

**INQUIRY INTO ARTS AND MUSIC EDUCATION AND  
TRAINING IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

**Organisation:** Sydney Youth Orchestras

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Thursday, 25 July 2024

**Joint Select Committee on Arts and Music Education and Training in New South Wales  
Submission by Sydney Youth Orchestras**



**You can only have this, if you have this.**

Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO) welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important enquiry for which this parliamentary group has been formed, particularly with respect to providing long-term systemic change for young people and their teachers in music education in NSW. We believe that quality musical experiences, when provided for young people, not only shapes an individual but strengthens communities and enriches the sound of the future.

The concern of SYO focuses on:

- The high numbers of young people in NSW missing out on the benefits of music, particularly from low SES backgrounds, Western Sydney and the Far West of the state
- A lack of state-wide policy, consistent funding and standard delivery models risking sector sustainability
- The decrease in musicians being trained to read music and play an orchestral instrument to a high level and the threat to orchestral music become no longer financially viable to deliver
- Historic models of best practice in instrumental music no longer being achievable, but no investment in new and more cost-effective delivery models
- The absence of the delivery of the music curriculum in classrooms placing greater pressure on ensemble programs to fill the gaps, however these programs receiving no funding
- The decline of teaching specific instruments risking our ability to play orchestral music - you cannot have an orchestra without double basses, violas and bassoons

The delivery and approach to music education programs in NSW is inconsistent, unstandardised, inequitable, and patchy, and is reaching a 'crisis' point. For SYO, barriers in accessing basic music education fosters elitism in an artform that already has significant barriers to entry. While many young people miss out on critical life experiences and the many documented benefits on brain development and learning, it is their well-being and in turn the future of our culture which is also in jeopardy.

**The Current SYO Picture**

Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO) is the leading orchestral training and education provider in NSW. It is the largest and only program providing orchestral training from beginner to pre-professional levels and has grown to be the largest provider of weekly orchestral training in Australia. For 50 years it has shaped the musical landscape by training thousands of young people and has produced some of Australia's finest musicians, educators, conductors, composers and supporters of orchestral music. We have represented Sydney, NSW, and Australia in concerts and tours throughout the world.

Our program prepares young people to be on the pathway to joining professional orchestral organisations and SYO alumni can be found in every state orchestra and many orchestras internationally.

*"SYO has been a great way for me to connect with other musicians. It has expanded my views and given me insight into what orchestral music is like. Having joined in 2017 as a child, I had no experience with orchestral music before. But now I am able to confidently participate in orchestral programs such as the*

*2023 AYO National Music Camp. SYO has been a positive experience and contribution towards my musical journey."*

- Member of SYO (2023)

SYO has also been an important connector of young people through the many benefits of playing music in an ensemble.

*"SYO has shaped me not only as a musician but also as a person, instilling discipline, perseverance, and a lifelong love for music within me."*

- Member of SYO (2022)

In 2024 alone, SYO will have connected 642 young musicians in our core weekly program and 650 in open programs, representing over 200 communities and 300 schools and universities across NSW.

Despite the consistent quality and reputation of our work, SYO:

- Is required to apply for the highly competitive arts multiyear funding every 3 to 4 years at a state level. Successful over 15 years the grant has increased by \$30,000 only during that time to \$150,000 per annum and is never guaranteed
- Receives no ongoing federal support
- Has no permanent home or facility, currently the entire SYO multi-year grant does not cover the cost of hiring office, performance and rehearsal space in Sydney
- Provides over \$100,000 in scholarships to support musicians from regional areas and musicians with average family incomes of \$45,000 per annum
- Benefited from increased government support during COVID but has struggle since due to increased costs, superannuation and minimum wage changes, staff shortages and the cost of living crisis impacting families and staff.

Over the past 10 years SYO has diversified and increased income via growth in, digital education, philanthropy, performance hire, sponsorship and ticket sales, however the financial model cannot keep pace with the number of musicians wishing to access our programs. We have seen over 25% growth in participation since COVID, anecdotally we are being told this is due to the high number of school band and ensemble programs not returning post pandemic or unable to due to staff shortages.

