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An elegy for music, education and impoverished culture

Slow fade

by Anna Goldsworthy

It could have been almost any evening over the past two years. The children had gone to bed and I was again going to break the habit, but instead I was stuck to the feed like fly-paper, microdosing on dismay, when I chanced upon something different. It was one of those arresting moments online when the symbols suddenly line up – jackpot! – and you are surprised by something real. The conductor Riccardo Muti was addressing the audience before the first performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in more than 19 months.

"The world is going in a very tragic way because of lack of culture," he said, as the members of the orchestra sat behind him holding their instruments, many of them in masks. "Culture is not entertainment. You are not here tonight because you didn't know how to spend your evening. You are here tonight because you need music … We are here to give you emotions, to give you the sound of beauty, of harmony. That sound that the world is forgetting."

There have been many reasons lately to cry at the internet. Before the pandemic, I too was a performing musician, and when I looked at that orchestra on that stage I felt a type of FOMO for a previous life, which I suppose is one definition of nostalgia. But you can also weep from relief. That someone could take a stand for culture. That someone could invoke such unfashionable ideas as beauty and harmony. How have we allowed ourselves to forget?

The recent UNESCO report "Re|Shaping Policies for Creativity: Addressing culture as a global public good" notes that digitalisation presents countless opportunities for the cultural sector. But at its worst, Silicon Valley erodes our collective capacity for attention, the very raw material of art, as well as our judgement, as we outsource our taste to the bots. As the report makes clear, it also fundamentally undermines the sector's business models. In the reliable way Big Tech exacerbates inequality in almost every domain it enters, the streaming model of Spotify pushes more revenue into the hands of the those at the very top – the major record labels and superstars – at the expense of all those beneath, who fertilise and sustain the ecosystem.

At the same time, despite its promise of connectivity, social media seems largely to have done the opposite. Given the opportunity to speak freely with one another, it turns out we mostly just want to shout. It is as if, regardless of where we situate ourselves on the political spectrum, we have unthinkingly partaken of a singularity, merging with our devices to the extent that we now think in binary code, and everyone is either a goodie or a baddie. In this denuded, post-humanist landscape there is little room for nuance or for complex thought. And yet we face multiple encroachments on our democracy: the devolution of the fourth estate, the coming of the bots, the polarisation of discourse, rogue agents at home and abroad. And we have a sick planet to care for. We urgently need to recover our minds and our sense of the commons. But how?

I have often wondered what would happen if Big Pharma patented a single drug with proven effects that include improvements to working memory, logic processing and literacy; the fostering of empathy; the establishment of more robust immune systems; the prevention of "self-esteem decline"; a reduction in depression and mental illness; and the enhancement of social cohesion, compassion and cooperation. These are only some of the benefits listed in the 2019 report "Music Education: A Sound Investment", commissioned by the philanthropic Tony Foundation and led by the educator and researcher Dr Anita Collins. On top of this, it promised to deliver us to our inner lives. It promised to deliver us to each other.

"Culture is not entertainment. You are not here tonight because you didn't know how to spend your evening."

The benefits of music education are so well documented and so incontrovertible that it feels embarrassing even to mention them. Except that no one ever seems to listen, so you just have to keep saying it.

We have managed to put a screen into almost every human hand. I would like to see a musical instrument in every hand too, and particularly in the hands of our children. To teach them the arts of attention, as well as boredom. To allow their minds to be formed according to the principles of harmony and beauty, rather than the dopamine rewards of gaming, or the intermittent reinforcements and reliable disappointments of social media.

My sister, a psychiatrist, speaks of the metacognition that emerges in her consulting room. A similar therapeutic process emerges when people make music together. As the "Music Education" report describes, music promotes "the experience of physiological synchronicity", with music students having "less significant periods of depression or mental illness". In a society facing a debilitating mental health crisis, a program proven to develop empathy and self-regulation seems, well, useful.

There are those who object to such arguments, insisting you should only ever advocate for art for its own sake. This is a reasonable defensive stance in an arts sector that has been rebranded as "creative industries". And once you become an industry, your central purpose – obviously – is the generation of jobs and growth. *Look at us! We're big kids too! We employ more people than mining!* In this brave new world, the word "creativity" is a promiscuous one, mating with "entrepreneurialism" and "innovation" to spawn practices as diverse as advertising, footwear manufacture and the wholesale of watches. (One morning, as the artist wakes up from anxious dreams, she discovers that in her bed she has been changed into a creative.) As Labor's spokesperson for the arts Tony Burke pointed out at the Reset conference

in Adelaide last November – held to address the national crisis in the arts and culture sector – there are circumstances in which the economic argument needs to be made, not least to shore up the status of artists as workers. And, as we discovered over the course of the pandemic, such status cannot be taken for granted. But when the economic argument becomes the only argument, it is tempting to raise the drawbridge and retreat to a position of art for art's sake. And once we are ensconced in our Pateresque stronghold, other instrumental benefits start to look suspect too. *Vissi d'arte.*

