

# The decline and revival of music education in New South Wales schools, 1920-1956

Marilyn Chaseling

*School of Education, Southern Cross University, NSW. Email: marilyn.chaseling@scu.edu.au*

William E. Boyd

*School of Science, Environment & Engineering, Southern Cross University, NSW. Email: william.boyd@scu.edu.au*

## Abstract

This paper overviews the decline and revival of music education in New South Wales schools from 1920 to 1956. Commencing with a focus on vocal music during the period up to 1932, a time of decline in music teaching, the paper examines initiatives introduced in 1933 to address shortcomings in music education, and the subsequent changes in curriculum and teaching during the 1930s. Evidence of a variable revival lies in the school choral music movement of 1939 to 1956, and in how music education diversified beyond its vocal heritage from the late 1930s and early 1940s, with new emphasis on music appreciation, percussion, flutes, and recorders. By the mid 1950s, involvement in, and quality of, school instrumental music was continuously improving.

**Key words:** school choral music, school choirs, Theodore Tearne, Herbert Treharne, Barbara Mettan, Victor McMahon, flute bands, percussion bands, inspectors of schools

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## Introduction

This paper explores music in New South Wales (NSW) state primary schooling from 1920 to 1956, through the lens of music teaching and practice, building on the research of Dugdale<sup>1</sup> and of Stevens<sup>2</sup> into music in NSW state primary schools prior to 1920. Music and singing were synonymous in the school curriculum from the beginning of public education in 1848 until 1920.<sup>3</sup> While music was only a small component of what was taught in schools, it was valued for its extra-musical benefits, as a moral, disciplinary and aesthetic force, and for its ability to help mould children's character as future adults in society.

Around the turn of the century, NSW state schools were musical places. Thousands of

children could be assembled, at short notice, to form choirs to perform at celebratory or commemorative events:<sup>4</sup> a choir of over 5,000 children performed in 1897 for the Jubilee Celebrations of Queen Victoria, and the hand-picked choir of three thousand sang at the Public School's Patriotic Display in 1900;<sup>5</sup> a colossal choir of ten thousand public school children performed at the inauguration of the Commonwealth of Australia,<sup>6</sup> and a choir of similar size performed during the visit of the Prince of Wales to Sydney in 1920.<sup>7</sup> These choirs sang complex musical pieces. If those in, for example, 1919 who reported on NSW schooling had been asked to talk about music, they would have described a typical scenario where classroom teachers took responsibility for teaching music, and

where overall a good quality of vocal music was produced. The developmental learning sequence would have described infants' classrooms where children were taught singing 'by ear'; as children grew older and progressed to higher classes, vocal music was taught using the Tonic Sol-fa method, and in upper primary classrooms, children were taught to read vocal music from staff notation. They might also have talked about choral singing being important in commemorative or celebratory events, noted that church choirs and amateur choral societies comprised men and women who had learnt vocal music at school. They would not have mentioned instrumental music in schools, as this was not in the syllabi of the time, and was only occasionally present.<sup>8</sup>

Despite this healthy situation, after 1920 music remained this way in only some NSW schools, other schools not meeting the minimal requirements for an adequate music course.<sup>9</sup> This paper draws on the annual reports of District Inspectors, Superintendents, Supervisors of Music and their assistants<sup>10</sup> to examine this apparent decline of music after 1920, and its subsequent revival.

### **Vocal music in school, 1920 to 1956**

#### *The period of decline – 1920 to 1932*

In his 1920 *Annual Report* on music,<sup>11</sup> Theodore Tearne noted improvements in the tone of children's singing and in their better use of the head voice, matters of paramount importance to him throughout his period as Superintendent. The main findings of his 1919 and 1920 *Annual Reports* echoed his 1918 report: there had been improvements in voice production, but sight-reading was still weak. In 1918 he proposed a practical 'remedy' to improve sight-reading – lesson plans detailing what should be taught for both half-hour music lessons each week for each class from Third to Sixth Class. More specifically, he proposed that one lesson per week be devoted to scales, the modulator and sight-reading, while the second lesson should focus on songs.<sup>12</sup>

Tearne's 1920 report identified two problem areas. First, while many teachers were willing to teach a vocal music program, many lacked a correct ear and confidence in their own ability. Tearne recommended that headmasters place such classes with a confident teacher, with the weaker teacher assisting. Secondly, sight-reading was weak: Tearne recommended the focus of the one weekly music lesson on sight-reading, to be enforced by the headmaster.<sup>13</sup> The handwritten annotations, bracketing of sections, and underlining of key words by senior Department staff on Tearne's 1920 report indicate the concern these deficiencies caused. Chief Inspector Hugh McLelland gave Tearne two directives: first, that in subsequent reports Tearne should name all teachers who claimed an inability to teach music with a comment on the reason; and secondly, that Tearne should focus on sight-singing in his school visits.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of teachers struggling with teaching music is found in a 1922 letter to the Teachers' Federation journal from a disgruntled teacher: teachers needed more assistance than an annual visit from the Superintendent of Music (since one person had to visit every NSW classroom each school year, most rural schools rarely saw the Superintendent<sup>15</sup>); and many teachers found the songs in *The School Magazine* too difficult to read. Teacher G. Sharp asked:

