

# The finer things humanity does

A reflection on the ASME XVII National Conference

A national conference of any description is always an enticing vehicle for learning and growth. Such conferences provide exciting opportunities for presenters, delegates and the organisations that run them. As a general rule they are packed with workshops, lectures, papers, keynote addresses, forums, opportunity for networking and a good smattering of social activity. The ASME XVII National Conference was no exception. It was exciting in every sense of the word, and I was delighted to be a part of it on so many different levels.

I begin my reflections from the perspective of conference scholarship holder – my initial reason for writing this article. As a scholarship holder I had added impetus to make the most of the opportunity. Never one to take opportunities lightly, I was determined that I should justify the committee's selection and fulfil my stated objectives for learning and growth. French writer Vauvenargues (1715–1747) once said, “The greatest achievement of the human spirit is to live up to one's opportunities, and make the most of one's resources.” Here was opportunity and I was determined to make the most of the resources at my disposal! It was also a feeling I sensed among so many of the conference delegates I interacted with. In the preface to her book *Teaching for Musical Understanding*, Wiggins (2001, p. xv) states that “teaching music is both exciting and challenging.” I have no doubt that the many hardworking teachers and music educators at the conference shared this sense of excitement and were keen to enhance their understandings and sharpen their tools for this most exhilarating of challenges.

One of my scholarship application objectives related to my work as a MEd student with the University of Tasmania. As I travel the path of lifelong learning I am constantly searching for direction and evaluating the myriad of experiences that cross my path. As a result I was keen to absorb as much as possible during the conference so that it might inform my current study and future research. In retrospect I am convinced that the conference was a powerful catalyst, challenging my thinking and resulting in an

unexpected paradigm shift. It would be impossible to select a single experience from the many I encountered, however several stood out as highly influential in this process. Among these were meeting and listening to Professor Jackie Wiggins, an authority on teaching for musical understanding whose approaches to music education resonate strongly with my own views. Then there was Professor Margaret Barratt whose articulate and informative keynote address punctuated by stunning choral music examples reignited my passion for further research (and choral work!) There were the wonderful performances by the *The Chordwainers*, *Gondwana Chorale*, *Exaudi Youth Choir* and the *Friends School Marimba ensembles* to name a few. So many experiences, all of which provided opportunity for learning and growth! However probably of greatest significance were two unrelated and powerful experiences. These two experiences, both very different and very thought provoking, provided outstanding vehicles for personal learning and growth.

The first experience involved being unexpectedly privy to a visiting choir's warm-up routine. As a choral and instrumental director myself, I was intrigued. Listening to the way this director prepared their charges led me to critically evaluate my own approach. I wondered whether teachers and directors *talk* too much and in doing so neglect the powerful tool of modelling. In his article, *Traits of Effective Teachers*, Polk (2006) quotes the work of Hamann, Lineburgh, and Paul (1998) who discovered that the ability of music teachers to communicate nonverbally with their students resulted in "enhanced teaching effectiveness" (p.25). Furthermore Polk concludes that "[teachers] must understand what a powerful tool modelling can be and implement it whenever possible" (Polk, 2006, p.28). Upon reflection I decided to 'experiment' by significantly altering aspects of what I do as a choral director. My experiment involved running "silent" choir rehearsals where all communication was non-verbal and modelled through singing alone. The results were stunning. My students were positive in their reception and articulate in their recognition of its merits. Needless to say I am inspired to pursue this teaching method further.

The second significant experience related to the Young Composers Project of which I was privileged to be a part. As a performer I was able to prepare student works for premiere with the University of Tasmania Wind Orchestra and director Stephen King.

This journey began long before the ASME conference and it was truly wonderful to observe the ensemble becoming immersed in the work of such young composers, to see them come to value each piece on its merits and to enjoy the musical journey in the process. It was also wonderful to join the young composers during the conference and listen as they discussed their compositions. It was fascinating to gain insight into the valuable learning journey each had embarked on. Both Kariln Greenstreet-Love and Stephen King were integral to this process and are to be commended for their dedication in making the experience such a positive one! In addition it was our collective privilege to work under the baton of the one of the world's finest wind band directors - Professor Craig Kirchhoff, from the University of Minnesota. His quiet demeanour belied his passionate and powerful presence on the podium. The potent use of non-verbal communication and an ability to model exactly what he wanted meant that in just two short rehearsals he was able put his stamp on the repertoire and convince the ensemble to come along for the ride. The power of music to transport became clearly evident as both Craig Kirchhoff and Stephen King led the UTAS Wind Orchestra through Sunday's concert repertoire. The concert was a veritable feast of music ranging from Amanda Gale's stunning flute performance of the *Chaminade Flute Concertino*, to five premiere works, four by the young composers and one by talented composer in residence Karlin Greenstreet-Love. In addition the ensemble and audience were treated to some of the most powerful wind band music ever written including Holst's *First Suite in Eb* and *O Magnum Mysterium*. There is no doubt that the Young Composers project and performance had a profound impact on all who were involved in it.

Aside from these powerful learning experiences, I also had a role to play as committee member. For me it was the delightful task of wielding a camera for 5 days. This gave me unprecedented opportunity to meet a broad cross section of conference delegates. It gave me license to get up close and personal with the many wonderful performing groups and also allowed me to experience the conference from a multitude of interesting angles. It is always a bonus to combine your passions. It is also satisfying to work alongside other passionate, hardworking and efficient advocates for music education.

And yet, despite all these wonderful experiences it is the small moments, the snapshots in time that continue to linger well after the conference is over. Listening to Professor

Kirchhoff deliver his passionate address from behind a music stand, the place where he is most at home; meeting and reacquainting with colleagues and friends, past and present; sitting eyes closed in the middle of a circle of djembe as the rhythms pulsed around and through me; zooming in on the nervously excited faces of students in performance and capturing their cheeky smiles; sitting on a couch with a colleague and mulling over the day's events; enjoying the sense of relaxation as dancers swirled to the beat of *Bossa Fly Effect* at the conference dinner; watching the dynamics of a community which formed overnight and worked together for a common purpose in just five short days.

For me, the ASME XVIII National Conference was an amazing opportunity for learning and growth on so many levels. It was inspiring and confronting, hard work and relaxing. It was everything a good conference should be! It was also everything a good music conference should be – a mix of research and practicality, academics and classroom teachers, efficient organisers and co-operative delegates, good colleagues and great coffee. Most importantly it was a community of people who sensed that music is far greater than a mere subject area to be examined.

I conclude my reflections with a quote from Professor Craig Kirchhoff's keynote address. For me it sums up the reason I live, breathe and continue to do all I can to promote the essential place of music in our lives:

*"The future of music may not be with music itself, but rather... in the way it makes itself a part of the finer things humanity does and dreams of."* (Charles Ives)

#### References:

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