

The Pizzicato Effect program: A (personal) reflection

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection on a teaching program located in a Government primary school in Melbourne and initiated by the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO). The school was selected by a coincidence. Volunteers, MSO personnel, community and corporate funding, employed classroom and specialist music teachers came together to provide teaching of orchestral string instruments to students in the school. In 2006 the MSO was divested from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), their employing body, and they began to investigate how they could increase their presence in the community.

Key words: Sistema, philanthropy, volunteerism, educational benefits.

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The Pizzicato Effect commenced in 2009 as a pilot program and was initially funded by an anonymous benefactor. It is part of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra's (MSO) Community and Engagement Program and the original organising team sought inspiration from *El Sistema*. Social change was at the heart of the project. The MSO provided teaching artists and musicians to the school one afternoon a week to teach orchestral string instruments to groups of children. As the pilot program came to an end in mid 2013, active publicity sought tax deductible donations from MSO concert-goers in particular to keep the program alive. A decision was made to change the program focus and presentation commencing in the 2016 school year.

This reflection explores the project over seven years (2009-2015). Data collected from a variety of written material available in the public domain such as MSO concert programs, website, advertising, press releases, requests for public donations, the Meadows Primary School website, a teaching position advertisement and government reports inform this paper.

What is *The Pizzicato Effect*?

The Pizzicato Effect is an example of a project that has grown from an initiative funded by a private benefactor (who contributed over AUD\$50,000) and the desire of the MSO to become more involved in the community. This paper describes the growth and changes that have occurred in the program identified and facilitated by a team of people who have been challenged with a seed idea that needed to be made a reality, with total funding from business and private donations. The aim is to document the reported benefits to the students involved in learning an instrument, to the school community and in maintaining the institution of the classical orchestra. The new experiences gained by the teaching artists and musicians involved in the program, which relate to their ongoing professional learning opportunities, are highlighted.

The Pizzicato Effect involves teaching artists and musicians from the MSO visiting the Meadows Primary School one afternoon a week to teach orchestral string instruments. The school was chosen by coincidence and provided a shared

focus for two schools that were merging at the time as a result of a community regeneration project. Associated activities involve guest soloists and conductors who are currently engaged by the orchestra making 'guest' appearances with the children who are learning an instrument. This opportunity allows the students to work with professional musicians. Another element involves the students being involved in the annual education week activities offered by the MSO and concerts for children, families and teachers performed throughout each year.

The school website describes some of those activities:

Performance opportunities for the students have included concerts for family, friends and special guests at Meadows Primary School, performing at the Melbourne Town Hall as part of the Pizzicato Effect's inaugural Education Week in June 2011, performing for the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall during their visit to Melbourne in 2012, performing at the City of Hume Social Justice conference in May 2013, and at the Australia Council for Education Research conference "How the Brain Learns" in August 2013.

The program's structure, organisational model and long-term outcomes are heavily determined by available funding, however absence of initial planning impacted on the progress and future of *The Pizzicato Effect*. The verbal submission to the Education and Training Committee's *Inquiry into the extent, benefits and potential of music education of music education in Victorian schools*, by the Meadows Primary School witnesses (ETC, 2013b) clearly illustrate an initial lack of vision, direction and outcomes for the pilot program and the iterations that have followed. References are made to identifying the next stage of the program and the need to secure funds to implement that objective. An early witness comment confirms the uncertainty:

At the time it was set up we really did not know what it was going to look like or what the program was going to be like. We started up a bit of a pilot

program and we are coming to the end of that pilot program, which is affecting a couple of things about our funding, but I will come back to that. Basically it was to increase our presence in the community and the role the MSO plays in the community. We thought it was part of what we do. (Mowat, ETC, 2013b, p. 2)

And further

This is because we are now looking to see what the next program will look like, as we are finding that when we go to a number of trusts and foundations that have been supporting us over the last four years, they are only interested in seed funding or setting things up, they are not interested in long-term recurring funding—which is absolutely fine and we get that. (Mowat, ETC, 2013b, p. 2)

From the close of the pilot program in mid 2013, active publicity sought tax deductible donations from MSO concert-goers in particular, to keep the program alive. The table below gathers information from MSO donation brochures, and lists the rising cost of providing instruments, tuition and attendance at MSO performances in Hamer Hall (Melbourne Concert Hall) during Education Week, for children participating in *The Pizzicato Effect*. Over time, the language chosen to describe funding for instruments and tuition has changed.

Interestingly, the MSO promotional tag for the program has changed from 'our high-impact instrumental teaching program in Broadmeadows, *The Pizzicato Effect*' to 'our *Pizzicato Effect* music education program'. The changed descriptor reflects the different approaches of the program. And the splash screen on the MSO website promotes "since 2009 musicians from the MSO have been providing music for the disadvantaged", and further "On the basis of the extraordinary motivation now being experienced by students, further support is currently being sought to ensure the project – and its potential for these students and others – is realised into the future".