*is it not possible for our new director [Herbert Treharne] to blaze a new track – and direct? In the past we've had enough farce and make-believe, as well as our fill of misdirected or undirected criticism. If we've a specialist in the service surely we should have the benefit of his special knowledge. Seeing one for 10 or 15 minutes per year, reading the aforesaid criticisms and scanning our mark are almost our only memories of these folk. At the rear of the school magazine is a page devoted to music. I mean filled with songs impossible to all but an accomplished singer or musician. This continues year after year ... In its place let us have a graduated, live, practical series of lessons on music. Include songs by all means, and exercises that are exercises. Above all, let us*

*have suggestions of the right sort and plenty of them, helpful alike to teacher and pupil.*<sup>16</sup>

The new Superintendent of Music, Herbert Treharne, also addressed the issue of 'few teachers [being] prepared to teach music in schools', blaming this on music no longer being compulsory in the Teachers' Examinations.<sup>17</sup> By the 1920s, teachers could begin their career having received little or no music instruction, and could gain promotion without passing a music examination. Some primary teachers were probably insufficiently skilled or confident to teach music. By 1924, in an article in *Musical Australia*<sup>18</sup> it was confirmed that some teachers were avoiding teaching music by claiming they were musically incompetent; if successful, this claim was rewarded with 3½ hours per week free time while others taught their music. The article claimed this was having disastrous effects and some schools were becoming songless.

By 1926, Alban Kelly, a Sydney Teachers' College music lecturer, maintained that it was generally agreed that music had been poorly taught in many state schools over the past few years. He claimed that the authorities were either oblivious or indifferent to the problem, but that this problem stemmed from secondary schools, where little or no music teaching took place: on entering Teachers' College, students had had five years without music lessons. Kelly argued that music was condemned to a perpetual 'vicious circle', and it would be years before the music teaching cycle of neglect could be rectified.<sup>19</sup>

Writing in 1925, in *Schooling*, the inspectors' journal, T. Gallagher described the situation somewhat differently, maintaining that singing was being systematically taught in schools. The decline, he noted, was that part-singing was less valued, that good part-singing was rare, and that sight-reading needed attention.<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Hough, Acting Assistant Supervisor of Music in 1925, agreed with Gallagher, reporting evidence of an improvement in the teaching of music, and a feeling that 'optimism for the future prevailed'. For Hough, improvement came when teachers could

observe demonstration lessons and so learn the 'how' of teaching music, leading, he believed, to many teachers finding that children responded with remarkable aptitude and the once-burdensome subject became the 'happy' lesson of the week for both teacher and pupil. Treharne endorsed Hough's findings, and reminded the Chief Inspector that the future of choral societies depended on 'recruits' from schools, and hence children should be taught a repertoire of fine songs and sight-reading.<sup>21</sup>

When the NSW Institute of Inspectors of Schools released its 1926 publication *Teaching and Testing*, Senior Inspector Thomas Walker took the opportunity to discuss the condition of music in schools.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on his vast experience of inspecting schools, he reported varied results in music teaching. Some schools, he claimed, had reached very high standards, with fine performances in the NSW Tonic Sol-fa Association's competitions,<sup>23</sup> while in others music was 'seriously neglected' and Sixth Classes were only achieving Fourth Class standards. Walker maintained that many teachers were insufficiently qualified to teach music. The key to achieving improvement, thus, was the provision of opportunities for teachers to participate in professional development related to the syllabus, leading, he expected, to better results, at least in metropolitan schools.<sup>24</sup>

After both his 1926 and 1927 inspections, Treharne reported some improvement, although since the Supervisor of Music normally only visited metropolitan schools, it is unlikely that this improvement extended beyond Sydney. He attributed the improvement to an increase in music teaching demonstrations, made possible by the Department's temporary 1924 redeployment of Donald Millar as a demonstration teacher of music.<sup>25</sup> He noted other factors: (i) the introduction of school singing competitions, one of which had a large financial incentive, a first prize of 50 guineas for the most proficient sight-reading school;<sup>26</sup> and (ii) a willingness of more teachers to attend

the Department's music evening or the annual summer school classes.<sup>27</sup>

By the end of 1929, the neglect of music teaching was raised beyond the Department. Fears that 'good' music was dying out and being replaced by popular music and the cinema led the Music Advancement Guild of NSW to meet Stephen Smith, the Director of Education. Smith was sympathetic, reassuring the Guild that the Department encouraged the study of this 'very desirable' subject, that music was compulsory in the Primary and Super Primary schools,<sup>28</sup> and that he would appreciate any proposals from the Guild. The Guild's meeting brought a flurry of responses in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.<sup>29</sup> One lengthy article (possibly from someone senior in the Department) politely refuted claims of neglect,<sup>30</sup> while a columnist wrote, 'It is a pity the Education Department showed so little regard for music in the schools.'<sup>31</sup>

There is no doubt that during the 1920s and early 1930s music standards declined. In 1931, criticisms of school music were made publicly by one of the most senior Departmental members, the Under-Secretary for Education, who, at a primary school teachers' conference, lamented:<sup>32</sup>

