

El Sistema -type Programs for Australia's Children

By Chris Nicholls

“Arts programs keep kids in schools. When kids drop out of schools, schools lose apportionment from the state, so they lose money and the community gets the additional burden of uneducated kids loose in the community with nothing to do, who fall prey to drug dealers, gang members and sexual predators. It's really a false economy that the esteemed managers of our state government have painted themselves into this corner and are seeking to solve their problems at the expense of our kids. And it's never at the expense of kids from affluent homes, is it? Instead of investing in our most vulnerable kids to make them the leaders we need to improve our community, we ignore them, we push them away and then when they get in trouble, we lock them up. It doesn't make sense, and fundamentally, it's not cost-effective. I'm a fiscal conservative and it's a waste of money and it's a waste of talent and lives. Violence knows no zip code. We get what we pay for when it comes to our communities. When we don't invest in our communities, well you see what we have . . . It's actually cheaper and more effective to address and head off problems while they are developing than try to deal with them after they'd developed. We just don't tend to think or work that way in this country. But if we play our cards right and are able to deliver our programs, perhaps we will be able to deliver a sea change in that regard.”

- Margaret Martin, Harmony Project, Los Angeles.

This was written about the American processes, but it could so easily have been written right here in Australia, about ours. This is fundamentally what arts programs should be about. Not for the affluent alone, but for all. And it starts with kids. With programs such as 'El Sistema' – the amazing Venezuelan music education system.

So when I am asked why do we need a comprehensive instrumental and choral music education program here in Australia, I think like Margaret Martin – because it is important on so many levels to give children music – to inspire in them a future, and not necessarily in music. Music gives children a boost to their humanity, to their ability to relate positively with others and their community. It helps build their self-confidence and their ability to imagine and realise good futures, to follow their passions and be ultimately successful. Why? Because it is through the rigours of music, learning to sing and to play an instrument with others in an ensemble that we learn about ourselves – and in the context of others, we learn what it is to strive for something beautiful and difficult. We learn inestimable 'joy'. And we avoid future pain and suffering from the lack of such experiences and qualities in our society.

One of the most powerful ways to ensure the best possible outcome for the children and for the community as a whole, is to introduce a comprehensive instrumental and choral music education system based upon the hugely successful 'El Sistema' music project in Venezuela, South America . Tested and successful, this project has been running for over 35 years. 'El Sistema' – 'The System' is a free and inclusive immersion music education program for children, built around the teaching of music via instruments, singing and movement within the context of the symphony orchestra and choir. It was devised to create a system for social action, in that it was created to socialise and instil a culture of joy and imagination in disadvantaged, depressed communities – principally amongst the children of those communities and thence into the communities as a whole – to empower their minds, improve their belief in themselves and to inspire them to lead successful, fulfilling lives.

As fantastic as it is, it is nothing more nor nothing less than a sound, well supported, systematic music education process, which uses modern and old techniques of music tuition, with an unbreakable belief in the capability of children not only to master music and its performance to a high standard, but to see and treat them as highly capable people – and to instil that in them; always encouraging and never berating.

The system has now been established throughout Venezuela and is open to all communities – to any child wishing to participate, committing to practice and to learn. In addition it has now spread to 25 other countries around the world including the USA, England, Scotland and Canada.

And it really works – in creating happy joyous and competent children, in producing many very good musicians and so much wonderful artistry.