united force all of these associations under the umbrella of ASME would be a powerful force at government level. It would represent roughly 3 million Australians, constantly growing because when you look at teachers, the number of children doing music, the number of associations there are, the numbers of families that are involved, that's a very big number. That's a lot of people for a politician to hear "Minister, three million people in your constituency happen to think this is important. I'm sure you'll agree given there is an election coming up". That's all we have to say – because if we don't, other people will – drama people, visual arts people – the drama people are unstoppable – we have to become unstoppable. In promoting the idea that all associations should be umbrella'd by ASME, I am not promoting the concept that the associations change their nature. Is that clear? In other words, if you are a dyed-in-the-wool Kodaly person or Orff person, you don't have to stop that. Your association just becomes a member, a corporate member, of ASME, and may meet from time to time with ASME to discuss issues of advocacy; but what I'm talking about is an advocacy issue. I'm saying that if we entrust ASME with the charter it was really supposed to do, which was the Australian Society– Australian, that's us; Society, everybody; - for Music Education; everybody. You don't have to change your beliefs, you don't have to be baptised, you don't have to have a brain operation like becoming a National, you've just got to be a corporate member. And then as a corporate member, we then charge ASME with advocating on our behalf for the very best things in music education. We maintain our individuality because as musicians that's what we are supposed to be about. Individuals – isn't that the case? When we teach children to compose, which is the reason we teach music, we're teaching them to be individuals. We don't want them to lose their individuality. It's one of the great things about music education that each child will have a very different idea of how they compose. I know that from having done a big session recently in Sydney where we had four new Australian works by young composers, really good works, played by contemporary ensembles, and 35 works from Year 9 & 10 kids played by these ensembles. The 35 works that were played were all different. Every single one. One work came from a Year 9 boy in Blacktown – Blacktown is way out in the west, it is not the cultural centre of Sydney by a long chalk – and this kid said "I have written a string quartet and it's called String Quartet Number 1 because it is my first" and the string quartet played it. And I'm here to tell you – and I looked at the composer – and I said "That's the real McCoy". That's a Thomas Adès, that's a Harrison Birtwhistle – this kid was amazing. And these emerging composers looked a little bit embarrassed, at hearing this Year 9 kid writing sophisticated music, incredibly sophisticated music. How exciting is that?

34'12"

So, we know what music can do. We know what it can do for children. But we need to protect it because we are under threat. The Arts do not work well together. They will only work well together

when we are united. Everyone's fighting for the same pie. And we are fighting for the same pie because it's called the Arts. That was a sell-out. Once we became 'the Arts', we lost something. We lost our integrity a little bit. It was good as Music, it was good as Visual Arts, but when it became 'The Arts' – what happened? "Oh, it can all be done the same way". We even had syllabus meetings where people said "Let's find a common language for the Arts". How about, let's not? How about let's find all of those things which are special to Music and hanging on to those, and saying "while we might have certain things in common with Dance and Drama and Visual Arts, we are quintessentially unique". That's what we have to protect. Now the dancers, and the dramas and the painters will say "So are we", and I'll say "Good, fight your own battles". We need to fight ours, we really do, and we need to become political, because when we deal with children and we deal with music and children we go in to the deepest part of the mind, the most extraordinary part of the mind. So when children hear music and react to music, listen to music, sing – children singing together, how potent is that? And the effect that can have on children – and we can see it. You watch Michelle Leonard's Moorambilla Voices program, Gondwana kids - I've worked with Gondwana kids – they're serious, really serious - because having fun in music is serious. We need to get serious with music education. We've got lots of people doing things out there helping music education, but we need to get serious. We need to teach children as much about music as we can. I recently talked to a teacher who said "I have survived teaching music and I do not read a note", and I said "That is not something of which I would be proud". So how does that teacher handle a band? If we get to that level where it's about 'fun', 'engagement', all those lovely words we have now – engagement – like that one? Director of Engagement – does that mean endless fiancés? What does that really mean? We want to teach music properly. That's what we really want to do, and we want to make sure that kids have access to this because of what it does for their hearts, their minds, their souls, their spirits and their imagination. And music does it differently from all the other Arts. And this wonderful philosopher, Iris Murdoch, who I quote regularly, said "Education does not make you happy, nor does freedom". We don't become happy just because we are educated, if we are, or because we are free, if we are – but education may be the means by which we realise we are happy and may provide us with the information to know that the only freedom worth having is the freedom of the mind – the freedom of mind to engage, to wander, to explore. Michel Montand says similar things. If the mind ceases to be engaged, we're dead. And that which acts upon the mind of the child potently is Music. And it acts on the mind of the child from birth, even before, and it's why, ladies and gentlemen, I'm really serious about suggesting to you that ASME find a way to unite everybody in this country to become the real peak body and advocate as powerfully as possible for music education.