*I hope the time is not far distant when those schools, either Primary or post-Primary, will be considered inefficient where there is no good choral singing to be heard. I long for the time when the old part singing will return ... Do not neglect the teaching of music. We want our boys and girls to grow up with a high appreciation of beauty and art.*

By 1933, evidence of long-term neglect of school music by the Department appeared in correspondence from the Director of Education, George Ross Thomas, who reported that his close review of inspection work revealed the poor condition of music teaching in the state, particularly in country areas. For him, the issue was not neglect, but 'the impossibility of the task for one man'; financial restraints meant the issue could not be addressed until funds became available. Unfortunately, when Vivian Peterson

was redeployed to assist Treharne, country schools and many metropolitan schools were still not inspected. Ross Thomas remained frustrated:<sup>33</sup>

*There is absolutely no justification for the neglect of the country ... it has been going on for many years. In fact, the country has never had attention at all. The loss to the culture and refinement of the individual, quite apart from the national loss – for a country without music is too deplorable to contemplate – never so called for consideration as at present.*

### **Responses to declining quality of school music – 1933**

In 1933, the Department implemented initiatives to deal with the decline of music. It took the unprecedented step of publishing measures in the *Report of the Minister of Public Instruction*, thus bringing the decline in the standards to the attention of parliament.<sup>34</sup> The initiatives were wide ranging: country teacher access to music teaching demonstrations in provincial centres; music inspections extended to country districts; increasing school music broadcasts availability by broadcasting them on Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) wireless; special music classes to be established in Fourth and Fifth Years of Secondary schools, to increase the pool of students who could be trained to teach music; all Teachers' College entrants to be tested for the musical aptitude to become music teachers; and the ABC instigated matinee orchestral concerts for school children.<sup>35</sup>

Within the year these initiatives appeared to have positive outcomes. In 1933, over 200 teachers attended music demonstrations in Newcastle and Bowral, while record numbers attended music summer schools and evening classes. Special music classes were set up at Sydney Girls' High School and Sydney Technical High School. The ABC broadcast 25 and 27 music sessions for secondary and primary students respectively. The annual Tonic Sol-fa competitions were again successful, and extended beyond Sydney, the annual City of Sydney eisteddfod was

established, and one of the Armistice Day Concert choirs comprised 600 public school boys.<sup>36</sup>

### **Reports of improvements – 1934 to 1938**

A reasonably complete set of District Inspectors' reports for 1934 and 1937, and eleven reports that mention music for 1938 are archived in the State Record Authority of NSW. In 1934, music teaching had been inspected in 1,296 classes:<sup>37</sup> 81.5% were found to be satisfactory. Music teaching was reported to be almost universally satisfactory in inspected infant classes; 1% of inspected infants' schools were deemed unsatisfactory. Across the primary sections, 89% of inspected girls' schools, and only 65% of boys and mixed-sex schools, were deemed satisfactory. Progress amongst infant children was recorded: 25% of children in Kindergarten could sing in tune, while Second Class in-tune singing had increased to 85% in Class 2B and 92% in Class 2A. So committed were some schools, including Botany Public in Sydney, that they had achieved 'remarkable success', and children were not progressed to the primary school until they could sing tunelessly.<sup>38</sup> Treharne also reported music syllabus areas improving or requiring development. Overall there were advances in sight-reading, although breathing in songs and song phrasing was still reported as sometimes very poor; insufficient attention was often paid to the interpretation of songs, and children were often ignorant of songs' meanings.<sup>39</sup>

The 1934 District Inspectors' reports<sup>40</sup> revealed four themes.

- *Quality choral work in most large schools and in some smaller schools.* In the Taree district,<sup>41</sup> for example, while one third of the teachers were not teaching singing effectively, there were 'numerous schools' where the singing was described as 'delightful, [and] where teacher and children ... receive undiluted joy from the daily practice'.
- *Patchy results in vocal music in small schools across the state.* Inspector Harold Moore's comment from the Mudgee district is typical:<sup>42</sup>

'In several small schools music is not taught. In others, notably Home Rule and Kayuga, the part singing is very good'

- *Claims, often by teachers in small school, of inability to teach music due to tone deafness.* While some teachers found teaching music difficult, claims of tone-deafness were viewed with scepticism: Inspector Albert Dowd (Casino district) commented that, 'in many cases ... these teachers are musically lazy, for others with similar alleged musical disability have at least taken action to see that some means is at hand to provide training in a matter vital to our people.'<sup>43</sup>
- *Despite some improvement in music teaching in 1934, the syllabus could be better taught in many schools.* Inspector George Cantello reported in the Lithgow district:<sup>44</sup> 'schools generally do not reach the standard set down in the syllabus. Sight work is very indifferent. Two part songs are reached in but very few schools. Rounds are being attempted this year more confidently. No real attempt is made to teach pupils to harmonise the unison songs taught.'

