MUSIC AND ART PROJECT AND PENRITH STRINGS PROJECT MENTORED BY AUSTRALIAN CHAMBER ORCHESTRA (ACO) AND PENRITH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA (PSO) TUTORS

Anne Power & Sarah Powell

Research funded by the Crown Resorts Foundation through the Western Sydney Arts Initiative and the Packer Family Foundation.
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Final Report
2016

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Research funded by the Crown Resorts Foundation through the Western Sydney Arts Initiative and the Packer Family Foundation
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DOI: 10.4225/35/58bf5ded8a6eb
This Report commences with the Music and Art program. The students have had visits from by Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) musicians as well as the opportunity to attend concerts at The Joan Sutherland Centre (The Joan) at Penrith and the skype sessions with Sharon Roffman, guest artist with the ACO, introducing different repertoire. The children were encouraged to express their responses to the music. Some were colour pieces, inspired by Rothko:

Figure 1: Year 6 student art work, Penrith Public School

Some were influenced by Mondrian's art work to which their attention had been drawn:
During 2016, I visited St Marys North and Penrith PS and the children shared drawings done in their books to the music they had heard in the **Music and Art** program. The Mendelssohn ‘Song Without Words’ drew forth interesting ideas about waves lapping against rocks or being in space in a rocket ship among the stars.
The Schoenberg Piano Pieces brought out the stealthy movements of a thief.

Figure 4: Page from student workbook Penrith Public School

The children talked about music expressing emotion. As they draw in response to music, the children find the words to be able to describe it. When the Year 5/6 children attended the concert at The Joan with the ACO and Pekka Kuusisto, they were captivated by the Vivaldi music about winter and transferred their imaginings to computer screen, with swirling snow.

Figure 5: Students at St Marys North Public School
The effect of the Music and Art program on the school community was evident in the way the school adapted to the visits of the ACO musicians and made it possible for the children to take the excursion to The Joan Sutherland Centre. Parents, some of whom attended the concert at The Joan Sutherland Centre, were aware of the program and talked about the positive impact on their children.

In observing classes, the children showed a growing confidence in naming and identifying musical concepts and visual arts elements. They were attuning to the emotional states that can be enhanced by music and their art work showed development in the expression of personal ideas that were important to them. The value of this program cannot be overestimated. This program is enhanced by a teacher who is enthusiastic, observing and building upon the interests of the children. There is a consistent approach to the Music and Art program in 2016 in St Marys North. The prospect of commencing a young string program there is a wonderful possibility. The program has led to the students becoming very interested in music and in responding to music in imaginative ways.

**The Penrith Strings Project**

In each period of the Penrith Strings Project, there has been a specific focus for string development. In the first period in March 2015, it was about modelling strategies. Next, it was about collaboration; and then about meeting challenge together. In the beginning of 2016, it was about recognising ensemble skills; and it was about “getting past the notes to play the music.” In the second half of 2016, it was about “if we’re not all doing the same thing [in bowing or dynamics for example] we lose power.” The focus was on being completely united in interpretation.

The 2016 rehearsals for the young Penrith Strings demonstrated developments from the commencement of 2015. Data for this final report came from 60 Practice Log Book entries; two focus groups with young string players; a focus group with six parents including parents of new members for the Penrith Strings; a focus group with three PSO tutors and another with three ACO musicians. Focus group questions are shown in the appendix. The young musicians have learned more about ensemble skills, listening to each other as well as taking advice from ACO and PSO tutors and conductor.
In 2016, the students talked and journalled in varied ways about their practice, explaining how they think about problem solving. The students discussed the ways they would prioritise the music on which they were working, considering what needed their immediate attention. They would warm up with scales and then would commence practising with more intricate music, the music that they identified as providing challenge. They would practise more difficult sections slowly and then speed up, using a metronome. Two explanations from students give samples of their comments:

James (pictured on the left): *I break the music down into different sections and practise each of those until I’ve got it right. I usually don’t play the entire piece unless it’s immediately before I’m performing something. I’ve found that’s how it works best for me.*

Emily: *Mainly when I practise, I focus on the bits I need to work on. Usually with a metronome and speed up the metronome pace as I go. Once I feel I’ve got it up to speed, then I’ll go from the bar before the passage and run it from there.*

The students described strategies like ‘air-bowing’ and playing the music on the desk (rhythmically and fingering for pitch). They talked of experimenting with different positions to play the same note. Several young players spoke about their goal of
becoming a professional musician. For others, the experience of playing music as well as they can was and is a big part of their lives. They were aware of their own improved progress. Table 1 below shows the improvements the young players were able to identify in their playing.

