

Countering inequality: The role of music opportunities in promoting wellbeing and belonging for young Australian regional classical music students

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Abstract

This article shares the narratives of young rural and regional classical musicians in Australia as they navigated their musical journeys. Challenges are explored, including the lack of resources, and the need to travel long distances and the associated costs. Study participants reflected on their feelings of isolation and lack of understanding from their non-music peers and stressed the need to connect with other like-minded musicians. The benefits of being a young musician in a non-metropolitan area are discussed, including unique opportunities offered in a nurturing, less competitive environment. Regional conservatoriums' role is highlighted, particularly through the Regional Youth Orchestra NSW (RYO) initiative. Study findings demonstrate the positive impact of regional youth orchestra programs in connecting talented young classical musicians with professional orchestras and peers to support and inspire their musical ambitions and address entrenched music inequalities.

Key words: youth orchestra, inequality, regional

Introduction

Engaging with music fosters skill acquisition, cognitive and social development, and an appreciation of the joy of music. For young regional¹ and rural classical music students, their musical journeys provide new encounters, challenges, and sometimes life-changing opportunities to learn, connect, perform and be inspired. This article documents the aspirations and experiences of non-metropolitan classical music students in New South Wales, Australia, to consider how programs made available through local regional conservatoriums can support them in achieving their goals and address inequality issues. The research focuses on the case study of Regional Youth Orchestra NSW (RYO), where advanced regional and rural classical music students are nurtured to develop their skills and

collaborate with like-minded young musicians across the state.

Regional and rural music students navigate challenges not encountered by their city-based counterparts. Although there are distinct music inequities within and between cities and towns in Australia and internationally (Brasche & Thorn, 2016; Francisco Reyes, 2019; Music Australia, n.d.; Power & Powell, 2016), non-metropolitan students often have the additional burden of travelling long distances for lessons or rehearsals, may not be able to access large scale professional performances, and may not easily be able to source instruments, supplies and services. Many student musicians in regional and rural areas have accomplished and supportive teachers and can attend professional performances by local and touring ensembles. However, connecting them with talented students from other regions and guest musician mentors can offer increased inspiration, enhance their skills, provide exceptional performance opportunities,

¹ For the purpose of this article, regional is defined as 'all of the towns, small cities and areas that lie beyond the major capital cities' (Regional Australia Institute, n.d.)

and pave the way for future music ambitions.

This case study provides a foundation for a larger-scale investigation of regional music experiences to consider how further investment in this area could enhance positive outcomes for young regional musicians. Research on this topic is sparse and expanding knowledge in this field would benefit regional communities to foster deeper engagement in creative arts, especially for young people.

Background and context

Music education is broadly valued as a learning, social and emotional tool, creative activity and form of self-expression (Brasche & Thorn, 2016; Egana-delSol, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2019; Howe, 2021; Music Australia, n.d.), and ‘music literally “lights up” the brain like no other human activity’ (Collins, 2013, p. 218). However, inequality exists in many geographic locations, with metropolitan, private school children more likely to access music education (Music Australia, n.d.). Regional music students are navigating challenges not encountered by their city-based counterparts (Klopper & Power, 2012). Fortunately, there is growing interest in better serving regional communities’ specific music interests and needs (Grimmett, Rickard, Gill, & Murphy, 2010). Many professional Australian orchestras² and music organisations/institutions³ include regional tours and education programs as part of their annual schedule of events. These programs augment weekly lessons, local ensembles and a calendar of performances offered by local conservatoriums.

NSW regional conservatoriums are unique within the landscape of Australian music providers.

Established in the 1970s, these organisations are run independently with part state government funding administered through the Department of Education (Klopper & Power, 2012). No other state or territory offers similar government-funded music providers to the regions. There are 17 conservatoriums located in diverse communities throughout NSW with a shared goal to ‘promote and facilitate high-quality music education’ (Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums [ANSWRC], 2023). These organisations play an essential role in promoting arts in their local communities and are often the principal provider of music education in their region (Brooks, 2020).