Despite these positive reports, Inspector Percy Cane, attributing the decline to the increasing use of reproduced music and an associated decline in live music,<sup>45</sup> forecast that the long-term effect would be fewer teachers able to play musical instruments or with technical knowledge. Nevertheless, while the standard of music teaching had declined by 1934, there was a general view that a committed teacher could create a positive result. Inspector Frank Ravenscroft's reflection<sup>46</sup> sums up the thoughts of many inspectors at the time:

*Music is ... the least efficiently taught subject ... probably one-third of the teachers in this district are unable to teach singing efficiently; not one of the ten teachers on the staff of a certain primary department has any real musical ability. The reason is not hard to find: ... the absence in past years of music as a subject in most of the High Schools. The one subject which, above all others, cannot be taught unless one be proficient oneself,*

*is the subject which, for five years in the High School, has been totally neglected. Children are growing up ... with no knowledge of music; they will probably never be able to sing and will be permanently incapacitated from the enjoyment of music. I believe that in the past a grave error was committed in permitting the entry to the service of teachers who could not sing. Not for 30 years will the ill effects of the policy be driven out of our schools. ... Encouragement to overcome the defect, to persevere, to employ such substitutes as the gramophone, to attend summer schools, are practically useless – the teachers themselves believe that their case is hopeless ... I would personally debar from taking charge of a small school anyone unable to teach singing.*

The Department published extracts from the 1935 inspectors' reports in the *Education Gazette*.<sup>47</sup> In one extract, teachers were advised that signs of improvement had been noted in Tonic Sol-fa and sight-reading, but further progress needed completion of correct syllabus work. Inspector Charles Harrold reported some improvement in teaching of music appreciation, with teachers being assisted by *Education Gazette* articles. Harrold observed that the best work in music appreciation was in infant classes when teachers used the piano, and children were trained to listen; he had seen the gramophone used in several schools allowing children to gain 'some insight into the character of good music'.

In 1937 Treharne's annual report<sup>48</sup> noted that further innovations assisted the recovery of music. The first, which he described as an 'epoch making development', saw music compulsory in secondary school First Year. This had started four years earlier, with students chosen on their Intermediate Certificate results for special music training in Fourth or Fifth Year at certain secondary schools or the State Conservatorium of Music. Further selection at the Leaving Certificate Examination resulted in students being offered two more years of music study to train as secondary music teachers. The second innovation was the establishment of a lending library of

over two thousand gramophone records at the Conservatorium.

The 25 inspectors' reports for 1937<sup>49</sup> suggest the Department's initiatives were having beneficial effects. Inspector George Bruce, for example, observed developments in the country district of Kempsey:<sup>50</sup>

*During 1935 [a] definite attempt was made to overcome the neglect of Music in so many schools ... 1937 has seen much real improvement. Not only is the singing more tuneful and sight reading more generally attempted, but teachers and pupils are finding that the greater scope of the work and the need for really mastering something are giving the subject new interest.*

Improvements were also noted in many other districts.<sup>51</sup> Inspector Percy Cane, of the Hornsby District, typically commented:<sup>52</sup>

*... [music] shows a steady advance throughout the district. Standards are steadily rising and only in the smaller schools is little advance to be seen. More children are now acquiring some skill in sight reading than was usual a few years ago. More part singing is heard and in the larger schools at any rate more are definitely being helped to appreciate good music through the medium of the gramophone and the radio.*

The standard in some non-metropolitan districts, however, was still not satisfactory. While vocal work improved in, for example, Maitland North, Singleton, Dubbo and Leeton, more challenging areas of the syllabus (e.g. sight-reading and modulator work) were reported as still inadequate.<sup>53</sup> Inspector John Harrison reflected<sup>54</sup> that 'music ... is a subject that varies with the ability and/or inclination of the teacher'. Inspector Raymond Gilbert, recently transferred from Broken Hill, found that music in the Grafton District varied 'from poor crude stuff to work of very high quality',<sup>55</sup> while Inspector William Newton identified similar variability in his Tamworth district.<sup>56</sup> In the Inverell District, Inspector Norman Drummond was pleased with the 'definite advances' in music, crediting

the progress to two factors,<sup>57</sup> school choral competitions and a Friday afternoon teachers' class, commenced in July 1937. By the third term of 1937, Drummond noted an improvement in music teaching by those attending.

Only eleven Inspectors' reports mention music in 1938. Receiving more attention than previously, music showed more signs of improvement:<sup>58</sup> singing was taught in most schools to a greater or lesser extent; despite some improvements, there were still opportunities for development; and effectiveness of teaching depended on the teacher's musical competence and confidence. Music standard still varied between and within school districts.

