

Sound Links: Uncovering the Dynamics of Lively Musical Communities in Australia

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ABSTRACT

"Sound Links" is an Australia Research Council Linkage project that examines the dynamics of community music in Australia, and the models it represents for music learning and teaching in formal and informal settings. This project is focusing on a selection of vibrant musical communities across the country and exploring their potential for complementarity and synergy with music in schools. This paper focuses on the most significant themes that have emerged from the author's recent "Sound Links" fieldwork in four musical communities across Australia. Drawing on insights from well over 300 community music practitioners, participants, educators, and administrators, the paper touches on the critical success factors, key challenges, learning dynamics and models for community-school collaborations found in these diverse community settings. These themes are interwoven with ideas and concepts from community studies in the humanities and community music literature to provide a range of insights into the social, cultural and educational dynamics of musical communities in Australia.

KEYWORDS

community music, learning & teaching, community-school collaborations

INTRODUCTION

Tonight we attended the gathering of the "Nobodies" drumming circle at the Singing Gallery. It was like watching a secret men's ritual as they each arrived and embraced one another. The drumming seemed to begin out of nowhere, with two men swapping their instruments and jamming together. Slowly more men entered the circle and without saying a word began hitting their drums. A profound sense of community was evoked as they engaged in musical dialogues with one another; watching, listening, responding, experimenting, learning, and exerting themselves. Then all of sudden the drumming dissipated and the room was silent. The men left the circle and walked outside to smoke and talk with one another. They tell us that they see this drumming circle as a family; they care for one another and help each other out. It gives them a sense of belonging and helps them cope with life.

(Bartleet Fieldnotes, 4 December 2007, 10.38pm, McLaren Vale, South Australia)

Today we visited the local high school in Cabramatta, recently labeled a "ghetto" by one of the local newspapers, and spoke with a group of primarily Pacific Islander students. They are part of a singing group which rehearses every Tuesday morning. Their director can't read music; he's the special education teacher. He simply counts to four and shouts "go!" and the students break into lush four part harmonies. When we ask them to sing us a song, our jaws drop from the moment they open their mouths; they are incredible. When we ask how they learnt to do this, they look confused. It's not like someone has sat them down and taught them how to sing, it's just part of their everyday lives, whether they're at home, school or church. Their teacher simply facilitates and encourages them; he recognizes their talents and lets them take the lead. (Bartleet Fieldnotes, 19 February 2008, 10.55pm, Fairfield, New South Wales)

"Sound Links" is an Australia Research Council funded project which is examining the dynamics of community music-making in Australia, and the models it represents for music learning and teaching in formal and informal settings. It is being realized by Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre (Griffith University) in partnership with the Music Council of Australia, the Australian Music Association, and the Australian Society for Music Education. I am the Research Fellow on this project, and Huib Schippers (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre), Peter Dunbar-Hall (University of Sydney), and Richard Letts (Music Council of Australia) are part of the Research Team. This project is focusing on six vibrant musical communities in the Dandenong Ranges (Victoria), Albany (Western Australia), McLaren Vale (South Australia), Fairfield (New South Wales), Borroloola (Northern Territory) and Inala (Queensland), and exploring their potential for complementarity and synergy with schools in their local areas. The project spans a period of two years, commencing in 2007 and concluding in 2008. So far, four of the six vibrant musical communities have been visited, with the last two scheduled for April and May 2008. In this paper I give an introduction to the study and position it within the broader context of Australian community music and education. I then briefly outline three of the most striking themes that have emerged in my fieldwork visits and briefly touch on the learning dynamics and models for community-school collaborations which have emerged in the preliminary analyses of these community settings.

While there have been numerous debates about what constitutes community music, it is widely acknowledged that it is a group activity where people join together to actively participate in the music-making

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