NSW conservatoriums are located in some of the most disadvantaged postcodes in non-metropolitan parts of the state and ‘make significant contributions in addressing disadvantage...’ (Brooks, 2021, p. 18). By offering accessible and inclusive music opportunities (ANSWRC 2023), the conservatoriums ‘provide equity for students in remote areas having the same access to music education opportunities, as do their city counterparts’ (Klopper, 2009, p. 36).

A significant music equity initiative is the Regional Youth Orchestra NSW (RYO), established by the Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums in 2016 (ANSWRC, 2023). RYO bridges the gap between metropolitan and non-metropolitan music experiences by linking talented young musicians with professional classical musicians from highly regarded Australian and international orchestras. The audition-based program has offered projects with acclaimed orchestras, including the Australian World Orchestra, Staatskapelle Berlin, Opera Australia, London Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra. RYO members have performed at the Sydney Opera House, City Recital Hall, and various regional locations as part of the Artstate⁴ initiative.

2 Sydney Symphony Orchestra, Playerlink Program, <https://www.sydneysymphony.com/learning/young-musicians/playerlink>

Australian Chamber Orchestra, ACO Collective, <https://www.aco.com.au/the-orchestra/aco-collective>

3 Musica Viva, Regional Touring, <https://www.musicaviva.com.au/concerts/regional-touring/>
Sydney Conservatorium, Regional Engagement Program, <https://www.sydney.edu.au/music/industry-and-community/community-engagement/regional-engagement-program.html>

4 A four-year project by Regional Arts NSW, <https://artstate.com.au>

Benefits of youth orchestra participation

Numerous Australian and international studies have explored the benefits of participating in youth orchestras (see for example Baker, Forbes, & Earle, 2020; Egana-delSol, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2019; Hewitt & Allen, 2012; Power & Powell, 2016; Uy, 2012), noting clear findings around increased confidence, social connections and music and other skill acquisition. Some of these publications acknowledge the role of the well-established El Sistema program, initially set up in Venezuela and now introduced in many other countries, including the USA, Scotland, England and Sweden (Baker, 2016; Uy, 2012), in fostering youth music appreciation. El Sistema founder José Antonio Abreu proclaimed the benefits of group music participation, suggesting 'an orchestra means joy, motivation, teamwork, the aspiration to success' (Sistema Europe, 2023). Although questions have been raised about the motivations and methods behind the El Sistema program, with some highlighting the potentially neo-liberal or neo-colonial undertones (Baker, 2016), there is nonetheless a clearly established benefit for young people engaging in arts-based activities in a wide range of settings (Egana-delSol, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2019; Stegemann et al., 2019; Tawell, Thompson, & Daniels, 2015).

In the context of youth orchestra participation, Power and Powell (2016), in their study of an advanced string project in Western Sydney, highlight how participants embraced their 'opportunity to learn' in a rich learning environment supported by community and professional mentors. In particular, the authors observed a growth in the young people's confidence, both musically and socially, as well expanding their conceptualisation of 'future selves'. Similarly, Baker, Forbes and Earle (2020), in their research with the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra, identified how youth orchestra participants connected with their peers, developed both socially and musically, and experienced happiness, enjoyment and pride. Hewitt and Allan

(2012) in their study of advanced youth music ensembles in Scotland, observed the importance of spending time with like-minded young musicians and enhanced feelings of happiness and musical satisfaction. All of these embodied youth orchestra experiences contribute to fostering a sense of wellbeing and belonging in young people.

Methodology

The author used a qualitative approach to document regional classical music students' lived experiences to provide depth, reflection, and understanding (van Manen, 2006). To construct a case study, the researcher conducted nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with current and past Regional Youth Orchestra (RYO) members and parents to offer insights into regional music challenges and opportunities. The researcher is a parent of two former RYO participants and acknowledges the potential for the subjectivity this positionality presents. For ethical reasons, the author's children were not interviewed as part of the study.