From the beginning, the aim was for the MSO to become more involved with the community

Table 1: Rising costs of funding *The Pizzicato Effect* sourced from MSO donation leaflets.

2014	2015	2016	2017
\$100 helps provide a beginner instrument for children in the program	\$250 gives one child in the program an instrument for a year	\$250 covers the cost of instrument hire for a child participating in the program for one year	\$1000 will provide a string instrument for 2 children in the program
\$200 provides a new beginner with a string instrument for one year	\$50 supports one week of instrumental tuition for two children participating in the program	\$90 enables one child to take part in a week of lessons in the program	\$2000 the annual per-head cost of child's participation, free of charge in the program
\$1500 will support 40 disadvantaged students attending an MSO performance	\$1000 enables one class from a school facing barriers to experience an MSO concert	\$1000 enables a class of 24 students from a low socio-economic school to participate in an MSO concert	\$75 is the average cost to subsidise a \$15 student-priced ticket

and develop *The Pizzicato Effect* as an initiative funded by a private benefactor. The introduction of a Kodály specialist teacher in 2012 was funded by NAB Schools First, and confirms the apparent piecemeal development of the program.

We only started Kodaly last year because we received an injection of funds through NAB Schools First, and we thought, 'What are we going to do with this? Let's set this up so we have really quality foundation skill building for these students in the early years and by the time they get an instrument they can really fly.' (Lobb, ETC, 2013b, p. 11)

Sistema connection

The link to *El Sistema* is tenuous and four references can be cited, two statements and two longer descriptions regarding possible inspiration. It can best be described as a passing thought by those involved in the organisation and publicity for *The Pizzicato Effect*. In other promotional opportunities for this program, the reference to *El Sistema* is notably absent. The MSO website says "Inspired by the *El Sistema* model of music education". The report of the Education and Training Committee says "the Pizzicato Effect, an instrumental program based on the philosophy of the *El Sistema* program in Venezuela" (ETC, 2013a, p. 48).

Danielle Arcaro in her verbal submission combined with reference to the inclusion of Kodály for years Foundation to year 2 remarks, *It is developmentally perfect for where the kids are at. It is proven. It has been used all around the world. In a lot of these Sistema programs they all use it, but also just in schooling particularly in Europe it is used a lot. It has proven outcomes.* (Arcaro, ETC, 2013b, p. 8)

A more extensive interpretation of *El Sistema* is made by Bronwyn Lobb (MSO Education Manager) in her verbal submission and is linked to a question about the potential rollout of the program. Her unprepared response indicates the popularity and misunderstood notion of Sistema-inspired programs being considered as a solution to a need, a way to promote music education and an umbrella term for orchestral programs.

The potential is enormous. The kind of pinnacle program of music education is in Venezuela—El Sistema—and that has now been replicated throughout the United States, Europe, Africa and the United Kingdom. There are multiple programs along those lines here. We have sought a lot of inspiration from that system. I think what you see when you look at something like that is that once you have a really great set-up and you have the funds behind it, this can be as big as you want it to be and it can

affect a lot of kids in a really positive way, and then it has a positive impact on the community and on their likelihood for employment. Whether you are a musician or not, you learn all of these additional life skills that you can use that are with you then forever—self-confidence, an ability to focus on a task. (Lobb, ETC, 2013b, p. 6)

As widely cited in the literature, Jonathan Govias details five “fundamentals” that define *El Sistema* and *El Sistema*-based programs:

1. Social Change – The primary objective is social transformation through the pursuit of musical excellence. One happens through the other, and neither is prioritised at the expense of the other;
2. Ensembles – the focus of *El Sistema* is the orchestra and/or choral experience;
3. Frequency – *El Sistema* ensembles meet multiple times every week over extended periods;
4. Accessibility – *El Sistema* programs are free, and are not selective in admission; and,
5. Connectivity – Every nucleo (*Sistema* music school) is linked at the urban, regional and national levels, forming a cohesive network of services and opportunities for students across the country. (Govias, 2011, pp. 21-23)

Baker and Frega (2016) provide a more realistic description of *El Sistema* and remark that although *El Sistema* has been in existence for 40 years, attracted attention from around the world, it has been subjected to little scholarly study.