*"I just wanted to say thank you for taking the time to bring your ensembles to Lismore. As a local primary school music teacher, I want to say thank you for your school's concerts - it was just what we needed to help to regain momentum in our school instrumental program. My students came away inspired and excited to either persevere with the instrument they have been learning, or in the case of the younger students that came, to consider what instrument they may take up in the near future.*

- School Teacher at Lismore

## **The Degradation of a Training Pathway**

For 50 years, SYO has relied on critical external factors for not only our survival and success, but for the vitality of the orchestral industry (Orchestras, Gaming, Film and TV). To become a professional musician, like elite athletes, young people need a long-term pathway to build advanced skills. The ideal pathway includes:

- children are exposed to music at a young age (e.g. through singing),
- parents understand the value of learning an instrument and support the practice at home,
- children (4-11 years of age for strings and 10-13 years of age for wind/brass/percussion) have access to a quality instrument and a qualified instrumental teacher
- children have access to musicianship and theory programs and are fluent in reading notated music
- And play in ensembles and orchestras with like skilled peers, equaling a minimum of 10 years of instrumental training.

*"Sitting in an ensemble is different from playing or practicing alone. It trains me to pay attention and listen to others' playing. I need to adjust in group and play in harmony. It's such valuable experience and could only gain through orchestral experiences. It strengthens our understanding of music and appreciating being different parts of the orchestra."*

- Member of SYO (2023)

The journey to become a conductor is even longer. Take the pathway above and add additional conductor training, access to high level ensembles to build skills and mentoring by experienced conductors as well as ideally high-level training in music education.

The National Review of School Music Education (2005) reports on the decline of the teaching of music (and the arts) in government schools, especially in music. It describes a long-term cycle of neglect and inequity that has led to less exposure to the art, lower accessibility to quality teaching, less support for teachers, discontinued learning and support networks, and no opportunities for community building - failing to equip and inspire young people to continue to study in music or even cultivate an interest.

*The impact the SYO had on our students was huge - so positive. We were actually just talking about it again at our Staff Development Day today, and every staff member agreed it was a fabulous opportunity for our students. I bet you left a trail of happiness and inspiration from your tour out west!*

- Teacher at Gol Gol Public School

Consistent and standardised music engagement is key for a young person's education, at the beginning, and delivered continuously throughout formative critical junctures from primary to secondary stages. Alarming, almost a third of those who learn an instrument cease to play before they became teenagers; a further 30% drop out by the age of 15 years. It is unlikely that a child would start learning an instrument at all if they have not started playing by the age of 11; if children have not started to play an instrument or have already given up playing by the end of primary school, they are unlikely to begin playing an instrument at secondary school.

As described, the average time it takes to become a professional musician, and able to teach, requires a sequential and consistent approach. When elements of the pathway are removed, as has been the case over the past 15 years, the impact is not easily reversed. These impacts, of teacher shortages in music and in instrumental tuition are seen not only in regional areas, but closer to home in Western Sydney, and indeed is reaching to metro Sydney. Quality instrumental tuition is becoming rarer by the day - there are simply not enough teachers in Sydney for everyone who wants to learn.

### **A Broken Financial Model**

Learning an instrument comes at a significant cost to musicians, their parents - and not-for-profits. As there is no universal access to free or subsidised music education in NSW, then the responsibility, workload and expense of starting young people on a musical pathway becomes an investment partnership between a musician's parents and the not-for-profit sector. In short, access to instrumental music is restricted to families with the financial means.

*"The SYO Scholarship provides financial aid for an increasingly costly area of study. As I become more musically experienced, it is vital that I take other opportunities that can assist me in my musical journey, such as other orchestral training and workshops. One such opportunity is SYO's HSC program, which will be imperative for the path to my musical career. The cost of these workshops can put pressure on our already strained budget which force me to compromise with all my other musical training. Without the SYO Scholarship, I would miss out on all the musical training."*

- Recipient of Opportunity Scholarship.