The researcher collaborated with conservatorium staff to identify and recruit participants. Interviews took place individually or in small groups. The students' ages range from 14-21 years, and they play various instruments across woodwind and strings. Participants' Regional Youth Orchestra (RYO) experience varied from members who had completed one program to others who had completed multiple programs over three to four years. The researcher provided participants with an information sheet about the study and invited participants to give informed consent. Due to COVID restrictions, interviews took place online (via zoom) or by telephone. The Southern Cross University Human Ethics Committee approved the study, approval no. 2021/130.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. To fully immerse in the inductive thematic analysis of lived experiences (van Manen, 2006), the author printed all transcripts and manually colour-coded significant words and phrases until clear themes emerged.

Findings: reflections on regional music experiences

The study findings illustrate reflections from participants with current or previous links to four NSW regional conservatoriums. According to social and economic disadvantage classifications, three of the four conservatoriums are in areas identified as the 'most disadvantaged', and one is in a 'disadvantaged' region (Brooks, 2021); therefore, findings should be considered in the context of social inequality and stratification. Key themes emerging from discussions included the challenges regional music students face, the benefits of *being* in the regions, and the opportunities provided by regional conservatoriums through the RYO and other programs.

Challenges

The research participants identified many challenges faced by non-metropolitan classical music students. These challenges included accessing specialised instrumental teachers, the lack of high-level ensembles in some locations, expenses associated with travel, and the loneliness and isolation felt by those unable to connect regularly with other talented classical music students their age.

Human resources

Interviewees described one of the challenges they had encountered as being the lack of expertise in specific instruments or experience teaching advanced students. A participant noted:

Because it's a small area, there's not as much expertise in music teaching like in the city. Of course, [name of conservatorium] is lucky because they have good mentors in the area, but there's still a need if you want to really extend your playing to go to cities to meet up with the leading professionals in the country.

Accessing specialist teachers was viewed as a clear advantage for city-based counterparts:

To compare my journey to, perhaps, some of my peers who've grown up in the city, some of them

learned from a teacher who had reached an elite level – a professional level - on the instrument ... at the beginning ... right from square one. So, they were set up with amazing technique. They had the opportunity to go to schools that had an amazing music program.

Another interviewee extended this theme by highlighting the notion of a 'regional ceiling':

One of the biggest problems with being a young musician in a regional town is that regional towns are great at starting kids on musical instruments. They're great at having beginners, but when it comes to actually continuing these kids on through high school, they almost always fall short in some fashion. That affects any kid that might have had a passion for music when they were younger, then all of a sudden they hit this regional ceiling and it immediately becomes a lot harder for any of these kids to find these opportunities.

Study participants recalled many instances of travelling long distances for lessons with specialist teachers. Limited expertise in specific instruments in some regions also impacts the capacity to create ensembles and orchestras. A parent observed:

I guess we're fortunate [name of town] that lots of good programs exist. But I know that many students don't have the opportunity of playing in large ensembles. Often in regional areas, there might be strengths in certain teachers like string, woodwind, brass, keyboard - where there's a music program that's established - but they don't get to play with other students learning other instruments and benefit from some of those larger ensembles.

Physical resources

In addition to some locations having a limited number of instrumental teachers, physical resources like instruments, music supplies or performance spaces can present difficulties for regional music students, as observed by different participants:

Being able to book a place to rehearse or perform and actually having places to see concerts and things like that is a big one. Then also just resources, whether it be music libraries or actual instruments to try out as well.

Even just access to general equipment, sheet music, things like buying new strings or new

reeds, these things are harder to do. You have to get things by mail, they may not be sold locally. You have to have that level of knowledge about where to find these things. Again, instrument care, getting them serviced regularly can be difficult. You may have to travel or worry about posting things and that can make it harder to access as well. Sometimes access to loan instruments, a lot of large cities have that. Good quality instruments the students can borrow to try, that may not always be available in some smaller communities so that introduction to music can be harder.