Good quality work was recorded in the Districts of Cooma, Murwillumbah, Mosman, Strathfield, and Albury. In Cooma and Murwillumbah, music was taught in most schools, and even teachers in Cooma who were poor singers and found music demanding were reported doing their best.<sup>59</sup> While 'exceptionally high quality' choral work was noted in some large Murwillumbah District schools, the chief weakness was sight reading.<sup>60</sup> Conversely, sight reading had markedly improved in the Mosman District,<sup>61</sup> while the 'improved attention' to music in the Strathfield District saw class singing improve, flute bands established in three or four schools, and two schools giving radio broadcasts.<sup>62</sup> In Leeton, Wagga, Parramatta and Broken Hill Districts, standards still varied.<sup>63</sup> In Leeton District some school music was described as 'atrocious' or non-existent, in others fair, and yet others 'delightful'; the teacher's personal aptitude was considered the deciding factor.<sup>64</sup> In the Wagga District, the newly appointed Inspector John Adam reported<sup>65</sup> that music was in many schools limited to the teaching of simple songs for community singing, although there were schools where music was good and taught effectively according to the syllabus. When this occurred, Adams reported that the tedium of lessons was relieved, the day was brightened, and children developed a 'real love' of music. Improvements in music teaching, particularly

in sight reading and singing, were noted in the Parramatta District,<sup>66</sup> and similar results observed in the Broken Hill District, where singing and other aspects of the syllabus were reported to be particularly good in some schools, with occasional examples of flat singing.<sup>67</sup>

Two western Districts, Narrabri and Dubbo, stand out for reported low standards in all but a few schools. In several Narrabri schools, children were reported to have no sense of pitch, exacerbated by, according to Inspector James Cartwright, two factors:<sup>68</sup> (i) the musical environment in the community was poor, and children, especially in the isolated communities, rarely heard music; and (ii) teachers had insufficient appreciation of music's importance to the child. The situation in Dubbo was no better as reported by Inspector Henry Williamson.<sup>69</sup>

*Though anyone not tone deaf can in theory teach Music, in practice it is so difficult for the 'non-musical' to teach that it is still the least satisfactory subject in the whole curriculum ... we might well recruit teachers for work in music on definite musical ability irrespective of a pass in the L.C. [Leaving Certificate]. The problem of music in the school was best seen in this district at Narromine ... Long before actual inspection I dropped the hint that I considered the situation unsatisfactory, and efforts were re-doubled, but not until the arrival of the present H.M. [Headmaster] who is an accomplished musician did the situation greatly improve ... Dubbo Boys' up to date has produced the only really first class school music, Bourke, Cobar, Gulargambone, Warren and Nyngan and Brewarrina showed some promise. The rest ranged from 'medium to very poor'. A great effort is to be made this year, but though many teachers were somewhat surprised by my rather unbending attitude, privately I felt forced to think that they have more excuse than in some other aspects of the work of the school ... I am investigating cases of pupils from the High School who intend entering the Teachers' College ... and urging them to take up Music.*

Some 1938 correspondence about the need for a second assistant supervisor in music, manual work, artwork and needlework contains Director of Education Ross Thomas' confirmation that country schools were treated differently to metropolitan schools:<sup>70</sup>

*In music ... we are attempting to supervise the city schools with a supervisor and one assistant. This cannot be done adequately. The country is simply neglected, that duty being left to the Inspectors ... [who] are not always experts in music ... hence the subject is frequently poorly handled in country districts, where the rights of the child are as important as those of the city child.*

### **Combined choral concerts – 1938 to 1956**

Post-1938 Inspectors' reports were not retained. However, Barbara Mettam's archives<sup>71</sup> contain a folder with combined school concert programs and other material dating back to 1939, providing a post-1939 story of vocal music in Sydney metropolitan schools (there are no records of the non-metropolitan schools). From at least 1938, the Department regularly organised combined concerts at the Sydney Town Hall.<sup>72</sup> These patriotic displays continued throughout the war years, each including a mass choir of Sydney primary and secondary school students conducted by Treharne, the Combined Schools' Flute Band conducted by Victor McMahon, the Supervisor of School Bands, and solo performances.<sup>73</sup> Terence Hunt had championed the idea of a combined primary schools' choir. Despite derisive comments that primary choirs could not sing in three parts, in 1945 the first of what would become decades of annual primary choral concerts was held with Hunt as the conductor. From 1945 to 1948, the combined choir comprised approximately seven hundred children from Sydney metropolitan schools, and the events were so popular that two choirs were formed in 1949; by the end of the 1950s, enough schools were participating for four choirs.<sup>74</sup>

The format of primary concerts remained the same for years – unison, two- and three-parts choir items, interspersed with solo or ensemble performances chosen by Mettam on audition. Thus an 'extraordinary number of young people' had their first opportunity for public performance. The repertoire to 1956 was primarily from the Western art music tradition, with some arrangements of British folk songs.<sup>75</sup> In 1951, at the 50th commemoration of Federation, Australian material was included, including Australian Aboriginal songs, an item each by local composers Dulcie Holland, Lindley Evans and Alfred Hill, and five Australian Christmas carols by William James; no Australian items appeared in 1952, and only one in each of the following three years, and in 1956 a work by Frank Hutchens and four more James' Australian Christmas carols.

### **Diversification of music teaching**

Although there was some diversification of music teaching beyond its vocal music origins after 1925, schools were slow to adapt. As part of the response to criticism that NSW school music was falling behind other countries,<sup>76</sup> Ross Thomas, the Director of Education, responded with a vision for instrumental music in NSW schools. McMahon took up the challenge, in four areas: music appreciation; percussion bands; the school flute band movement; and recorders.

