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A state of crisis

As the report of the 2005 *National Review of School Music Education* made abundantly clear,¹ music education in Australian schools is in a state of crisis, and has been for several decades.² Clear evidence of this fact is presented in this paper. Evidence is also presented below that not only is music an essential component of a successful education, it **also** has a major positive impact on performance in other subjects, especially language and mathematics, and promotes healthy attitudes to school and society at large. Research in several countries shows consistently that those who learn a musical instrument at school do better in mathematics and language than those who do not. Schools where music is important and large numbers of children participate produce better results than those with poor or no music programs. Considering the importance the Federal Government is now placing on good outcomes in school education, it is surprising that there are no signs of the Government recognizing the importance of music, and the arts generally, to the success of the overall educational enterprise in schools.

But Australia is a country which has produced some of the twentieth century's most revered composers and performers—Percy Grainger, William McKie, Barry Tuckwell, Eileen Joyce, Joan Sutherland, Richard Bonyngé and Charles Mackerras, to name only a handful. These eminent musicians have all succeeded brilliantly despite the state of school music education here. Significantly, all developed their early career first through private tuition from inspiring individuals, and subsequently by going abroad to England or Europe where their talents were developed and appreciated.

Yet despite evidence of the importance of music generally for the education of all children, and such an international array of highly talented Australian musicians, school music education is described as being in dire straits, especially in the public sector and in many schools in the independent and Catholic systems which are not funded adequately for music education. Typical of the general ignorance about classical music among teenagers, for example, is the comment by a fourteen-year-old boy in a public high school in Sydney last year to one of my music education student teachers. He claimed that there was no such thing as opera in Australia: he had never heard of it. When the student teacher reminded the teenager of the Sydney Opera House, it became clear that he thought of it only as a venue for pop music and *Australian Idol*.

The main title of this essay, *Beethoven or Britney*, signifies the confusion over what should be taught in schools: classical art music of the Western tradi-

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tions or popular music with which young people fill their lives outside of school. The sub-title points to an alarming disparity, described below in this essay, between a few very rich private schools that are offering a complete musical education focusing on making music—performing, composing, improvising, conducting—and the great majority of public schools which do not. Every child in these exclusive schools has the opportunity to learn about music actively, as opposed to listening passively for hours each day to the latest pop song on an iPod or the internet. The latter appears to be the main source of musical experience and default education for the vast majority of Australian children while the fortunate minority who attend schools with large and well-resourced music departments, are educated in music in the best sense of the word: learning about music as a complex expressive art form by making music themselves.

Such has been the concern of many at this state of affairs that pressure for government to do something has been building for decades. In 2004, the Music Council of Australia, the Australian Society for Music Education, and many other groups and individuals including Chris Pearce, Member for Knox, Victoria, and a former musician, finally persuaded the Federal Government to conduct an enquiry into the state of music education in Australian schools. In March 2004, Dr Brendan Nelson, then Minister for Education, and Rodney Kemp, Minister for the Arts, jointly announced a national review of school music education. The final report was delivered to Minister Nelson in November 2005.