Table 1: Skills improvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what extent have your skills as a musician improved in Penrith Strings Program?</th>
<th>1 (a little)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (a lot)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bowing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pizzicato</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensemble Skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following a conductor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fingering</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone production</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observing Dynamics</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following a leader</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Penrith String program, the parents notice changes as they occur for their children’s music making. One parent talked about the improvement in her daughter’s bow hold, making a difference to the quality of sound she is producing. She commented that her daughter is realising that listening to other students is beneficial and that coming into contact with professional musicians has opened prospects that she might not have previously considered. One father talked about his son enjoying the program. Another father commented that, because of the program, his son had not only improved in music but also in school. A mother talked of her son’s “massive improvement” through the program last year. Still another talked of her son doing music for the HSC and going on to university. Table 2 below shows the extent to which involvement in the Penrith Strings program has had an impact on their expression of their musicality in practice and in other activities:
Table 2: Impact on practice and other activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To what degree has involvement in Penrith Strings helped you approach the following?</th>
<th>1 (a little)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (a lot)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual practice</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensemble playing elsewhere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to String music, recorded or live</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation for exams</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking back on the previous year's repertoire, the students commented on their enjoyment. Table 3 below shows their overall positive response:

Table 3: Enjoyment of repertoire in 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How much did you like the music played with Penrith Strings in 2015?</th>
<th>1 (a little)</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5 (a lot)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Romanian Folk Dance</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messiah, Sinfonia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moldau</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ases Dod</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divertimento</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once again in 2016, the Penrith Strings program used a pattern of rehearsing three or four musical works in a block of rehearsals. The repertoire for the first session of rehearsals included Jenkins: *Palladio*; Grainger: *Three Movements from Lincolnshire Posy*; and Newbold’s *Arabian Dreams*. In a different strategy from last year, the
second session of rehearsals (in April-May) consolidated the repertoire, with a wonderful growth in confident sound from the players.

The tutti and sectional rehearsals in 2016 have allowed the tutors to work with the young musicians on fine details: ‘saving bow’ by travelling the bow at slower speeds; and using open A string after a long trill because it will sound better; getting the cellos to pick up on the intensity of the violins; and moving away from the fingerboard so that it’s a “bit more gritty”.

During the year, eight of the Penrith Strings having been invited to play with the Penrith Symphony Orchestra, and many benefits are evident. The sustainability of a local quality amateur orchestra has developed through this program. The musical and social outcomes for the young players are evident when the breaks in rehearsals see friendships forming and when the tutors encourage the young performers in moving desks so that different students have a chance to lead sections of the strings.

The students’ 40% response in Table 4 to a question about ACO Academy ‘in the future’ is very significant, given that students in the local area can struggle with issues of positive mindset and self-esteem.
The program has been a very positive counterbalance to struggles with self esteem. This positive outcome is the result of the warm encouragement and caring attitude of the ACO mentors and the PSO tutors. There is evidence that young musicians, who might not otherwise have had an opportunity to learn from experts, have been changed by their experience. What is different is the access to expert mentoring. Without such a program, the families would not have been able to offer their children this community experience.
Students, like Keith (principal violin, pictured) are starting to talk about goals they have, whether those are to be able to play a challenging piece really well or to imagine a future in professional music making. The common factor among the students and their tutors is enjoyment: in playing together, in interpreting the repertoire and in bringing pleasure to audiences.

Two papers have been generated from this research: The first paper was submitted to the Australian Journal of Music Education, and has been accepted for publication in 2017; The second paper was submitted to the International Journal of Music Education, and has been accepted for publication in 2017.
Appendix

Student Focus groups (S)

1. As the year comes to a close, can you identify the things you have learned about playing your instrument this year?
2. Which of those things do you feel was most influenced by being part of this program?
3. What do you think about when you practise?
4. What does your teacher think of your progress this year?
5. What are the things you have most enjoyed about this program?
6. Do you have a favourite piece that the ensemble has played this year?
7. Do you prefer to play solo or in a group? Why is that?
8. Will you continue in the program next year?

Parent focus groups (P)

1. What were your expectations of the program at the beginning of the project?
2. Comment on what your child has achieved in the project over the space of one year.

PSO and ACO tutors (T)

1. What skills do you notice the young players acquiring? Can you comment on the technical and musical challenges?
2. Did the format of rehearsals work for you and the young players?