#### *Music appreciation*

Although music appreciation had been introduced in the 1925 syllabus, and there were occasional articles in *The School Magazine*, mention of music appreciation is notably absent from the Inspectors and Supervisors of Music reports before 1936. In 1936, possibly to make music appreciation more accessible to teachers, the Department published *Appreciation of Music: A Series of Articles Specially Compiled for the Use of Teachers*,<sup>77</sup> although the Department's expectation remained that music be performance-based with vocal music at its core.



Music appreciation appeared to be relegated to subsidiary skill, only for those who could not sing. Treharne explained:<sup>78</sup>

*Throughout school life the principal medium of performance is singing, although there is much joy, interest and value in such a delightful innovation as the percussion band; pipe playing, too, is simple, but effectively gratifying ... Some day we will have bands and orchestras in all large schools and perchance in many of the smallest. Some day, too we may hope for instruction in instrumental – e.g. violin and piano and band – music in schools. Some day! ... the school becomes the nursery of the beautiful – of the music-makers. But even if we cannot be music-makers, we may all acquire the fine art of listening to music – appreciation.*

In 1937, to provide music appreciation resources, the Department established another free lending library for schools of over two thousand gramophone records.<sup>79</sup> Inspector John Braithwaite later reported success in leading children to appreciate music, although he viewed music appreciation more broadly than merely listening to Western art music. He explained that:<sup>80</sup>

*There are many songs which can be linked with the pupil's life in school and out. The Froebelian principle of identifying the child with the world around him by means of story and song is a good one. We must catch the interest of the child. If the music is well chosen and ample opportunity is given for singing we need not worry over much about the growth of appreciation.*

The 1941 syllabus reflected Braithwaite's vision that music appreciation was more than just listening to music: 'In appreciation lessons, the tendency to make the children listeners only, should be avoided. Children should *make* music as well as listen to it; or, at least, recreate it in their own singing ... [or] translate into bodily movement the rhythm of the music they hear. This and their attempts to dramatise music played for them or the little song stories they sing are an early form of appreciation.'<sup>81</sup> However, the

1952 syllabus signalled a change of approach to music appreciation. Music appreciation became synonymous with the 'listening' lesson, and teachers were advised that 'in listening lessons an atmosphere of quiet relaxation is essential [and] the children should be grouped informally and allowed to sit in a relaxed comfortable position'.<sup>82</sup> That year the Department, for the first time in fourteen years, funded the gramophone record and music library to meet its desperate need for replacements and new recordings.<sup>83</sup>

### *Percussion bands*

The first references to percussion bands in NSW schools were in 1935. The Department's approval for Treharne to adjudicate a half-day session of this 'delightful innovation'<sup>84</sup> at the City of Sydney Eisteddfod<sup>85</sup> suggests that at least a few schools had percussion bands. One such school was Birchgrove Infants' School, whose boys and girls, in uniform, each played a percussion instrument.<sup>86</sup> Five months later, *The Australian Musical News* readers learned of the growing popularity of percussion bands in Britain.<sup>87</sup> It was noted that playing in a percussion band required young children to read their own musical parts and to appreciate that their part needed to be subordinate to that played on the gramophone or piano. Percussion bands were valued in Britain for their extra-musical potential, training, discipline and leadership. Ruth Flockart reported on the potential of the ensembles.

*I need not speak of the improvement in team spirit, and orchestral sense, and so on, that these children get. Certainly the marked concentration of some of these children when reading for the first time is most remarkable ... I remember watching a group of infants of six to seven years ... I have never before seen such concentration in my life ... The counting of twenty bars, and then striking the triangle on the second and fourth beats of the twenty-first bar is much more difficult than it appears, and the ability to do this successfully argues considerable mental concentration.'<sup>88</sup>*

Despite the ready availability of instruments,<sup>89</sup> percussion bands were slow to appear in NSW schools.<sup>90</sup> A 1941 combined school concert provided greater exposure of the percussion band, with the Cleveland Street Infants' Percussion Band, combined with school flutes, performing 'Baa! Baa! Black Sheep', Tchaikovsky's 'March of the Wooden Soldiers' and Strauss' 'Blue Danube Waltz', conducted by young Master Bobbie Evans.<sup>91</sup> Two Sydney infants schools gave a demonstration performance at the 1944 Music Teachers' Conference in Sydney, creating great interest and plans for subsequent demonstrations.

However, while McMahon, the Supervisor of School Bands, valued percussion bands in infants schools, instruments were in short supply during the War; his prediction of 'a fine harvest sure to result immediately instruments became available'<sup>92</sup> was premature. In 1948, with the supply of percussion instruments from Britain, and despite the high cost, new bands were formed and old ones revived.<sup>93</sup> Nevertheless, in 1949 McMahon lamented slow progress,<sup>94</sup> for four causes: (i) infants' mistresses opposed to band work where the noise disturbed other classes; (ii) inflated instrument prices; (iii) unattractive instrument tone; and (iv) lack of teacher training in percussion band work. In 1951, with further disappointment, he added a fifth,<sup>95</sup> percussion band work was only an extra-curricular activity, rating only one sentence in the 346-page music syllabus.<sup>96</sup> More prominent in the 1952 syllabus, percussion remained optional. In his view, it should be a continuous course from Kindergarten to Second Class; if that was impossible, it was better used in helping First and Second Class children to learning reading time patterns from staff notation.<sup>97</sup> Reflecting on percussion band work at his 1954 resignation, McMahon lamented its under-use.<sup>98</sup> He believed it should be used throughout the first three years, with children as early as possible being introduced to reading time patterns from staff

notation; consequently student teachers needed to be adequately trained.