Instrument care is a very specialised profession. With limited luthiers and bow-makers residing in regional areas, this adds another complication to the pursuit of classical music in the regions. An interviewee commented: 'if you're re-hairing or just trying to get re-varnished or anything like that - yeah, you have to drive such a distance'.

Accessing performances

Regional conservatoriums present an annual performance calendar featuring accomplished local and touring artists. However, some smaller or more remote conservatoriums may not have the capacity to offer the same range of artists due to a lack of community support or appropriate performance spaces. Therefore, the smaller size of these communities limits the potential to offer live concerts. A participant commented on a significant difference between accessing classical music in cities compared to non-metropolitan areas:

There are the big orchestras. I think that's probably one of the biggest ones. They have these major orchestras half an hour or an hour down the road, whereas definitely, for someone like me, I think it's around a three-hour and 50-minute drive to Sydney.

Not being able to experience large-scale concerts to be inspired by role models can reduce young classical musicians' motivation and may hinder future music ambitions. This lack of access adds to the perception that young city-based musicians have an advantage over their non-metropolitan counterparts: 'for example, in Sydney, there's the Australian Chamber Orchestra and it's in the same city'.

Music in schools

The lack of music education in some schools in regional and rural areas added to the sense of frustration felt by some young musicians: 'our school didn't have a music program at all until I was in about Year 10. We had two classrooms for music, and they were pretty bad'. Furthermore, other regional students stated:

I had to study music for my senior years via distance. My teacher offered to do Music 2 [classical focussed senior music course] with me, but she probably wasn't the best qualified to teach Music 2 ... That was a bit of a disadvantage because we didn't have face-to-face teaching.

When I hit senior years, my school didn't run Music 2 for me. So, I had to do all of my HSC stuff at [name of school], as opposed to the school that I was originally going to. I had to go back and forth between these two schools in the middle of the day, I missed about 50 per cent of my legal studies course because it overlapped and it was really hard. Before that, I did distance education which was another challenge. The sheets were so old that they said refer to the 'cassette'... I think isolating is the best word to describe it.

Having specialist music schools and extensive orchestral training programs are another perceived advantage of living in a city:

You have the conservatorium schools and you have the rather elite ensemble programs ... where particularly students who progress really well and are more advanced, have really excellent training programs, and the rural students can miss out.

Expenses and travel

All interviewees spoke of the extensive travel required to pursue music needs, engage in lessons with specialist teachers, and attend professional orchestral performances. Many participants shared stories of travelling for many hours to access opportunities. One interviewee mentioned they would often travel between two and eight hours to support their music ambitions. Another young musician spoke about a friend who travelled three hours each weekend to participate in a youth orchestra. A participant said one of the biggest challenges was 'not having the tutors that I needed

and in the right places. Like me having to travel to Sydney for my lessons for about four years once a month...'

As well as the time commitment required to travel for music needs, the expense is also considerable, as noted by all interviewees:

Being a musician in a regional town is so expensive.

My family lost so much - well not lost money because it was an investment, but we were living off chicken feed for a while, just because of all the flights. Not just the flights, but the instrument lessons as well ... it drained us for sure.

There are also logistical challenges for these young musicians to negotiate:

There are different issues for different instruments ... I've this massive instrument that I can't take anywhere that is a certain distance away. Or if it's within a certain distance, then we can drive, but then it's all three of us and then that's like sacrificing three people's worth of income for however many days.

And sometimes, planning for music activities can impact the whole family's priorities:

School holidays revolve around what did you want to do these holidays? What music programs are you excited about? What things have you been fortunate to audition for and be part of? So not a time goes by in the school holidays when there's not something involved and that affects our family planning for things that we'd like to do in holiday time. In a good way.