We argue that El Sistema has not developed a new, distinctive, or consistent pedagogical paradigm or method, but has drawn somewhat haphazardly on a range of older methods, primarily of European origin though also including Suzuki. The “system” in its name refers to a network of music schools, not a method; as a result, defining El Sistema as a pedagogical system is problematic. Similarly, with regard to curriculum, El Sistema’s focus is on the European orchestral canon, supplemented by a few nationalistic compositions and orchestrations of folkloric music, looks back to older norms,

such as those found in the UK until the 1970s. The implications for music education are significant, given the worldwide attention now being paid to El Sistema and the efforts to transplant it to dozens of countries around the globe, in the belief that it constitutes a revolutionary program and rests on a distinctive, consistent, and thus replicable practice. (p. 6).

El Sistema is positioned somewhere between a social project and a classical music initiative, and this belief covers the original definition of providing players for symphony orchestras, and the changed definition –since the 1990s–as explained by Creech *A core aim of El Sistema is to effect social change through the provision of musical and intellectual opportunities for young people, including those from poor and vulnerable communities who would not otherwise access such experiences. El Sistema has been built around the idea that music could function as a vehicle for social reform.* (2016, p. 39)

Baker remarks

It has operated in recent years under the banner of “social action through music,” and now presents itself as a motor of social inclusion, also instilling values such as discipline, teamwork, obedience, and good behaviour. (2016, p. 11)

The focal point and outcome for the school has been for the children to “to work, respond, and play together in a vibrant and collaborative environment” (MSO website). The program coordinator employed by the MSO noted that whilst the teaching artists had worked to produce the results, the children have learnt to get along with each other (Personal communication, 27 July 2016).

The Meadows Primary School Principal, Julie Cooke comments

This program is affording our children so many valuable opportunities, and the transformation in the children and their confidence across all areas of learning and social interaction is without doubt. Yet the single most important achievement and benefit of the initiative, from my perspective, is that The

Pizzicato Effect is helping our children take pride in who they are. (MSO website)

The school website notes that

The impact of the program within the school and the Broadmeadows community has been very positive. The children have developed a strong relationship with their Pizzicato Effect mentors and a love of music, and their classroom teachers have reported improved focus, self-confidence, grades and behaviour. (Meadows Primary School website)

In 2014, The University of Melbourne conducted formal research into the developmental assets, social-emotional wellbeing and education impact acquired from participation in *The Pizzicato Effect*. Students in years 3-6 indicated improved non-verbal (visuo-spatial) reasoning, verbal and mathematical skills, and psychosocial well-being for students involved in *The Pizzicato Effect*. The researchers comment that there is some evidence of positive outcomes for children from low socio-economic and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who participate in *El Sistema*-inspired music programs (Osborne et al., 2016).

Implementing *The Pizzicato Effect*

Challenge

The establishment of the pilot project very quickly highlighted the need for the teaching artists and musicians involved with the teaching of the string instruments to be trained teachers. The original participants delivering the program identified that not having a teaching qualification was a major hurdle that they needed to overcome. They also identified that experience as a studio teacher in the one to one teaching environment was not sufficient background that could be applied to group teaching in a school.

The initial Lead Teaching Artist, Danielle Arcaro, who played viola casually with MSO, comments:

I had taught in number of private schools and thought I could do this. I went and started,

my techniques didn't work. I had to make real adjustments to meet the schools needs. Couldn't presume that students had been clapping and singing. (Arcaro, MSO website, video)

Arcaro continues:

The main challenges that I face are because of the diversity of the children and their different backgrounds. Just catering for a huge range of children is very difficult, and a lot of them came with huge gaps in what they could do. I went in with one expectation of being able to deliver this and I had to fill in a whole lot of gaps underneath before I could even start. That has been the main thing, and that has been an ongoing thing. I think culturally we certainly have a lot of struggles in terms of which ones work and how to work the various cultures. I am always trying to accommodate the different children's needs. I am learning Lebanese lullabies and all kinds of things like that to try to make sure that I cover as many children as possible. (Arcaro, ETC, 2013b, p. 3)

The MSO Education Manager, Bronwyn Lobb remarks:

In the very first year we sent Danni Arcaro and Bonnie Smart—a cello teacher ... out to a school with a whole lot of instruments, and we got started. We very quickly realised that there are all these other things that we may not have initially thought of. Over the years we have now started to develop them, so that we can really cater to the learning needs of individuals and groups and the school and the community. (Lobb, ETC, 2013b, p. 3)

Lobb continues:

The biggest challenge is that it is a highly complicated program to manage. To have quality teaching staff who are trained and who know what they are doing is a big challenge as well, because at the moment in the sector what we are seeing is a lot of [higher education] students who are not being trained to be able to impart their skills in a teaching capacity, let alone in a group environment. When they are teaching to a large number of students

at once, we need to consider how they cope with the varying needs of those students. I think that is another really big challenge for the program. (Lobb, ETC, 2013b, p. 3)

Growth

The program commenced in 2009 with group teaching of orchestral string instruments to students in Years 1 and 2. It involved two teaching artists, one afternoon a week. The focus shifted to providing group instrumental lessons on violin, viola, cello or double bass for students in Year 3 only and additional teaching artists were involved to teach the full string family. In 2012 intensive Kodály training for all students in Foundation, Years 1 and 2 was added with specific funding and a generalist school teacher providing classroom music for the remaining school years.

