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## Battle to save VCA is not over yet

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July 30, 2010 - 3:00AM

SO, THE divisive Sharman Pretty has gone from the University of Melbourne, having resigned her post as dean of the troubled Victorian College of the Arts and Music on Thursday last week. Her resignation has done much to appease those who took issue with what they regarded as her tough cost-cutting measures, her lack of sympathy for the college's successful tradition of studio-based practice, and her support for the introduction of the dreaded "Melbourne Model".

To many - staff, students, the Save VCA group, and other sympathisers - Pretty's departure comes as a relief. But they are not so credulous as to believe that her demise spells the end of the college's woes.

Pretty's appointment was no accident. She was brought in to do the university's dirty work, and now she has been blithely sacrificed. Whether her departure will amount to anything more than a symbolic gesture remains to be seen.

She has been replaced by an acting dean, Professor Warren Bebbington - a former dean of the university's music faculty - which has raised questions about his allegiances.

Pretty's resignation was announced late last Thursday and virtually swamped the other big news of the night - the university's much-anticipated response to the Ziggy Switkowski-chaired review of the college.

Some background. In 2007, the VCA, finding itself in dire financial straits as a result of federal government funding changes, was forced to merge with the University of Melbourne. It was always an incompatible marriage of convenience. Ever since, the VCA and the university have been struggling to bridge the divide in their approaches to education.

Training at the VCA is expensive, with a low student-to-teacher ratio. Students are chosen not by scores but by talent - and practice is paramount. The university is more academically and theoretically focused, and the student-to-teacher ratios much higher.

One of the main sticking points between the VCA and the university has been the threat of the Melbourne Model - which requires students to take on "breadth subjects". Music students, for example, might choose to study a language or marketing as a breadth subject. But at the VCA, where students go to develop excellence in their discipline, such subjects are seen as robbing time from practice.

One of the positive results of the university's response to the Switkowski review has been the suspension of the controversial Melbourne Model, for the Southbank campus at least, pending a curriculum review.

However, the Melbourne Model is by no means off the agenda.

In other changes, the college faculty has been divided in two - the Victorian College of the Arts, based at Southbank and encompassing art, performing arts, film and television; and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, encompassing music from both the Parkville and Southbank campuses.

The siphoning off of music leaves uncertainty about the future of the remaining music subjects, such as improvisation, taught at the VCA's Southbank campus. The division seems to carve off music and make it the university's game.

Professor Su Baker has been appointed director of the VCA. As someone who has been head of the college's school of art for 10 years, she has the confidence of staff.

However, Professor Gary McPherson, the new director of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, is in favour of the Melbourne Model and talks up the merger between the music schools.

But one music student I spoke to, who had studied at both the university and the VCA, said each institution was excellent, for different reasons. The VCA had been the place to go if you wanted a performing career. The only options now for someone serious about performance were to study at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, or to go overseas, she said.

At least Premier John Brumby is finally taking notice of the VCA. Last week, Mr Brumby used the opening night of the Melbourne International Film Festival to announce that he would "not rest" until a solution was found for the college, which is facing a funding shortfall of up to \$20 million a year. About time.

Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu has long vowed to give the college an extra \$6 million a year if elected.

The federal Greens candidate for Melbourne, Adam Bandt, has also pledged to be an advocate for the college if he is elected.

Clearly, Bandt is seen as a political threat. Yesterday, state Arts Minister Peter Batchelor and the Labor candidate for Melbourne, Cath Bowtell (on behalf of federal Education Minister Simon Crean), met staff and students at the VCA campus at Southbank.

No announcement was forthcoming, but in a press release Mr Batchelor said: "Cath, Simon and I are very much aware of the contribution the VCA makes to our vibrant arts community, and we want to see it flourish."

Let's hope that's not just pre-election spin.

*This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/battle-to-save-vca-is-not-over-yet-20100729-10xvx.html>*