

February 4th, 2010

<NAME AND CONTACT DETAILS REMOVED AT AUTHORS REQUEST>

The VCA Review Committee
C/- University of Melbourne

By email: vcam-feedback@unimelb.edu.au

Re: Discussion Paper

Dear Review Committee,

As you most certainly are aware, in 1853 a very wise man was successful in persuading funding bodies of the importance of higher education for the general population, stating that “persons of both sexes and all nations above fourteen years of age are admitted free without letter of recommendation, guarantee, payment, signature of name or address, or ticket of admission” to this liberating place where such education would be available. The man was Sir Redmond Barry and the place was the University of Melbourne. In an attempt to encourage the cultural advancement of a region, Barry was instrumental in founding the University.

Change and transformation is necessary for our society to progress, but I wonder what Sir Redmond Barry would have to say in regards to the complete destruction of an ever-changing, flexible and liberating creative environment such as the VCA, by a University *he* established as a liberating institution in the first place.

I am a current VCA student studying for my Masters By Research in Music Performance having also completed a Bachelor of Music Performance (Improvisation) with Honours in 2008. <SENTENCE REMOVED AT AUTHORS REQUEST THAT WOULD IDENTIFY THE STUDENT>.

In my years studying at the (former) VCA, I have experienced the success of such a specialised curriculum in a tertiary institution. I wish to share with you my experiences as a student, so that you, as a committee dedicated to the wellbeing and needs of the student body, can make a more informed decision regarding the future of the VCAM. After all, without students, a university cannot survive.

Firstly, I would like to offer my suggestions on the issue of curriculum.

Curriculum

There seems to be some confusion in regards to what the VCA actually offers in terms of its curriculum. Dean Sharmen Pretty’s suggestion that the VCA appears “*siloed in its narrow little degree programs*” is untrue, at least in the case of the Bachelor of Music Degree. While studying as an Undergraduate I enjoyed a very broad education, including electives in foreign languages, psychology, film composition and private studio teaching among many others. The discussion paper, however, implies that only with the implementation of the Melbourne Model will Southbank students have access to breadth subjects such as foreign languages (stated on page 22). As I have just outlined however, these options are already available to us.

I have difficulty understanding the concept of “breadth” studies in terms of what the University of Melbourne has to offer. From what I can gather, these “breadth” options would mean that music students could also have qualifications/experience in other fields of study such as Foreign Language, Law, English Literature, Science or Education etc. etc. These options are already available to students who study Music at the University of Melbourne, but also to students who study music at Monash University. Students wishing to pursue a broader educational experience already have two major options within Victoria. The reason I *chose* to study at the VCA was because it offered me something quite different. What VCA offered was “breadth”, but in terms of a career in music. I would like to elaborate on this point further by sharing with you a short anecdote:

*In my final year of High School, I attended the University of Melbourne open day. I sat in on a talk given by the then Head of Strings. I wanted to study violin at a university level, but my interest was not necessarily in classical repertoire, but rather improvisation, jazz and contemporary music styles. I asked the Head of Strings whether there was the option to explore these styles of music within the Bachelor of Music offered by the Faculty. Before I had even finished my sentence he said, "Oh no, you'd have to go to VCA if you wanted to do something like **that!**"*

It seemed to me, that what the University of Melbourne was offering in terms of its Bachelor of Music Program was a more fitting example of something "siloed". The VCA in contrast, gave me the opportunity to explore many different styles of music within a theoretical and practical context, including different skill sets, appreciation of music across many genres and it was because of this "breadth", that I was prepared for a multi-dimensional career in music. I was still specialising in the violin and improvisation and I was still learning in a practical environment, but ultimately, I was learning how to become a musician who could survive in an ever-changing musical landscape. Because of this multi-tiered education, I have worked in many different environments. I have performed in theatre, including the 2009 Malthouse Production of "Woyzeck", I have played on film scores including the soundtrack for "Bran Neu Dae", I have performed with "You Am I", I have sold-out my own show at the Spiegeltent as part of the 2008 Melbourne International Arts Festival playing my own music that I composed and I have arranged string quartets for pop artists. I knew, from the very first moment I stepped into VCA, that I wanted a career in music, not a career in Music Law, or Music Education, or Music/Japanese and VCA was the only place to offer me this choice. For many musicians such as myself, there is no Plan B, I don't *want* a Plan B, I needed to be a part of an institution that encouraged this and VCA was the place.