Musical peers

Music educators and other stakeholders cannot underestimate the importance of connecting with like-minded young musicians to provide inspiration and develop a sense of belonging. Without these connections young regional musicians can feel isolated due to a lack of understanding of their music interests. One participant shared their experience of disconnection:

The thing that kind of encompassed all of the struggles the most was just having this extreme feeling of tall poppy syndrome, in the sense that people could be supportive but only within their realm of understanding. I think one of the

toughest things growing up doing classical music in a country town is that no one really knew what you were doing ... like in my school, there were people that I had been going to school with for 13 years and they still thought I played the big cello [double bass].

Multiple participants said that finding peers at a similar level in a regional area can be challenging, and this can impact music ambitions in many ways, as described by numerous participants:

For advanced students, there's a lack of competition. It can be frustrating for some students to not have other people playing at a similar level to them, to push them and motivate them.

It's just good to have people to bounce ideas off and have a reference frame. I think we're lucky now with the internet that I can just go on YouTube and see what people my age are doing and compare to that, but it's still no real replacement for just having a sense of community in what you're doing.

There was no one else really doing classical music. Although there was a lovely music community... there weren't really the opportunities to progress beyond a beginner level. Although we did get quite a lot of really, quite world class artists visiting the Con fairly regularly. The opportunity to actually reach that advanced standard sort of seemed a bit out of reach and not something that, I guess, we felt you would feel inspired to do. Because no one else your age was doing it.

Participants mentioned how the absence of other passionate young classical musicians also led to a sense of social disconnection: 'I am really into classical music. I just love the music. I love all of it so much. I go so deep into it. I don't think I know anyone who's really like that.'

Regional opportunities

Despite the many challenges non-metropolitan classical music students face, regional conservatoriums provide many exceptional opportunities to foster a love of music. Study participants also observed unique qualities amongst regional musicians that were considered beneficial in pursuing a music career.

Resilience and passion

Interviewees commented on how growing up in the regions and appreciating all music opportunities can shape attitudes towards music and provide a different kind of motivation compared to their city counterparts. Various participants shared their reflections:

The regional kids at the Con are definitely - okay, this is quite a statement - but definitely the most passionate.

While everybody may not be massive virtuosos at what they're playing, they definitely are a little bit more into it than I notice with the Sydney kids. Not really more dedicated as in maybe trying harder but I think they're more into the passion and the kind of the vibe, I guess, of music.

Yeah, I think it's definitely motivated me more – just to work harder.

Because a classical music culture may not be so well integrated or valued in their community, many young musicians are self-driven and seek out whatever opportunities they can source. Participants mentioned the inclination to take up every offer you get as a regional musician. This can mean partaking in music activities in a wide range of genres, with a mix of other musicians. Such diverse commitments can be challenging to manage; however, they broaden skills and develop well-rounded musicians.

Big fish in a small pond

Despite the disadvantages of not being around other high-level musicians, young regional classical musicians can readily establish an identity as aspirational and highly regarded musicians. As mentioned by multiple participants:

If you can overcome that feeling of isolation, of just not being around so many other people that play the same instrument at a higher level, it does become your thing, it becomes your speciality. If you can persist with that idea, then it's definitely going to lead you down a road towards following music with great vigour.

If you are good, you're more likely to stand out, and you're more likely to be someone that teachers and students will go, okay, well, this person's trying.

It's beneficial in the sense that there weren't many other clarinetists in [name of location], so because I was the only one that was really serious about it and wanting to make a career of it, I actually got all of the opportunities.

A nurturing environment for young musicians in the regions can develop, as: 'it's also probably a slightly less competitive atmosphere which can help some people, so it's a bit less stressful.'

Specialised programs and networks

Although some young musicians spoke of limited ensemble opportunities in their regions, others described the exceptional opportunities they received by belonging to small and specialised chamber music programs.

I think [name of location] is lucky to have quite a good chamber music scene that's centred at the Conservatorium with the staff there.

It definitely was a beacon of light.

