

VCAM's New Conservatorium of Music

By [Fiona Mackrell](#) ArtsHub | Tuesday, July 27, 2010

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VCAM: Melbourne Conservatorium of Music Director, Prof. Gary McPherson

Last Friday, in a sudden turn of events, Melbourne University's Faculty of VCA and Music (VCAM) was split in two and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music was born with VCAM's Head of Music, Professor Gary McPherson stepping up as its Director. And it would seem he couldn't be happier.

'I had a meeting on Friday with my staff and they were bubbling with enthusiasm,' Prof. McPherson says. 'Everyone's just relieved and they want to get on with it now. It will take a couple of days or maybe a week to sink in, because it's been a draining process for everyone, but it should be good.'

It has come about thanks to the Melbourne University Council's endorsement last Thursday of the recommendations of the Switkowski review and the subsequent resignation of VCAMs Dean, Professor Sharman Pretty, who decided to not continue in the substantive changed Dean's role. And is recognition of the distinctive differences in curriculum and funding challenges that Art, Performing Arts and Film and TV on the one hand, and Music on the other face.

The newly created Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, (MCM) now sits next to the VCA as an equal and discrete part of VCAM. Each part will be headed by a director who will report to the faculty's Dean. Su Baker, previously Head of Visual Arts, has been named the Director of VCA and Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Warren Bebbington will be Acting Dean.

'I think [the university's response to the Switkowski Review] has been a considered response,' says Prof. McPherson. 'I think it's been a cautious response, and I think it's been a very receptive response. They're the three things that I see.'

The new structure will mean more of the decision-making will occur within the two parts, with the Directors directly responsible for curriculum, staffing and finance. 'A lot of the university's recommendations have been about empowering the people, who could really make this change at the coal face, to get on with it,' says Prof. McPherson.

Prof. McPherson is a little evasive on just what has made the position of VCAM Dean, substantively different now to what it was 15 months ago when Prof. Pretty took on the job. Instead, he talks about his experience at the University of Illinois, where he was before coming to Melbourne a year ago. There the Dean's role was a more political one, liaising with federal and state governments, being a spokesperson for the discipline, helping with funding and reporting decisions back to senior management. He seems to foresee something similar for the new role of VCAM Dean.

The split tries to decouple the mash up made in 2007 when the University cobbled together its own Music Department and the VCA due to funding pressures. But VCA music will not return to the VCA, with the MCM continuing to operate over both the Southbank and Parkville campuses.

Blending the two Music Departments over the past two years has not been easy, with different traditions and cultures and duplication and overlap of courses and specialties leading to inevitable internal conflicts for resources. Adding to the difficulties has been the further review process, which stalled progress just when new ideas and progress were starting to be made.

The ongoing student protests and discontent with the leadership of Prof. Pretty, staff concerns regarding programme changes and a voluntary redundancy program across the University late last year that saw many within VCAM take their leave have added to the internal challenges for Music. It's little wonder people are feeling drained.

'I feel very deeply, having taught and administered at a number of institutions,' Prof. McPherson says, that 'It's not about consensus it's about refining debate... You'll never get any music school in the world where everyone agrees with each other, but you've got to give people a voice so they can express a view. To be honest, he says, it's remarkable how quickly we've adapted and come together as a single team.'

Prof. McPherson has spent eight months of his first year with the University in the review, but he says it was necessary. 'There was a need to stop, take a big breath and re-evaluate where we were going – to make sure we were heading in the right direction.' And because of this process, he feels confident that the difficulties and frustrations are behind them, at least in the Conservatorium and the outcomes will be better because of the broad consultations that have taken place.

The further announcement by the University that there will be a curriculum review, which will start in the next few weeks and take until the end of the year means that the Visual and Performing arts will suspend any further moves towards implementing Melbourne University's infamous Melbourne Model for now. Music at Melbourne however, has already gone much further down that path.

What the new Conservatorium will finally look like will depend on money. Currently the financial problems come from three areas, inadequate federal funding; too many courses with very small numbers of students, and the University's internal cost-accounting system which disproportionately charges internal fees for Southbank facilities.