For students in Years 4, 5 and 6 who are continuing with their instrument, volunteers support lunchtime practice clubs and a bi-weekly after school program, providing an opportunity for students to further their instrumental skills. Upon entering Year 5, those displaying a connection to their instrument continue their tuition in a more individualised environment. Instrumental lessons are 30 minutes each provided by the teaching artists, with a total of three hours string teaching per week. Between 2009-2013, 500 students had participated in the program. From 2014, a part time music educator with significant Kodály training and understanding of Kodály method, (16 hours contact time at the school across four days) was employed to teach the Kodály method to children across Foundation to year 6.

Change

In 2015, seven MSO teaching artists were involved and numerous volunteers and interns participated in supporting the lunchtime practice clubs and after school program. At this stage the program encompassed: Foundation to Year 2 aural work, Year 3 (40 plus students) learning string instruments,

three hours of teaching time, Years 4 to 6 involved in lunchtime and after school extension activities. In 2016, *The Pizzicato Effect* moved to an after school program only and expanded to include more schools. (ETC 2013b, school website, MSO website, teaching position advertisement)

Observations and concluding comments

This paper has focussed on the development and the offering of music education in a Victorian Government primary school, initially introducing instrumental music teaching through string instruments to employing a music specialist to supplement the music curriculum provided by a primary generalist. However, there are many observations that can be made of the current life cycle of the program promoted as *The Pizzicato Effect*.

The Pizzicato Effect provided an instrumental music education program in a government primary school with teaching artists and a specialist Kodály teacher. Instrumental music in Victorian Government schools has always been a secondary school resource where teaching staff have been salaried and instruments bought through school budgets and for those with access, the Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) budget. Primary schools have needed to use private providers to offer instrumental programs to their students.

The initial absence of a clear vision with direction, structure, long term goals and resulting planned learning outcomes is a clear flaw. The program has been built through a series of attachments, depending on funding that might be available for the next stage of the program resulting from the next idea. Continuity and connection are lacking with one-off programs hooked together with 'no strings attached' funding. Donations from MSO concert-goers, who are a section of the population with disposable income, become less readily available without a justifiable long term focus.

The inspiration derived from El Sistema rests as a promotional tool as not all five principles are implemented in this program. Frequency and Connectivity are the two principles that are much harder to create, justify and may be spasmodic. Lunchtime practice clubs and after school activities, although supervised, are voluntary for students. A total shift to an after school in 2016 makes participation more voluntary for students—they may be less likely to stay after school or may not be allowed or unable to stay. The more extended responses from Arcaro and Lobb at the Education and Training Committee verbal hearing indicate that inspiration from El Sistema remains a loose connection.

The teaching artists have been given an opportunity for a different kind of teaching experience – part of their protean career as a musician – in a different work place and working in a multidisciplinary team. They have experienced the difference between being a musician and teaching in a school. They have needed to consider personal learning and continue their professional learning. Issues have included understanding group instrumental music teaching, making judgments about student learning, pedagogy, lesson planning and learning outcomes, consideration of special learning needs and the broader definition of disability in use in schools, accommodating different learning styles, leadership and handing over to new teaching artists as personnel change. The program has provided work placement opportunities for musicians enrolled in higher degree music courses to participate as volunteers.

The program has probably been less about social change and more about a promotional tool for the MSO and by default the school. MSO guest conductors and violin soloists have visited the school. The program has publicised and encouraged generalist teachers to use MSO education resources. Through access to rehearsals and concerts, it has made a connection to classical music for future audiences.

The benefits from the program for participating students have been no different from any other

school music program, and in this instance, music education is being used to support academic and social aspects of the school curriculum and students' lives, when music should be taught for music's sake. Victorian school populations that can be described as disadvantaged with a multicultural mix – catering for students who are refugees, asylum seekers, diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, one parent families and levels of unemployment also have successful music programs, without being re-badged as El Sistema-inspired. If government schools provide instruments and hire them to students, unpaid hire fees are not a reason to exclude students from learning. Such an action by a school would contribute to the demise or closure of an instrumental music program.

The change of the primary objective of El Sistema in the 1990s – to effect social change—has sparked the interest and proliferation of programs, so inspired, around the world, and *The Pizzicato Effect* is no different. It is possible for a school music program to be successful without a promotional tag, a special name and a statement that inspiration has been sought from El Sistema. Although *The Pizzicato Effect* program is an example of providing music education in a school, it could also be the result of good teaching supported by dedicated generalist primary teachers and musicians.

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