Without parental contributions no ensemble programs in NSW would be financially viable. Even the Department of Education's own Ensemble and Orchestral programs require:

- Parents to pay for hire or purchase of an instrument
- Parents to pay for instrumental lessons
- Parents to pay for ensembles and orchestras
- Parents to pay for camps and tours
- Parents to pay for tickets to concerts

'Music Education: A sound investment' (Collins et al, 2018), research undertaken thirteen years on from the National Music Review demonstrates that the situation has not improved over time and identifies 'systemic inequity' as a major barrier to music participation particularly in NSW. This is then heightened for orchestral music education, in that a child needs access to an instrument, a teacher, a conductor and a group of peers at a similar level in order to participate. Currently, there is little to no access to state supported instrumental music education for young people

in Western Sydney, the Far West (1/3 of the state), and the far south coast of the NSW as they are not within areas serviced by regional conservatoriums.

Inconsistent servicing of need, a lack of state-wide policy or standard program offerings, results in organisations, not-for-profits, teachers and school systems being pitted against one another for the parental dollar. This leaves a sector vulnerable to the impact of economic downturn and cost of living pressures. The vast majority of arts funding in Australia has focused on the elite training and major performing arts companies, with the assumption that the funds will then trickle down to the grassroots and development programs, however this is not the case. Instead, grassroots organisations and participants are offered “aspirational experiences” which whilst important do little to increase access, capacity or sector sustainability.

## Working Conditions and Employment

The National Review reports deficits in music teaching among large numbers of generalist primary and secondary teachers. Pre-service professional development in music has been reduced and generalist teachers can lack sufficient knowledge, confidence and skills to sufficiently teach music to young people, and that is when curriculum budgets even allow it as a teachable subject.

Further, inconsistent employment models of music teachers in schools have seen the greatest impact on music teachers leaving the profession. With the shift away from funded ensemble, instrumental and specialist music program in schools, employment of instrumental tutors and conductors are often via a P&C or on casualised contracts. This has historically left instrumental teachers exposed to exploitation, particularly in relation to the payment of superannuation. Programs such as Amadeus, instigated by Sydney Catholic Schools in 2020 has seen more music teachers directly employed by the school system with improved working conditions, however this has negatively impacted many public-school programs across Sydney, as they struggle to compete or find new staff.

The Amadeus Program aimed to put 52,000 instruments into the hands of every Sydney Catholic Schools’ student in years 3 to 8 by Term 1, 2024. The program has been integrated into the normal school curriculum and provides the students with classroom music lessons, ensemble lessons and small group tuition.

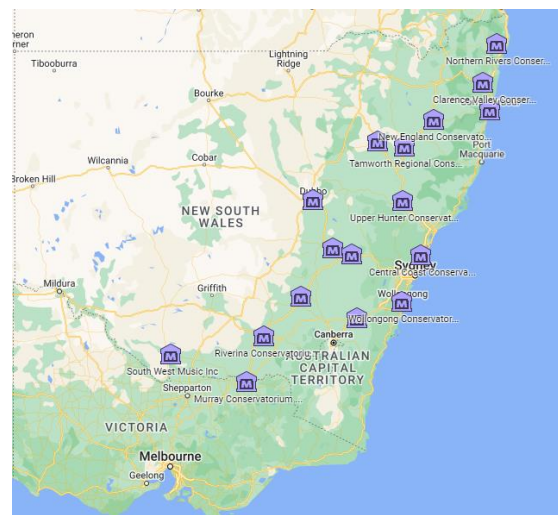
As identified in ‘Music Education: A sound investment’ due to the skill shortage it “is the predicted continuing decline in the availability of competent and confident music educators within schools in the next decade as a result of changes to the provision of teacher training in the university sector. The impact of this may be 10 or more years away but will tip the system into a new state whereby a lack of qualified educators will hinder even the most ambitious policy agenda”.

Unfortunately, we are already seeing the impact of these tertiary training changes in instrumental music.

## Gaps in Access

Currently the only model of delivery of state supported instrumental music across school sector is via the Regional Conservatoriums. In the most successful examples of Regional Conservatoriums, they are a central part of the community, providing:

- specialist music teachers to work collaboratively in schools
- instrumental music tuition
- ongoing employment for musicians/music teachers
- ensembles and orchestras
- creative opportunities for performance activities
- subsidised venues and spaces
- access to supportive networks and a host of other benefits



However, these organisations do not cover the whole state, struggle to cover costs, particularly when there is not the population to support the “parent pays” model and are challenged by all but constant teacher shortages.