To make these programs so successful, conservatorium staff drew on existing music networks and community connections. This use of social capital supported dedicated students to follow their musical aspirations to partake in masterclasses and other mentoring experiences:

There are definitely some advantages to growing up in the country. There were some really unique opportunities that, perhaps, don't happen in the city. Like getting to work with a lot of very top-class chamber music ensembles that would tour. We got to have lessons with them and a workshop with them, which generally, in the city, that never happens.

One interviewee explained she did not have a specialist teacher for her instrument at her local conservatorium; however, the staff utilised their networks to enable her to attend lessons at a neighbouring conservatorium. Connecting with high-level teachers in other regions serves young musicians well without travelling further afield to a city.

Before [name of teacher] moved to [name of location], I was actually going to quit music altogether. This was a very fortunate turn of events ... suddenly being presented with this opportunity to learn from a player who had studied - gotten to

the very top level with playing – just blew open some doors in my mind and made me realise that this was something I could do.

Exceptional opportunities: Regional Youth Orchestra NSW

Although young regional classical music students may navigate challenges unknown to their city counterparts, they also benefit from unique opportunities *because* they are regional. These experiences depend on teachers, regional conservatoriums and other community arts organisations to imagine and facilitate these inspiring and sometimes life-changing programs. One such program is the Regional Youth Orchestra (RYO), an initiative of the Association of NSW Regional Conservatoriums, that provides talented musicians with the opportunity to collaborate with like-minded young people to play challenging repertoire and be mentored by Australian and international orchestra members. For some young musicians, RYO provided their first orchestral experience:

It was actually my first experience with a real orchestra... I'm very fortunate for that, and I'm really glad I got to do that.

Study participants discussed how RYO inspired them as developing regional musicians.

Repertoire

RYO programs provide experiences that young musicians cannot access in their regions. These programs create a challenging and rewarding environment where members play original repertoire rather than simplified arrangements. For many of these young musicians, this is the first chance to play an entire symphony and learn about the expectations of playing in a full orchestra. A selection of participants commented:

That was one of the really important things about RYO, is just actually being able to play some of the repertoire that we wouldn't have a chance to play in school... Proper repertoire, not dumbed down arrangements, which I think a lot of us get really tired of eventually.

Even still today, after three years at the [tertiary] Conservatorium, some of my fondest memories of playing in an orchestra still come from playing in RYO because it was just so great at a young age to play such a great repertoire for one thing. There was so much discovery and so many new things. It was just a really exciting atmosphere because it's a higher standard of orchestral playing to what you're used to in your community orchestras and your school orchestras. I think it really helps instil a love for orchestral music, further than what I already had and really got me started with a great orchestral experience. Even coming into my degree, I had, I guess, more general knowledge about the unspoken rules of playing in the orchestra that was shared throughout that Regional Youth Orchestra journey. I think it was really beneficial for me to do all of those programs.

That one was a huge highlight, getting to play that symphony... I remember just getting to the end of the fourth movement and goosebumps were going up all over my body, because it was so exciting, and the music was so epic and powerful.

Concerts

RYO programs integrate orchestral training with performances at iconic venues, including the Sydney Opera House and City Recital Hall: 'you go from not even having a theatre in your hometown to all of a sudden you're playing in the Opera House, on the Opera House stage'. RYO members also play alongside orchestral mentors in public concerts. In contrast, many city-based young musicians may not have access to these unique opportunities. As well as being mentored by and performing with professional orchestras, RYO members were further inspired by attending their concerts.

We got to see so many great concerts by the Australian World Orchestra and Staatskapelle Berlin, Sydney Symphony and Opera Australia. I think just being exposed to all of that really paved the way for my interest in music.

Part of it is seeing what's further out there beyond the regional area they live in and getting excited by the standard that's available if they were successful in pursuing music. The types of ensembles or musicians that they could work with.

Making connections

Beyond building music skills, one of the most critical aspects of the RYO program is its capacity to connect young musicians who share a 'regional perspective' to feel part of a community of like-minded individuals. This element of the program is highly valued, as illustrated in the quotes below from two respondents:

Something that could support me into the future from RYO is definitely the people. Meeting kids from rural areas who are pretty dedicated to their instrument, pretty certain that they want to keep going, who are like me - I have their phone numbers, their social media profiles and stuff like that. I have them forever, you know what I mean?

