

**Discussion Paper: Victorian College of the Arts**

**Submitted by**

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**Member MEAA since 1966**

- 1. Contact hours – one-on-one – are crucial**
- 2. Relevance of curriculum – arts focussed**
- 3. Balance of training must be in favour of the practical**
- 4. Restoration & enhancement of specialist courses: Music Theatre Course, Puppetry**
- 5. Is the VCA actually suitable for the University of Melbourne?**
- 6. An independent panel??**

*New York has Juilliard, Sydney has NIDA, Perth has WAPA, Melbourne once had the VCA.*

I am a performing artist of many years standing: I trained in drama at the National Theatre Drama School, trained in voice and operatic singing with various teachers in Melbourne, London and Paris, and took dance classes to make sure I could be proficient where choreography was required in the operas and musicals in which I appeared. I have been a proud member of Equity (now MEAA) for nearly 45 years.

I am making this submission as someone who has been passionately involved over four decades in the arts in a professional capacity, and who has a degree of wisdom and understanding of how the artist would be best served in their training for a dedicated life.

I did not train at the VCA (I have given classes there), but I would have loved to have had my multi-disciplinary training requirements under the one roof, as the fortunate students at the VCA have had hitherto, for I know from my own years of experience of an artist's life, that this is the ideal way to prepare young artists to enter the highly competitive and often largely youth-oriented, performing arts work-force. I did not need academia in those early days of training, I needed practice and discipline, technical information and training. What training I did in a haphazard and ad hoc fashion over many, many years is what the Music Theatre course (the cancelled Music Theatre Course) has been delivering in a package in a three year course – time and cost-effective for those students who wish to do some of the things I have done, They will be better equipped than I ever was.

A dancer must train for hours from an early age (5? 10? 15?) to be considered for an apprenticeship at the Australian Ballet for example, and not apply as a “mature-age arts graduate beginner” of 22 or 3. A singer needs to have one-on-one classes, not group classes. A violinist needs to practice for 4-5 hours a day as well as having one-on-one classes. Research subjects should be pertinent to the art being trained for, or chosen for relevance by the arts-practitioner-to-be.

When I addressed the rally (warm up for G. Rush...) last year I stated that there were ten things you need to be an artist. Ten things. First: Passion. Second: A modicum of talent - a handy thing! Third: Excellent teachers and training can make the most modest talent shine. Four: Practice. Five: Practice. Six: Practice. Seven: Practice. Eight: Practice. Nine: Practice. Ten: Practice. The crowd shouted in recognition and agreement.

Practice is the key to excellence. Professor Stephen McIntyre of Melbourne University, himself an acclaimed pianist and teacher, estimated that one of his own teachers, the great virtuoso Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli (who started lessons as a 3 y.o.) would have had to practice for something like 20,000 hours to achieve the perfection that he did. If an extraordinary talent needed to practice to that degree, what about the more modestly talented artist!? Must he/she build-in to training the expectation of failure by studying topics that are unrelated to their art or irrelevant? (“study accounting, you can’t survive as a painter”).

While it is sensible to train in other disciplines, (I qualified as a pharmacist), extra-curricular courses must be at the service of the training artist, and not academicize a study course which is supposed to train in the basics of an art. You cannot become a singer or a dancer or a painter or instrumentalist by reading a “how-to” manual. It doesn’t work that way.

The contact hours between students and teachers should be INCREASED not decreased. By over-loading a young music student with hours of extra study units – so idealistically but quaintly termed, “breadth subjects”, subjects that must appear to a passionate violinist to be totally irrelevant, is setting up for failure or withdrawal of that student by the system that is meant to be nurturing him or her in the art in which they wish to immerse themselves.

While the education sector – in particular the University of Melbourne – has fared badly in the turbulent economics of recent times, it is a false economy to slash arts funding, to cut contact hours for musicians and performers with their professional teachers, to try to teach technique in groups, to measure with graphs the success of a course of what is essentially practical training. The future of the Arts in this city will clearly suffer in the short, medium, and long term. It seems to me an Arts training institution is the last thing that the University of Melbourne is suited for or should administer. Or would want.

And talking about administration, how come the Review Panel comprises staff (eg Kirsty Edmunds) who are already clearly in favour of the Melbourne Model and demise of the VCA? Of course Ms Edmunds would be in favour of the American system being American herself. I understand however, that disturbingly, Ms Edmunds is not trained in education theory OR practice either for that matter.

Whatever the fashionable American theory behind the Melbourne Model, that has so captured Professors Glyn Davis and Sharman Pretty, this is not a new takeover bid really. In 1729 Alexander Pope wrote wittily and at length in his epic poem “The Dunciad”, regarding the dire consequences to society that ensue when the Arts and Sciences and Philosophy (a whole Melbourne University perhaps?) is taken over by the primary considerations of money-making and bureaucracy. Alexander Pope speaks of the effects of this Dullness. He describes “rainbows of Fancy (or imagination)” dying away; declares that “Wit shoots in vain”; that “Art after Art goes out, and all is Night”; that “Philosophy...is no more”; and that “unawares Morality expires”. He sees Anarchy and Chaos, and paints a picture of un-civilization and a return to the primeval darkness of ignorance. He sees that “no human Spark is left” ... by his art he is painting a horrible picture. Art is reflecting society. The worst of it is, history here it seems, is repeating itself. For the Goddess of Dulness has descended on the VCA. The poem is below – read it.

Finally, New York has Juilliard, Sydney has NIDA, Perth has WAPA, Melbourne once had the VCA. What a legacy the University of Melbourne will be seen to have left, under Professor Glyn Davis.

From "The Dunciad" by Alexander Pope 1729

*In which the poet describes what happens when Dulness (ie the bureaucrats and accountants) take over the Arts and Sciences and Philosophy Departments*

In vain, in vain - the all-composing hour  
Resistless falls: The Muse obeys the power.  
She comes! she comes! the sable throne behold  
Of Night primeval, and of Chaos old!  
Before her, Fancy's gilded clouds decay,  
And all its varying rainbows die away.  
Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,  
The meteor drops, and in a flash expires.  
As one by one, at dread Medea's strain,  
The sickening stars fade off th' ethereal plain;  
As Argus' eyes by Hermes' wand oppressed,  
Closed one by one to everlasting rest;  
Thus at her felt approach, and secret might,  
Art after Art goes out, and all is Night.  
See skulking Truth to her old cavern fled,  
Mountains of Casuistry heaped o'er her head!  
Philosophy, that leaned on Heaven before,  
Shrinks to her second cause, and is no more.  
Physic of Metaphysic begs defence,  
And Metaphysic calls for aid on Sense !  
See Mystery to Mathematics fly!  
In vain! they gaze, turn giddy, rave, and die.  
Religion blushing veils her sacred fires,  
And unawares Morality expires.  
Nor public Flame, nor private , dares to shine;  
Nor human Spark is left, nor Glimpse divine !  
Lo! thy dread Empire, Chaos! is restored;  
Light dies before thy uncreating word:  
Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;  
And universal Darkness buries All.