

Music Concert

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We don't have a clear sense of the very early days of what music making looked like prior to the 1980s. I have had quite lengthy discussions this week with Peter Cavenagh our Director of Music from 1983-2003. He sends his apologies, he is now living with his family in Switzerland. I will intersperse his thoughts and memories with my own.

We have been blessed to have had College principals who have understood quickly and instinctively the special nature of what it is we do. I recall one of my first discussions with Br. Julian Casey not long after I had been appointed. He shared with me that it was his belief that "the music students were the happiest people in the school", at the time I thought it was an innocuous observation – I know now that this was in fact my job description. These are the happiest people in the school – don't muck that up! Erica Pegorer, principal for the majority of my time, was always unflinching in her support and her intuitive understanding, our choirs and bands flourished under her watch both musically and ideologically.

Peter has asked me to acknowledge Br. Doug Walsh who employed him in 1983 to what was then St. Paul's College, in Peter's words:

Doug had a passion for giving the St Paul's boys every opportunity possible to grow into complete men - body, mind and soul. I think this celebration concert shows that the Lavalla Music is still making a wonderful contribution to the continuing unfolding of Doug's vision - now including XX as well as XY chromosome groups.

The Lavalla Music Program is a testimony to all of the principals of Lavalla who have solidly supported the work of the music students and staff over the years. This has been something of "a light on the hill" phenomenon in the context of a decline in the scope and standard of music education in Victoria, where a bland utilitarianism seems to have generally taken too great a hold on educational philosophy and practice

Our students, who literally number in the thousands, who have benefitted from this marvellous program have done so because all of our principals have supported music as not just a commodity to be called upon, but a curriculum to be celebrated and perhaps more importantly, a community of people to be cherished. We thank and acknowledge them all – Br. Doug, Br. Peter Morellini, Br. Fons Van Rooj, Br. Julian, Erica and now Mr. John Freeman whose unobtrusive presence as a silent observer at many a rehearsal speaks volumes for his support of the work our music students do.

Our Senior Concert Band which you will hear tonight traces its genesis back to the early 1980s. I believe that Br. Doug would call the early iterations of this band "The first 18". The Concert Band program has ensured that hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of students have had their minds, bodies and souls developed from both the tangible and intangible benefits of ensemble music. Shane Lebbe has taken the reigns of this group quite recently. A few stalwarts of the college who well remember those early days have been quick to point out some similarities between Shane and

Peter in their general mien and presence amongst the students. It is while talking about this group that I must mention, thank and acknowledge one of our finest ever students and certainly one of the most influential staff members in our department – Mr. Matthew Harris. From a wonderful foundation, his leadership of our Senior Band from 2004-2014 made us the envy of many a school.

Our Jazz Ensembles were a little bit more transient in the early days. Peter was careful to establish the Concert Band as an ensemble of substance before branching out into what was a labour of love for him and the many of us students, myself included, who were a part of these early days of jazz music at our College. Peter suggested that until the mid-90s the jazz ensembles were perhaps less formally structured than they are today. It would be remiss not to mention the great work our students have done as members of our jazz ensembles over the last decade.

Our Liturgical Choir was the last but perhaps the most significant piece in the puzzle. Liturgical Music was first offered as a senior school Religious Education offering in 1997 and has become a tribal institution that many former students still feel a strong connection with. Peter conducted this choir from 1997-2003, Marian Jenkinson in 2004 and I have conducted this group from 2005 to the present day. I share Peter's beautifully eloquent thoughts again:

Lavalla makes a special contribution to the spiritual development of its students through the Choir. My great friend and colleague, Mike Hansen, is to the choir what Br Doug is to the overall music program. Mike had the vision and the faith to facilitate the founding of the Choir.

The issue of participation in liturgical music is a tough one in contemporary secondary schools in Australia for most 21st century adolescents find singing very threatening.

I think that Lavalla may have it right though. The singers of the Choir set an ambience of reverence at College masses and other liturgies; and this sacred atmosphere is a place for all - those who sing and those who do not. One of the students I interviewed for my masters thesis about the Choir described this reciprocal dynamic very well. She saw the role of the Choir as giving the sound and (I used her words as the title of my thesis) the role of those who do not sing with the comment, "It's the silence that they give."

I can only echo Peter's sentiments here. Our choir, each and every year in my time at the helm, have earned the respect of their peers. "The silence that they give" continues.

On the surface it makes no logical sense that we have what we have, that we are what we are. It is sobering to note that in the last decade, state-wide enrolments in VCE Music have plummeted from over 5000 to less than 2000 last year. Most in our area have never set foot in a Concert Hall or Recital Centre. What we do is proudly counter cultural and proudly aspirational. In our discussion and in his words that I have shared with you tonight, Peter Cavenagh, more than once described our program as a 'light on the hill', a phrase he has borrowed from former Prime Minister Ben Chifley describing the Labor Party, is indeed an apt analogy.

I run a dangerous gauntlet when I single certain people out for acknowledgement, so many have shaped and gilded this department. Having said this, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge former support staff members Br. Peter Howes and Mrs. Maria Testa and all of our former classroom teachers and instrumental staff. I particularly highlight Marian Jenkinson of these staff who was our Director of Music in 2004. Many past teachers of classroom and instrumental Music have left an indelible mark. I am also grateful to our current tutors as well as Mrs. Sarah Duncan our Music Administrator.

Peter Cavenagh and his staff hastened slowly with the careful building of this program. Whilst he was quick to apportion responsibility elsewhere, there is no question that we are all here because of him. He is both architect and builder of what we are. We conservatively estimate that since the late 80s, over 60 students have gone on to post secondary music studies of some type and many more have built careers and lives around the love for music that he inspired in a legion of students. Even now, indirectly, there is a clear organic link between all of our current students and Peter's work. We are what we are because of him.

Shane Lebbe has reinvigorated so much of our program, a wonderful teacher and is the latest in a long line of Lavalla graduates who have moved from our program into a music teaching role.

Matt Harris and I have worked shoulder to shoulder for twelve years now. Matt is famous within our College for his passion and his zeal. The vibrant energy that he brings to Music at Lavalla is something for which we can all be grateful.

To all of our current and past students and their families – thank you for your commitment, for your early mornings, for the value you place in what we do and who we are. I thank the students for the legacies you have left or are currently building

We are not just proud of our history but excited about our present and hungry for the future. We are certainly not done and our best stories are still to be written.

Thank you all.