In order to provide the education I have described above, VCA must maintain its small class sizes, the same lecture/tutorial ratio, the same time allocated to private lessons and no additional "breadth" study requirements. However, I will offer the following suggestions to meet with the Board's Review of the VCA curriculum some years ago that presented a few holes:

Firstly, I would have preferred to collaborate with the other Art Schools a lot more. This seemed irrelevant during my first two years of Undergraduate Study as it was only in my final year that I realised the opportunities I had missed. The Centre For Ideas needs to examine its role in the Bachelor Course and work on ways to become more relevant earlier on.

Secondly, the Professional Development element of the Bachelor Degree was almost non-existent in the Undergraduate level. Like other institutions that incorporate professional development into the final year through the likes of internships or placements, VCA needs to address this as a formal component of the course.

Funding & Structure

Money doesn't grow on trees. If VCA is to remain an internationally recognised faculty, it requires funding and support from somebody. If the VCA is to become an independent college, which ideally it should, I would like to see the VCA included in the Roundtable Program not dissimilar to NIDA. Reinstatement of Federal Government funding would also be required. I support the view that the optimum outcome for VCA is to be an independent institution, capable of awarding its own degrees and managing its own curriculum.

However, if the above option is not available, an alternative solution that sees the VCA remain an affiliate of the University of Melbourne, whereby the VCA and the Faculty of Music remain separate within the University, is workable. The Discussion Paper examines this option and describes it as possible but difficult in the sense that the University will have two music schools ultimately in competition with one another. I do not see it this way. The Faculty of Music and the VCA, as I have already outlined, offer two very different things that suit different student's needs. Just as a Medical student would not study Law to achieve their dreams of becoming a medical practitioner, I would not choose to study music at the Faculty because I hope to become an improvising musician as opposed to a classical violinist/music teacher/ethnomusicologist. In the same way, a student wishing to pursue a career in ethnomusicology would not choose to study at the VCA. The Faculty is not competing with the VCA because they each offer separate and different things that are unique to each. The University

should be proud of the opportunity to offer local and international students the choice to study at one of two very different and exceptional music faculties to suit the needs each individual requires. I believe that *this* would assist in attracting increased international recognition of the University and its music faculties.

Perhaps more relevant to my own experience at present, I would like to state here very seriously that the VCA *should* have a place within a University and not as a VET institution. As stated in the Discussion Paper, “higher arts education is integral to artistic development. Without opportunities to experience the arts, without research and development which enhances creativity, without innovative training, the arts become less dynamic”. My experience of my Masters course at VCA has been extremely provocative and challenging and without the opportunity to research within such a practical and creative environment, my future as a dynamic and thorough musician and researcher would suffer.

I have already felt the effects of the merging of the Faculty of Music with the VCA despite being informed by the Discussion Paper that changes would not occur straight away. I would like to share with you in detail what these effects have been so that you may become aware of how it has impacted on my studies and my experience of the University of Melbourne in the most tragic of ways.

First of all, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that most of the changes have occurred without warning or even without being informed by administration, but rather by rumour and experience of the changes. This is something the University should be quite embarrassed about as any institution aspiring for international recognition and boasting world-class education *should* have a functioning administrative and secretarial body.