But I am not persuaded that we need to be wed monogamously to a single argument. There are plenty of good (and bad) reasons to make art, and to teach it to our children. What drew me – and I suspect many of my colleagues – to become a musician was less a single ideal than an alloy of factors, some loftier than others. Neither the generation of GDP nor a burning desire to improve executive function rated very highly, but an appreciation of beauty and harmony did, and the sense of meaning they provided, alongside the sheer pleasure of making things, an appetite for attention and a predisposition to monomania. Other things became clearer later: music as a means of connection; music as a public good.

China has a long tradition of music education and an associated respect for teachers. Over the past two decades, the vast majority of my piano students have been of Chinese background. Several of their parents have been candid about their motivations for piano lessons, including equipping their children with habits of work and mind to set them up for medical school. And while I resist the notion of Beethoven as gateway drug to dermatology, the children are still taught. The culture is transmitted; the social benefits pertain. And perhaps there will be a larger audience for harmony and beauty in the future.

The problem is that this audience will contain too many dermatologists. It already does. Numerous international studies point to a disproportionate number of theatre makers, writers and musicians hailing from privileged backgrounds, resulting in a lack of representation in our stories and on our stages. But the issue is not only representation within the sector, but the many documented benefits of arts education to the child. Some years ago, I expressed my concerns about music education to a music-loving friend, who disagreed vehemently. She pointed out that her children each played several instruments, were members of an orchestra and a concert band, and participated frequently in music theatre. But her children went to one of Melbourne's top private schools. As the gap widens between private and public education, the role of art education in perpetuating structural disadvantage is not always appreciated.

When I was a child, a highlight of my public school's calendar was the South Australian Festival of Music concerts, in which my school choir joined other choirs from around the state for a performance at the Adelaide Festival Theatre. These bedazzling events arrived just in time, as the magic of early childhood was evaporating with Santa and before the adult compensations had begun. They were experiences like nothing else: the startling invisibility of a blacked-out auditorium; the constant sense of the audience's presence, like consciousness. The stage itself was a bacchanalia of lighting rigs and strobe effects and electric guitars and one year – I think – a throbbing Harley Davidson. But the greatest pleasure was that of joining hundreds of other children in song from all around the state in harmony and, yes, in beauty. It seemed incongruous that so transcendental an

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experience should had been birthed through our weekly choir rehearsals in the enclosed shelter shed at Walkerville Primary, our parts thumped out for us by Wendy, our blind accompanist, or demonstrated by Mrs Slater's warbly soprano, but in some ways the boredom was as important as the communion. Among other things, learning music is a lesson in patience.

Several years later, as a conservatorium student, I worked part-time for this same festival organisation, travelling around Adelaide, from the leafy south to the under-resourced north, to accompany choirs. In the lamentably slow way that an awareness of your own privilege dawns on you, it became clear to me that for some of these children this would be their only exposure to music for the duration of their education, and that these teachers – without exception hardworking and committed, but also often overwhelmed, intimidated and underqualified – their only guides.

According to the executive summary of the longitudinal "Champions of Change" study in the United States, which tracked 25,000 students over 10 years, arts education is a powerful tool for equity with "high arts participation [making] a more significant difference to students from low-income backgrounds than for high-income students". In Australia, education organisation The Song Room rolls out programs to children from low socioeconomic, Indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds, along with those at elevated risk of juvenile crime. Documented benefits of these "arts-based interventions" range from school attendance (65 per cent improvement) to academic achievement (the equivalent of a one-year gain in literacy) to enhanced social and emotional wellbeing.

In the absence of any national policy, such measures are enacted haphazardly around the country, thanks to passionate individuals and private organisations. Music education in schools has fallen between the gaps in our federation, with some states doing markedly better than others. Queensland has been a national leader in musical training since 1971, when it began its Instrumental Music Program in state schools. It now provides tuition for more than 50,000 students in small group lessons, in preparation for large ensemble performances. Music

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has also been a mandatory part of the state's primary curriculum for many years, and the combination of these two factors has fostered much greater equity in musical training than elsewhere in Australia.

In 2018, Vincent Ciccarello, managing director of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, observed that his orchestra had been recruiting about three-quarters of its musicians from Queensland. He suspected a problem "further down the chain" and joined forces with Graeme Koehne, director of the Elder Conservatorium of Music, to lobby the South Australian government for a music education strategy. A 10-year plan was rolled out in 2019 with bipartisan support, centring on primary-school music education, with an emphasis on vocal music-making as an entry point. A central tenet is the support of non-specialist music teachers through the provision of professional development, and curriculum guides and resources. Such support is critical when – according to a 2009 national audit – Australian primary-school teachers receive an average of less than 17 hours of music training over the course of their teaching qualifications.

