

Music Council of Australia

Short Survey of the Members of the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO)

March 26, 2011

The survey was devised and interpreted by Richard Letts. It was conducted by the ACO in early March, 2011.

A questionnaire was delivered to 15 of the 17 core members of the orchestra, all string players. 9 responses were received (60%).

This response rate should be easily sufficient to provide a valid statistical portrait of the entire orchestra. However, recall that musicians are the subjects of the survey; it is possible that those who did not respond are less comfortable with the written word and perhaps have undertaken less formal education.

1. What instrument do you play in the ACO?

Violin 5
Viola 1
Cello 2
Double bass 1

2. How old were you when you began to play an instrument?

AGE	3	4	5	6	7	11
Violin	1	2		2		
Viola		1				
Cello			1		1	
Double bass						1
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>

7 of 9 began by the age of 6. One cellist began at age 7 and the bass player at age 11; the size of the instruments could be a factor.

3. How old were you when you first took music lessons on an instrument?

AGE	3	4	5	6	7	8	11
Violin	1	2		1		1	
Viola		1					
Cello			1		1		
Double bass							1
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>

It appears that all but one of the players began lessons in the same year that they began to play an instrument. One violinist began lessons two years later.

4. Did your primary school offer a good quality music program?

	YES	NO
Violin	1 (public, Tokyo)	3 (1 private, 1 Catholic, 1 Israel)
Viola	1 (private)	
Cello		2 (public)
Double bass		1 (public, Canada)
TOTAL	2	6

One did not answer the question. 2 had a good quality music education in primary school but 6 did not. From responses to other questions, it is probable that the failings of the primary schools were overcome probably by parents' provision of private lessons.

4 attended public schools, 1 Catholic school, 2 private schools and one did not answer that question.

5. Did you graduate from high school in Australia, and if not, where? Did you graduate from a public, Catholic or private school?

	FOREIGN	AUSTRALIAN	DID NOT GRADUATE
Violin	1 (private, Tokyo), 1 (public, Israel)	2 (1 private, 1 Catholic)	1 (Australian)*
Viola		1 (private)	
Cello		2 (public)	
Double bass	1 (public, Canada)		
TOTAL	3	5	1

* Left school at 15, went to the Conservatorium.

All responded. Of the 9 members, 3 grew up in foreign countries. In secondary school, 4 attended public school, 1 Catholic, 3 private.

6. During your school years, where did you get instrumental lessons? (e.g. private teacher, regular schools, music school etc.)

	Private teacher	Regular teacher	Music school
Violin	1 (school, then teacher), 2		1 (Tokyo), 1 (Israel)
Viola	1		
Cello	1		1 (ANU)
Double bass		1 (Canada)	
TOTAL	5	1	3

The Australians depended almost totally on private teachers excepting that one cellist attended pre-tertiary music school at ANU School of Music. In Europe, including

Israel, there are highly subsidised “municipal music schools”, usually nationally funded, that provide expert music lessons and other music education to interested persons. We do not know the situation in Japan.

7. Where did you attend Conservatorium?

	AUSTRALIA	FOREIGN
Violin	3	1 (Tokyo), 1 (Israel)
Viola	1	
Cello	2	
Double bass		1 (USA)
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>3</i>

Our intention was to discover where the initial degree was taken. The wording of the question was poor. But see question 9.

8. What degree did you take?

	BACHELOR	ADVANCED CERTIFICATE	MASTER	DOCTORATE	NONE
Violin	2	1	1		1
Viola				1	
Cello			2		
Double bass			1		
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>1</i>

We show the highest degree achieved. 6 of 8 have higher tertiary qualifications. One has no tertiary qualification, presumably because of high talent and particular life circumstances.

9. If you undertook post-graduate study, where did you do it?

	AUSTRALIA	USA	UK
Violin	1	1	1 (postgrad study, no award)
Viola		1	
Cello		2	
Double bass		1	
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>1</i>

5 of 7 studied in the USA. Is this because Australian musicians choose the USA over other destinations, or does the Artistic Director of the ACO have a preference for an American playing style?

10. How old were you when you took for first regular job in a professional orchestra?

	16	22-23	25-26	27-28	31
Violin	1	2		2	
Viola					1
Cello			1		
Double bass			1		
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>

One person misread the question.

With such a small sample, personal biography can be important. A 16 year-old violinist is already so exceptional as to be able to walk into an orchestral position. The violist who took his or her first position at age 31 is the only member of the sample to take a doctoral degree. Presumably, that choice pre-empted early employment in an orchestra.

All of the musicians who began work at an early age, i.e. at 23 years or less, are violinists. This may not be significant. Two are foreigners.

But generally, it appears that people were not ready for continuing orchestral employment until they had gained more education or experience.

11. What were the most significant factors in your music education?

NOTE: Some respondents did not reply to this question, while others gave multiple answers.

The number citing each factor is shown to the right.

Parents' enthusiasm 2

Private teacher 3

Music teacher at school 1

Teachers at all levels 1

Youth orchestra 1

Music camp 1

Summer programs 1

Playing lots of chamber music 2

Playing in groups 1

Vocal ensemble at North Sydney Girls' High 1

Hearing good music played by top players 1

Inspiring music festivals 1

Environment in which I studied 1

Study grants 1
Ability to study further overseas 1
New York [!] 1

SUMMARY

The Australian Chamber Orchestra is a virtuosic ensemble of world standing. It must be highly selective of its players. However, the competition for places in good orchestras is severe and other orchestras also are highly selective. There is a good probability, therefore, that important characteristics of players in the ACO would be shared by string players in other orchestras.

There is, however, one distinction that may be of importance. The ACO tours extensively and the rigours of touring are better withstood by younger players. There are few grey hairs on stage at an ACO concert. The illustration of the situation in the education of orchestral players as represented by ACO musicians therefore should be fairly current.

5 of the 9 players in the sample had begun music lessons by the age of 5 and indeed, 4 were taking lessons by the age of 4. One cellist began at age 7 and the bass player began at the age of 11, before which age it usually would be difficult for a child to hold the instrument. Anecdotally, we believe that players of wind and brass instruments probably begin instruction a little later. But it appears that an early start is necessary for those string players who eventually become career bound.

The early years are important for music education but the members of this sample did not receive much support from music programs in primary school: 6 of 8 wrote that their school did not have a good quality music program. Two attended private schools, which in Australia generally offer a better music education but in one of those, the music program was not good at primary school level. The players who grew up in Australia were heavily dependent upon private teachers.

Six attended conservatorium at least initially in Australia. Seven did postgraduate study and six took postgraduate awards – 1 a certificate, 4 took masters degrees and one a doctorate. Postgraduate study is the norm. 5 of 7 did their postgraduate study in the USA, counter to the common impression that Australians choose Europe and the UK.

5 of 8 did not take their first regular job in an orchestra until they were 25 or older. 2 of the 3 who studied overseas began orchestral work at age 22 or 23 and the other was the late-starting bass player. So on the basis of this small sample, we note that those who did their studies up to bachelor degree in Australia were not ready for or did not seek regular orchestral employment until a few years after graduation. The sample is too small to draw firm conclusions.

However, as noted, Australian orchestras complain that graduates of Australian conservatoriums do not play well enough to be hired on a full time basis, and Australian conservatoriums complain that by comparison with foreign institutions they are so underfunded that they cannot provide adequate instruction in the area of 'principal study', the instrumental lesson.