It's a form of communication... you can't play by yourself but on a deeper level, I think that connection with peers is vital because - it's hard to describe.

Making these connections and building this community of interest not only acts as a social conduit but also inspires better playing, as noted by one participant:

I think the key way to advance your skills is to make music with people your age, and also people your age who are a lot better than you are. Because if you are surrounded by people who are similarly aged peers who might be more advanced, it really pushes you to be more like them ... It's seeing other people your age succeed in an instrument, it inspires you to be like them as well.

Participating in RYO also established relationships that the young musicians took into other settings, including other music camps such as Australian Youth Orchestra programs. These connections are meaningful due to shared understandings of what it is to be a regional or rural young classical musician. All participants commented on this valuable aspect of RYO programs, as illustrated by the following comments:

I think a big thing for a lot of people is actually just meeting people who understand being a regional musician and actually meeting people that go oh, you play double bass, not the big cello.

Being able to go up to someone and talk about Baroque music and it's like oh my god, I can actually have this conversation with someone.

Bless my parents, but I couldn't even have that conversation with them really. I could kind of try but I couldn't really nerd out properly, and I really had to hold that part back as a part of me.

A parent summed up their observations about the impact of music camps such as RYO:

Many children I know of feel that the people they're closest to and the deepest friendships they have are with people who experience the same amount of pleasure from playing music. They get each other, they understand each other and that's not always available for some children who are very deeply connected with music.

RYO highlights

Study participants reflected on the many highlights of being part of RYO programs and how they had new experiences they had previously not imagined.

In parts of the Dvořák, we were practising...I was looking over at the cello doing that fantastic little solo in the middle of the third movement, where it sort of leads into the rest of the piece. It's just fantastic. I'd never really even met an oboist before. You know what I mean?

I think there was one project with the Australian World Orchestra - we got to play alongside them in their concert and that was pretty awesome. Also, when we got to play alongside some of the musicians from the Staatskapelle Berlin. I think that was a great experience. I still think about the experience of having Matthias Glander sitting next to me and just making the biggest, most beautiful clarinet sound and just being amazed at that. Just that feeling and having - trying to recreate that, it was a really great reference point for my concept of orchestral sound as a clarinet player.

Another interviewee described the excitement of being part of a chamber group with members of AWO performing at the City Recital Hall. The experiences presented to RYO members often went beyond their expectations:

Some of the opportunities we got were quite amazing ... I don't think any of my city peers have ever gotten to work with, like Australian World Orchestra musicians, or to play in Sydney Opera House with Staatskapelle Berlin, which is one of the probably top fifteen orchestras in the world. If an orchestra like that were to tour Brisbane,

they'd probably only be doing master classes with Con students, and probably only the best Con students would get chosen for that. Whereas with RYO, we were getting access as a whole group to these amazing opportunities. I would go so far as to say that RYO changed my life.

RYO participants acknowledged that they felt incredibly fortunate to have participated in these programs. A parent described her daughter's first RYO performance:

The first time she'd ever been to the Opera House was when she participated in an RYO program. Whereas many students in Sydney would just take that for granted, they'd go there many times. But for her that was just the ultimate. Just simply to walk into that building, let alone to play on the stage and to be able to see face-to-face many famous musician idols that she'd look up to... The excitement that children experience when they go to a music camp and play great music together or they walk on stage and perform a piece they've worked on together for the last four or five days. The buzz that gives them and the lift that that gives them and how it makes all those hours of practice worthwhile.

