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Dean Barry Conyngham pledges to retain VCA traditions

- by: Andrew Trounson
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Barry Conyngham is the new dean of Melbourne University's Victorian College of the Arts and Music. Picture: Alan Pryke

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BARRY Conyngham, the new dean of Melbourne University's Victorian College of the Arts and Music, promises to be a strong advocate for the faculty.

This comes in the wake of last year's bruising dispute between its supporters and university management.

But Professor Conyngham, an internationally recognised composer, urges against any push for a return to full independence, despite funding injections from the state and federal governments that have encouraged champions of independence.

"The preservation of the name and the preservation of its traditions are really important, but I wouldn't see that as a pathway to total independence," Professor Conyngham said.

"I hope that in fact students see the advantage of being graduates of the University of Melbourne."

Conyngham faces a challenge in striking a balance at the VCA between preserving the expensive studio-based training characteristic of the performing arts, and the academic aspirations and cost constraints of the university.

This battle over resources was at the centre of a damaging dispute last year that at one stage led to thousands of VCA supporters demonstrating against the university.

The dispute culminated in the resignation in July of dean Sharman Pretty after a university about-face in which it suspended plans to introduce its Melbourne model to the faculty.

The model requires students to pursue academic breadth before specialising and there were fears it would have reduced studio practice.

But Professor Conyngham is confident he now has the scope and resources to support studio-based training properly.

He praised the SaveVCA campaigners for playing a key role in attracting new government support.

"Politicians have noticed enough to resource it further and there has been an acknowledgement that the university had to know a little bit more about how things worked," he said.

But he also supports academic learning in the arts and sees merit in encouraging more academic breadth.

"I happen to be a person who thinks that for a lot of students the Melbourne Model could be fantastic. How many of them are in this faculty I don't know, and that is really something at the moment that I don't have a sense of, and I'm not sure anybody does.

"There is a lot to be said for developing students in that kind of way, but there are some challenges when it comes to the creative and the performance arts. Craft and practice are really crucial at that time of a person's life if they go straight to university from school."

Professor Conyngham is an internationally recognised and practising composer. His commitment to continuing to write and perform will be seen as an asset in winning over staff.

But he is also an experienced university administrator, with the clout of having been a vice-chancellor. He was the founding vice-chancellor of Southern Cross University from 1994 to 2001 and is a former dean of creative arts at Wollongong University.

Writer Rodney Hall, a former Australia Council chairman and VCA council member who remains a prominent advocate of independence, welcomed Professor Conyngham's appointment as someone who could bring vision to the faculty.

"He is an ideal person, because he has both the academic background and his own very notable and original works: he is a major composer," Hall said.