These are important first steps, but our children deserve a coherent national approach. All the research into the benefits of music points to the need for a continuous, sequential and developmental education. We understand this implicitly in, say, mathematics, but struggle to apply the same principles to music. It is hard to say why. In Finland, they have less trouble with this concept, and the access of every child to a musical education is mandated by law, beginning in pre-school and continuing through primary school for two to four hours each week. Specialised music teachers are highly respected, and paid commensurately, with fierce competition for education degrees.

The musical health of our society requires interventions at multiple entry points: children, teachers, performers, audiences, amateurs, parents. Conservatoriums play a key role in all of these. As Julian Meyrick wrote in these pages in October last year, "if creative arts teaching struggles to survive, then the creative arts will struggle to survive. To damage one is to cripple the other." Many of our tertiary music institutions were in crisis even before the pandemic, situated on the faultline between two cash-starved sectors: tertiary education and the performing arts. The spectacular self-detonation of the Australian National University School of Music in 2012 is still spoken of in hushed tones, but it now looks like the canary in the coalmine. Since then, many of our music schools have foundered; many others are struggling with their purpose. And now the pandemic – with its disappearance of the international market, and stark demonstration of the precarity of the performing arts – has wreaked havoc with enrolments, threatening further erosion of the individual teaching model.

And yet the individual teaching model remains the most effective way to impart musical craft. One of the key recommendations in the Tony Foundation's "Music Education" report was that children should learn a complex instrument. The report acknowledges that "instruments such as complex strings, wind, brass and percussion take years to master and require consistent effort, but it is this effort that will result in positive cognitive

In Australia, there has been a steadfast decline in public expenditure on arts and culture since the 1960s.

development". Many people have had their lives transformed by individual music lessons, and I count myself among them. At the age of nine, there was an adult in my life who took me sufficiently seriously to spend time with me in a room each week. Such a relationship is formative, regardless of whether a child is destined to become a musician. The success of the interaction is based on many things, not least the expertise and artistry of the teacher. But – as in a therapeutic relationship – very little can happen outside an atmosphere of care. Above all, the student needs to be seen, and heard.

Such a format does not graft readily onto a factory-farming educational model. And, as became apparent over the pandemic, it does not translate readily onto Zoom. In *The Good Story*, a collection of correspondence with the psychoanalyst Arabella Kurtz, J.M. Coetzee writes that:

> I cannot resist pointing out that a working-through of the student's relationship with the teacher figure cannot take place when the teacher is an image on a screen. Education is dialogical. Universities that do away with the old model of face-to-face instruction or replace it with canned (recorded) teaching are making a profound pedagogical error.

During lockdown, my piano lessons morphed into something closer to telehealth sessions, in which I kept one eye on my students' (stalling) musical progress and another on their emotional wellbeing. In certain cases, this was critically important, especially for international students confined to tiny rental accommodation. But the profound pedagogical benefits of being in the same room had never been clearer. Music is an art predicated on connection, and that connection is written into the very DNA of its transmission, from hand to hand, from body to body, from master to apprentice. Perhaps this makes the individual lesson an anachronism. Perhaps, in a society plagued by feelings of disconnection, it makes it worth protecting.

To lose the performing arts in a pandemic may by regarded as a misfortune. To lose them regardless looks like carelessness, or something more sinister. Multiple studies reveal that music was the tool that brought the greatest relief and pleasure to those in lockdown. This entirely unsurprising discovery coexisted with a striking lack of support for those who provided such an antidote. The UNESCO report notes that 10 million jobs were lost in 2020 in the cultural and creative sectors. An RMIT study titled "Understanding Challenges to the Victorian Music Industry During COVID-19" found that 58 per cent of respondents in Victoria were considering leaving the music sector in 2020: the so-called mid-career "pivot" that makes a collective exodus sound much more elegant than it actually is.

But this is a larger story than the pandemic. Internationally, there has been a significant reduction in arts funding in real terms over the past decade. In Australia, there has been a steadfast decline in public expenditure on arts and culture since the 1960s, and a seismic shift in our government's rhetoric about the importance of the arts since Whitlam, and more recently Keating. We have not had a federal arts policy since Abbott summarily dismissed one, nor a department for the arts since Scott Morrison thought it was better placed with roads and rail. There has been a clear ideological platform here, as the pandemic starkly revealed, in which universities and the arts were left to contend for themselves. But this has been enabled by a broader cultural indifference, which can be traced directly to exposure. You can carbon date an audience according to whether or not it can sing: we now have a generation of parents who missed out on pianos in their kindergartens. And, with a few notable exceptions, we also have a generation of Australian politicians who see no real purpose in advocating for the arts. There was barely any mention of the arts and culture in the election campaign. The arts, presumably, are campaign kryptonite, reeking of "elitism" to both sides of politics. And in a country in which the only permissible elite is the sporting elite, nobody wants to be carrying that can.