### *The school flute band movement*

In 1937, following the success of fife bands in South Australian schools, Ross Thomas and Victor McMahon discussed the introduction of a simple and inexpensive melodic instrument into NSW,<sup>99</sup> finally recommending a 'school flute' of McMahon's design – a chromatic keyed fife using standard staff notation, with a full chromatic range of two and a half octaves, and thus able to be played with other instruments.<sup>100</sup> The following February, McMahon was appointed to the new half-time position of Supervisor of School Bands; his other half-time position was as the Sydney Conservatorium of Music flute teacher.<sup>101</sup> His work in establishing school flute bands in NSW primary schools was pioneering. He researched, proposed, designed, and negotiated the production of the school flute,<sup>102</sup> and worked tirelessly to establish flute bands in NSW schools,<sup>103</sup> despite multiple challenges: NSW recovering from economic depression, facing an imminent world war; virtual absence of an instrumental music culture in schools; the absence of school flutes, primers and rehearsal facilities; and the absence of trained teachers and students. By 1941, there were over seventy flute bands in Sydney schools (later decreasing to around forty) and over thirty in country schools.<sup>104</sup> A Metropolitan Schools' Flute Band was practising and performing regularly each Saturday morning at Palings Music Centre, and flute bands were recommended in the 1941 syllabus as an extra-curricular activity, 'particularly suitable' for Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Class boys and for post-primary students.

During the 1940s, five difficulties led to the decline in the flute band movement:<sup>105</sup> (i) wartime and post-war import restrictions limited the supply of flutes; (ii) a departing band teacher was often not replaced; (iii) practice was often outside class time and in unsatisfactory accommodation; (iv) a growing disinclination of teachers to direct flute

bands, considered difficult and often unrewarded; and (v) unsupportive headmasters. The section on flute bands in McMahon's 1951 annual report reads like a eulogy for the instrument.<sup>106</sup>

*The flute is generally regarded as having a particular appeal to boys, but where it has been introduced to them girls often do better than the boys.*

*Compared with the recorders the flute band offers as compensation for its greater difficulty, its fine usefulness for 'outside' work (especially marching), a greater sense of achievement where it is well done and its more immediate leading of talented boys to standard wood-wind instruments.*

*After some years of experience the Supervisor has come to the conclusion that the school flute is too difficult an instrument for many teachers and pupils under present conditions and that the recorder is more suitable for general purposes. This does not mean that the flute should be discarded in favour of the recorder but that it should be issued for the more competent teachers and selected pupils.*

*Efforts should be made to improve the instrument. The original aim of combining the school flute with concert flutes, clarinets and saxophones in boys' Secondary schools has been balked by the economic factors.*

*When specialist teachers in music have been appointed to all secondary schools and some consideration has been given to music [and] sound-proofed rooms, only the 'cost' considerations remain for the realization of such bands.*

Nevertheless, next year there were still forty flute bands in Sydney and an unknown number in the country. However, due to government import quotas and increases in sales tax, the problem of the supply of instruments came to a climax in the second half of 1952, with no new flutes available in Sydney. The 1962 syllabus<sup>107</sup> recommended flute bands to commence in Fourth Class, and teachers were advised that bands only be taught by teachers trained by the Supervisor of School Bands or who had experience of side-blown flutes or fifes, and that expedient methods of

'numbering,' 'fingering' notation or 'loose rote playing' should not be used. McMahon resigned in January 1954, disillusioned about his prospects of bringing about further developments.<sup>108</sup> The school flute band movement flourished in NSW schools until at least the 1960s, as McMahon continued his work privately.

### Recorders

The recorder, or 'block flute' (from the German *blockflöte*), first appeared in the 1941 syllabus. Advice that it should be 'played in the manner of the bamboo-pipe or flageolet ... is easy to learn and its tone is peculiarly charming and sweet', and that it could be used in girls' departments in place of the school flute,<sup>109</sup> indicates that it was then unknown in NSW schools. McMahon also referred to recorders in his annual report of 1941: 'A small band of recorders' or 'block flutes' commenced at William Street Girls' Junior High School by Miss Patti Graham made excellent progress and performed regularly to the general benefit and enjoyment of the whole school [and] a set of instruments was purchased by [Head Mistress] Miss Morley from the school funds'.