Music pathways

Inspired by their orchestral experiences, RYO participants often continue to study music at the tertiary level and plan to have careers as professional musicians. Although exact numbers are unknown, many participants commented that they believed most RYO members went on to study music after school. All RYO alumni who participated in this study are currently studying music at a city-based tertiary conservatorium, and all mentioned how RYO shaped their future music pathway:

I would not have pursued music without RYO. RYO - and my teacher - made me realise how enjoyable classical music was, and just how worthwhile it was to pursue as a career. I absolutely would not be at the Con if I hadn't had those opportunities and I probably wouldn't be studying music, I'd probably be doing some other career.

Beyond RYO, the wide range of experiences and having passionate, encouraging teachers all contributed to developing the kind of resilience required to pursue a music career.

All the experiences I have had as a regional musician, I think, have actually contributed to my decision to become a musician. I don't know if I would be a musician if I'd come from the city.

So, I guess it's been a kind of a little bread crumb trail. Just from getting a few good teachers in my region- really good teachers - and then getting to the Con. I don't think I would have pursued music if I hadn't had good teachers... I would've just kept it as a Fun hobby, but not really taken it to the next level.

Discussion and conclusion

Rural and regional young classical musicians face many challenges in pursuing their musical aspirations compared with their city-based counterparts. They may have less access to specialised teachers, resources, and opportunities to play with other high-level young musicians. Although there are inequities within cities and towns, with socioeconomic differences playing a significant role in musical fortunes (Brasche & Thorn, 2018; Francisco Reyes, 2019), the non-metropolitan experience remains different due to geographic realities such as distance. Aspiring regional and rural classical musicians work hard to overcome inequalities due to locational disadvantage. Regional conservatoriums in NSW have sought to address this inequity by delivering high-quality music education from passionate educators.

The study findings correlate with previous research on the benefits of youth participation in music activities (Baker, Forbes & Earle, 2020; Egana-delSol, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2019; Hewitt & Allen 2012; Power & Powell, 2016; Uy, 2012). In particular, the embodied, emotional experience of music participation, as noted in Baker, Forbes and Earle's (2020) study with the Tasmanian Youth Orchestra, has contributed to enhancing these young people's sense of identity as a musician. These positive feelings have also led many RYO participants to imagine 'possible selves' (Power & Powell, 2016) and pursue a career as a professional musician.

The Australia Council for the Arts (2020) report,

Creating Our Future: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey, noted 'all Australians, regardless of social, physical, geographic or personal circumstances, should feel invited to connect and immerse themselves in exceptional arts experiences'. This prioritisation of arts participation is noted in the literature on social inequality and disadvantage in music access (Brasche & Thorn, 2018; Egana-delSol, Contreras, & Valenzuela, 2019; Francisco Reyes 2019; Tawell, Thompson, & Daniels, 2015). The challenges the young musicians face in this study highlight obstacles to arts participation. The need to acknowledge and understand locational disadvantage and how inequality can correlate with a lack of music opportunities (Francisco Reyes, 2019) is essential to support these young people's musical aspirations. Identifying additional opportunities to offer similar programs in other geographic locations, could address these disadvantages. Disseminating the experiences of regional classical musicians will promote investment in more opportunities to support a greater number of students, especially those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

As noted in previous studies on advanced youth orchestra participation (Baker, Forbes, & Earle, 2020; Hewitt & Allan, 2013; Power & Powell, 2016), the findings of this study highlight how young musicians deeply value opportunities to engage with inspirational repertoire, perform at iconic venues and most of all, feel understood and supported by like-minded peers. In this instance, RYO exposes program participants to new possibilities beyond what they might have thought possible for 'country kids':

I remember being on stage and the whole leading up process of rehearsing made me realise how exciting music was. I feel like if I were in the city, I wouldn't have been chosen for something like that. Maybe playing music wouldn't have had the same profound impact on me, because it just wouldn't have been a possibility.

Finally, having a 'regional perspective' was identified by study participants as being a motivating force to draw on when venturing into

the competitive world of professional music. As summed up by an RYO member:

I'm determined to prove that it doesn't matter where you come from. Music is something everyone can do. Being in a regional area shouldn't make a difference. So, it does motivate me a little bit more, just to show that it doesn't matter where you come from.

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