*“Having these camps outside Sydney, with such a high level of tutorial and performance, provides experiences she has immensely enjoyed and greatly benefited from. Pursuing music in regional centres is often challenging - her school orchestra is the largest in our town and only has 2-3 string players - and so to prepare and perform with an orchestra as large and skilled as the Western Sydney Youth Orchestra is an opportunity we could never have provided locally.”*

– parent of Regional Participant in SYO Summer School

Where we see the greatest need in instrumental music is Western Sydney. In 2017 SYO, started The Western Sydney Youth Orchestra with the aim of increasing engagement with young people in Western Sydney. Although the number of musicians in the orchestra has increased over time, what has become increasingly clear, is that a structured training pathway starting within primary schools is required to gain any real systemic change. CAPA schools by their nature are designed to respond to the interests of their students and support these areas of creative arts. However, they are not funded to support programs in their feeder schools or required to drive a base level of program - i.e. must have teachers who can play instruments. If a young person has never had an opportunity to learn an instrument, how will they know they are a gifted musician.

In 2020 SYO was successful in receiving a grant to build and test a delivery model in low SES schools for instrumental music. Whilst COVID did impact the original shape of the project, the evolved outcome is a digital learning resource designed to support the first year of learning all 15 orchestral instruments. SYO Beginners, features teaching and learning frameworks and over 480 videos covering the first year of learning. This content is available now to all schools in all education systems via the Learning for Good Platform. It is an example of the innovation that will be required to increase access to instrumental music.

The size of the challenge is large however there are some extremely impressive models emerging including the South West Sydney Orchestras, Mid North Coast Youth Orchestra, The Bega Valley Youth Orchestra and The Shoalhaven Youth Orchestra, these organisations are in areas not covered by a NSW Regional Conservatorium, receive no ongoing government funding and are reliant on the passion and commitment often of volunteers. It is essential that this passion and commitment to music by individuals driving change within their communities is supported to ensure a sustainable organisations and sector. A billion-dollar music industry is currently reliant on the good will and passion of individuals and parents to ensure young people are given an opportunity to ever learn an instrument.

## Recommendation

Whilst widespread systemic change cannot occur overnight, there are several targeted recommendations that SYO put forward, to deal with more immediate issues.

### 1. NSW Youth Arts and Music Policy

Given the length of time required to establish programs and train musicians, we call for a NSW Youth Arts and Music Policy to be drafted and committed to for a 10-year period by all sides of government as in South Australia.

### 2. NSW Music Hub Network

The establishment of a new NSW Music Hub Network across the state (including Western Sydney and Metropolitan Sydney) expanding the regional conservatorium network and accessible to ALL young people regardless of educational sector. The Music Hub Model would:

- centralise administration, skills and expertise
- allow for a standard set of base requirements of sequential training to be delivered to all children across the state, regardless of educational sector
- coordinate and manage music education across their region
- provide digital infrastructure, connecting every child with an instrumental teacher on any instrument
- offer specialist music classroom teaching
- provide employment pathways
- offer professional development and training for teachers
- provide early childhood and pre-school programs

### 3. Key State Youth Arts Organisations

Define the Key State Youth Arts Organisations and fund them to provide equal access and equity to all programs regardless of educational sector to ensure young people from Broken Hill to Western Sydney would receive the same level of access. This would prevent redundancy and duplication of work and resources and foster close collaboration among organisations.

For example, the role of SYO would be to support the music hubs, by providing specialised training pathways including:

- A formalised Strings, Band and Orchestra Training Pathway
- Statewide Talent Development Programs (i.e. extension pathways)
- Workshop & Masterclasses Program
- Touring (state/national/international)
- Camps and Intensives

And be involved in sector development via:

- Conductor Training & Professional Development
- Internships & Fellowships
- Administration Programs

#### 4. Establish an Innovation Task Force

A collective of organisations, artists and academics brought together to look at building new models of delivery that are financially sustainable, scalable, and accessible to deliver the benefit of music to all young people in NSW.

#### Thank you

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission. We look forward to the outcome of the inquiry and are willing to work collaboratively on any initiative that benefits the young people of the state through music, and their teachers.

Please reach out if you have any questions regarding the above or regarding Sydney Youth Orchestras.

**Mia Patoulios**  
**Chief Executive Officer**  
**Sydney Youth Orchestras**

#### SUPPORTING REFERENCES

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