Two years later, recorder bands were formed at three Sydney schools (Lakemba Girls, Strathfield South and Eastwood), while, at Eastwood, Alan Knight taught recorder to his Fifth Class.<sup>111</sup> Obtaining good instruments was limited by wartime import restrictions, but partly overcome when Arthur Wilson, a Glebe school woodwork teacher, experimented with recorders made of local wood.<sup>112</sup> Almost five hundred recorders were made and distributed to schools.<sup>113</sup> In 1944, eight new recorder bands were formed, including two in country schools, with approximately twenty players in each,<sup>114</sup> and next year, McMahon reported<sup>115</sup> that,

*wherever and whenever these instruments have been demonstrated, spontaneous enthusiasm has been aroused ... after a demonstration by the Supervisor at the Newcastle Teachers' Conference some dozen letters were received inquiring about the purchase of instruments and the possibility of commencing bands.*

Unfortunately, many local recorders gradually became unplayable as the wooden mouthpiece block swelled; from 1945 recorder playing was curtailed until supplies of imported recorders were available.<sup>116</sup> Nevertheless, even after the War, musical retailers were uninterested in ordering large quantities of recorders,<sup>117</sup> and when they eventually arrived, the wooden recorders were too expensive and the first plastic ones had intonation and tone quality problems. In 1951, McMahon judged the Dolmetsch school recorder as the only fully satisfactory brand, although it was fragile and relatively costly.<sup>118</sup>

From 1946, McMahon reported the growing popularity of the recorder. In the last term of 1946, twenty schools had established recorder bands,<sup>119</sup> and by 1948 the greatest advance in instrumental work was with recorder bands.<sup>120</sup> Many student teachers, particularly at Sydney and Wagga Teachers' Colleges, were introduced to recorder playing. Hunt, by then the Supervisor of Music, had 'nothing but praise ... for these splendid instruments, apart from their unsuitability for outside and march-playing purposes due to their softness of tone.'<sup>121</sup> By 1951, McMahon advised<sup>122</sup> that 50 metropolitan schools and over 100 country schools had recorder bands, and that, during 1950 and 1951, Sydney music firms had sold eight thousand recorders.<sup>123</sup> Well over ten thousand recorders were sold to NSW children between 1945 and 1952.<sup>124</sup> The 1952 syllabus<sup>125</sup> promoted recorder bands from extra-curricular status to a recommended core instrumental activity for Fourth to Sixth Class. Advice was provided on organising recorder bands, but not on how teachers acquire recorder playing skills.

### **Music in the 1950s**

Primary school instrumental and band work grew from 1952 to 1956. In 1952, around 25% of primary schools had a recorder or flute band, and infant school percussion bands were also increasing.<sup>126</sup> In 1953, growth was limited by difficulties in obtaining instruments,<sup>127</sup> and

growth in 1954 and 1955 was mainly among recorder bands.<sup>128</sup> Barbara Carroll's report at the 1956 Melbourne UNESCO Seminar on *Music in Education*<sup>129</sup> listed musical and extra-musical benefits of instrumental music-making: its inexpensiveness and portability; its ease of playing for children; and the musical training in music reading, ear-training, tone and breath control. She discussed the social value of group music-making for children of all ages, skill levels and personalities, and the lasting value of recorder player as an adult hobby and social recreation.

The 1952 syllabus, with its 50% increase in infant school music time, coincided with a greater focus on music by the NSW government. The government allocated £6,400 (1953-54) and £9,200 (1954-55) for school purchases of tuning forks, modulators and sets of the English song book *Sing Care Away*.<sup>130</sup> In 1955, schools were supplied copies of *Sing Care Away*, charts, gramophone records, tuning forks and sol-fa modulators.<sup>131</sup> Additional funds were allocated to purchase miniature scores, a reference book library, and new and replacement gramophone records for the Department's music lending library.<sup>132</sup>

Further evidence of the greater prominence and involvement of schools in music is the inclusion of a discrete section on 'Music' in each year's *Report of the Minister of Public Instruction* from 1952 to 1956,<sup>133</sup> recording significant improvements: increasing numbers of schools participated in the Annual Combined Primary Choral Concerts, with 72 schools contributed to three combined choirs in 1954, and 88 in 1956; improvements in performance standards were noted; more schools were taking the ABC school broadcasts; the instrumental component of school music increased, especially in 1956, despite difficulties in securing instruments; and more schools participated in public choral and instrumental concerts, some of which were broadcast in 1956 on the new television service.

## Conclusion

Music education in New South Wales' schools, with its focus on vocal music, declined significantly through to 1932, following its golden age in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initiatives introduced in 1933 to address shortcomings in music education remained focused on vocal music, providing a variable revival in the school choral music movement of 1939 to 1956. Further changes in curriculum and teaching during the late 1930s and early 1940s reflected diversification of music teaching in NSW, with new emphases on music appreciation, percussion, flutes, and recorders. By the mid-1950s, involvement in, and the quality of, school instrumental music was continuing to improve.

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**Marilyn Chaseling** is the Deputy Head of the School of Education at Southern Cross University. She specialises in music education, and in 2009 was awarded her PhD from Deakin University for her thesis, *Teaching Music in New South Wales Primary Schools: 1920—1956*.

**Bill Boyd** is Professor of Geography at Southern Cross University, and specialises in the scholarship of teaching and learning, especially regarding professional development, educational culture, and teaching practice. He is a Visiting Professor at the Australian Studies Centre, University of Barcelona.