Why does this even matter? The UNESCO report notes that the "pandemic also shed light on the extent to which creative ecosystems are intrinsically linked to the lives of communities

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Somehow, in our settler society, we have come to think of culture as an additional extra: a luxury, or perhaps even a form of decadence. Why are we like this?

and their members through the resilience, connectedness and well-being they provide". Is there civic value in a theatre? A library? An orchestra? Is there civic value in a conservatorium?

In the Reset conference working paper "Art, Culture and the Foundational Economy," Justin O'Connor, professor of cultural economics at the University of South Australia, suggests that culture is "the ultimate goal of the city". He notes that:

> Rather than being a universal truth, it is only our own modern civilisation that thinks culture can only happen after the "essentials" have been met. When Indigenous peoples talk about culture it is something foundational to their lives. This has been the case historically for most societies and civilisations.

In their generous book, *Songspirals: Sharing women's wisdom of Country through songlines*, the authors, the Gay'wu Group of Women, tease out the meanings of five "songspirals". They are not extrinsic to their lives, but fundamental to their understanding of themselves and Country. Throughout the book, the songspirals are referred to variously as map, university and "the essence of people in this land". And culture involves everyone:

> Every Yolŋu is a singer, a painter. We need to find it within ourself. It is there. A dancer, a song maker, a teacher, a peacemaker. Everything has to be about peace and harmony. We have to find it by practising with our heart, our soul, our mind.

Somehow, in our settler society, we have come to think of culture as an additional extra: a luxury, or perhaps even a form of decadence. Why are we like this? Part of it, I suspect, is our much-vaunted pragmatism, which has provided fertile ground for the false promises of neoliberalism. In a consumption economy, where do you put music? You can wear the T-shirt, but you still don't own the song. You can't put it on a shelf. You can't park it in your garage.

At the same time, we are part of a global culture that celebrates progress, with all of its associated veneration of novelty. And we have supplemented this with our own great Australian forgetfulness. If we refuse to accept responsibility for the actions of our forebears, how can we claim ownership of a cultural heritage? It is the colonial issue anywhere: the true *terra nullius* is our cultural identity, rather than that fiction to justify dispossession. Never mind where the hell are we – who the hell are we?

Indeed, the tradition of Western art music is tainted by human history – by colonialism, and nationalism, and racism, and class oppression, and sexism – in ways that sometimes make it hard to live with. And yet it provides me with a deep sense of meaning, and I am keen to keep it. A reckoning is long overdue, but wilful amnesia is not the way to do it. All human culture is tainted by the human appetite for violence, unless there is a culture somewhere of the angels. All culture emerged from the primal swamp of our barbarity. That is the human story, and it is the job of art to make sense of it. Ignoring it is not the same as transcending it.

And yet some cultures have enacted that barbarity on a greater scale. The people the colonial project sought to displace have a more mature relationship with their own heritage. Many have maintained an unbroken relationship with tradition, despite our best efforts to break it. The Gay'wu Group of Women explain their motivation for writing *Songspirals*:

> It is so important that our children and our grandchildren learn. As they are growing up, they listen, and then, when they're older, they learn, so they have knowledge that they will use. When they go hunting, they know what to get. So songspirals connect us through the generations, to our knowledge, to those that have come before and those yet to emerge. Our children are also keepers of the flame.

I think of the teachers who have nurtured me, who have goaded and cherished and profoundly challenged me. And I think of the uncomplicated joy I feel when I encounter one of my students out in the world, perhaps as a colleague. It is a privilege to be a link in this chain, which is less about selfish genes than the transmission of culture.

A few years ago, just before the pandemic, I performed with the Australian Youth Orchestra at the National Music Camp in Adelaide, partaking of the energy and commitment that is an important resource for the middle-aged musician. Afterwards, I joined the tutors in the balcony to listen to the remainder of the concert. As soon as the students finished their gleeful rendition of Strauss's *Don Juan*, the tutors around me sprang to their feet, cheering, stomping and crying out. It was an elemental delight, and for a moment I feared the balcony might collapse from the force of it. I do not think it is overstating it to describe it as love: for the students, for the music, for its transmission. It is a different love to the other ones. In some ways it may be a better one. And I remembered the first time it happened for me. I was in my early twenties, teaching a boy not much younger than I was. After many weeks of lessons, his Ravel toccata suddenly took flight, just like that, with no warning. It was a type of quickening, and to my surprise, the tears just popped out of my eyes. Back then I hastened to dry them. TM