Our Head of Masters has changed. Our lecturers have been made redundant. Our course has changed completely. What I signed up for was a two-year course to complete the necessary requirements to be admitted to a Masters level of music performance and the way I have been treated in the last few months has been not dissimilar to the treatment of a high school student. Where the Masters Degree offered by VCA was tailored to meet individual and unique needs, such as being open to providing specialised sessional staff, listening to student’s requests and offering a course that provided students with the environment to explore their unique place in the Australian music landscape, a huge gap has been left in its place. Our lectures in Performance Research have been replaced by a class operating only as forums to discuss our own theses due to our lecturer being made redundant, whereas last year, this class was dedicated to educating us on research methods such as heuristic research, phenomenological research and as we were only half-way through, this year would revolve around writing a polemic. Now, I feel like I have only received half of what I signed up for and am quite disappointed that I may not graduate from my Masters with the necessary introduction to skills required to further my research at a PhD level. Added to this, the Music, Society and Culture lectures which were scheduled to commence in this, my second year of Masters, have been replaced by lectures concerned with solely, the Ballet Ruses. What was meant to be a platform for students to explore contextual factors affecting contemporary society and culture, specifically in Australia, with reference to our indigenous culture, has now become extremely pigeon-holed and in my opinion, completely irrelevant. Having a sound grasp on the Ballet Ruses is yet another example of a “siloes” experience, where as an understanding of our unique place in contemporary music culture (which is *now*) is an example of a broad experience.

These dramatic changes and the threat of effacement of VCA’s artistic and educational vision by the Melbourne Model is concerning. The fact that so much has been done already to obscure the VCA’s dedication to moulding aspiring students into professional musicians, is testament to the University of Melbourne’s lack of knowledge about the VCA and what goes on inside. In the VCA News, Issue 2, 2008, there is a feature on the Improvisation Department at VCA which was celebrating twenty-five years of Graduates. It was not celebrating twenty-five years of *operation*; it was celebrating its Graduates. The VCA celebrates its students and its graduates, its community and every person who makes it the place that it is. In an interview with the founder of the Improvisation Department back in 1980, Brian Brown, he stated that his philosophy was to encourage students to “discover their own creativity...to view musicians [such as Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker] as models in regard to their endeavour, rather than as people whose sounds should be copied.” In fact, the Department became the “Improvisation” Department, instead of the “Jazz” Department when it became “obvious

that many students...were more interested in expressing themselves in creative sounds that reflected the music of their own time, including world musics of all types.” At VCA, the most important thing is that the teachers provide the students with what they need to pursue their own unique and individual pathway.

When a Graduating Film student announced that the University of Melbourne was “ripping the heart out of VCA” at last year’s Graduation Ceremony, he was right. Last year saw the end of a beautiful and creative tradition as our typical VCA Graduation Ceremony adhered to University of Melbourne regulations including correct regalia and a swift event consisting of more monotony than ceremony. The VCA traditional Graduation ceremony was yet another example of how the Faculty celebrated its Graduates, acknowledging each and every one of us as being unique and special, having prepared us for the responsibility of being an artist in the world.

Our Future

A University is a community of masters and scholars, of teachers and students. It is a place filled with people united by a common interest in learning and giving. It should not be a place built on four pillars of essential dot-points, whereby the student pays for an understanding of this and that. A university is a place where discussion and debate is encouraged, where exceptions are nurtured; where specialization and diversification have a place side by side one another and not in competition with each other. A university is a place *for* sharing, not for excluding. I learned all of this at the VCA. But the most important thing I gained from being a student at VCA was the experience of appreciating that everything in this world, every moment, every sound, every being, is unique and exceptional and that a successful life is achieved by acknowledging this. The VCA is the liberating place that Sir Redmond Barry would have fought for as opposed to the impenetrable institution the University of Melbourne is trying to transform the VCA into.

The VCA is unique and special – a fact known all around Australia and other parts of the world. If the University cannot recognize this and cannot accommodate this uniqueness within its framework, then it should sever the ties between itself and the VCA and stop destroying what has always been a community of living, breathing, specialized and creative artists.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper, for your time and ultimately for your decisions, which I can only hope reflect the desires and needs of the next generations of students hoping to pursue a career in the arts.

Yours sincerely,

<NAME REMOVED BY SAVE VCA>