The Faculty has made a submission to the university to re-look at the costs that are charged for premises, which have seen practice rooms charged at the same rates as mass lecture rooms. And McPherson seems hopeful that this aspect of budget management may find a resolution.

On matter of public funding, there is also hope for a change of heart. Across town last Thursday, Victorian Premier John Brumby was making promising murmurings that the State government might finally step in to assist VCAM dire \$6 million annual funding shortfall. Unlike similar institutions in NSW and WA, which have ongoing substantive support from their respective state governments, VCAM receives no state government funding.

Prof. McPherson is enthusiastic about an approach put to the government by VCAM, which suggests the federal government is the primary source of funds for teaching and learning programmes but that the state government fund important outreach and enrichment programmes, that would for example, allow VCAM to run regional orchestra or choir tours and put on major concerts. Such initiatives would provide students with extension experiences and contribute to the cultural 'capital' of the state.

Whether much needed, federal funding per student will be increased is also being waited on with baited breath as the Federal Election draws nearer and all eyes are on Education Minister, Simon Crean.

The final challenge for the Melbourne Conservatorium is to rationalise what is currently about 18 programmes and four undergraduate degrees across the two campuses. The hope is to consolidate to a Bachelor of Music and Masters of Music programmes with strong offerings across all the sub disciplines by 2012. This will make the administration more manageable and release funds back into the programme. Rather than there being some sort of conspiracy to slash costs, McPherson sees this as a way to offer everything better.

It will also result McPherson hopes, in Melbourne being known for the high level and breadth of its sub discipline areas, which include, classical performance, improvisation, contemporary music performance, composition, conducting, musicology, ethnomusicology, performance science and music therapy. That's quite different from where most other conservatoriums are heading, he says, where the trend is instead to reduce specialisation and concentrate on only one or two sub disciplines at an elite level.

'There's a great opportunity to have a Bachelor of Music with different strands of expertise and specialisation, that also has different opportunities for different types of students,' he says. There will be options for students who want to take a practical studio based course, right through to those who want to be musicologist researchers and theoreticians.

Even within the Melbourne Model, the proportion of subjects that a student will be required to take from disciplines other than music will be only around 12.5%, across a three year degree with honours. That's less than what is typically required in similar courses across Europe and in the United States.

People don't really understand McPherson says, the advantage of the type of breadth Melbourne will be able to offer. In Music for instance, singers will be able to do languages, performers will be able to do marketing and business studies. These will be courses that will not only help them manage their likely professional portfolio careers but round them off as people, he says. They need not just a degree for their first job, which may only be for six to eight years, but a degree for life.

Contrary to the concern that the intense- studio based and performance-orientated learning experiences of students at the faculty will be diminished, McPherson is confident he will be able to increase one-to-one lessons, if only marginally. 'Instead of thinking we're going to live with what we've got, I'm not. I can see ways that we can work our programmes so that deep enrichment is still part of each of our sub disciplines.'

‘I don’t think that essential quality of multi-arts, practical opportunities for skill development will change dramatically. They may change in form, as we find different ways or better ways of doing it, but the essential quality of that studio based philosophy will still be there.’

What McPherson is hoping to develop is the antithesis of a one-size fits all template. He speaks instead of his experiences in Sweden, where teachers rather than being stuck to 45 minute sessions per student, could bring two or three students together to work for three hours when necessary, as well as giving them individual lessons. It’s engaging staff in discussing these sorts of possibility and talking about the best way of doing things that really seems to get his eyes twinkling.

Prof. Gary McPherson’s optimism is startling, and in sharp contrast to the usual tales of woe and despair that have been coming from the University over the past few years. He speaks with pride and respect for the history of both the Parkville and Southbank Music schools. ‘The challenge for us,’ he says, ‘is to retain the best of both entities and encapsulate them in the degrees we offer students...I want to reinvigorate discussions ...about what we’re here to do, which is to service the students, and to have the best course that we can devise.’



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