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MUSIC TEACHING A NECESSITY FOR STUDENTS

School children who do not have music are being discriminated against, according to leading conductor, Richard Gill.

“By not giving children music, you disadvantage them. Music is important because of what it does for them physically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually,” adds the Artistic Director of the Sydney Symphony’s Education Program.

“By not giving children music, you disadvantage them. It is a form of education discrimination.”

Gill was commenting on calls from sections of the Australian music industry for a major boost in teacher music training programs and opportunities for greatly increased student tuition.

“Children should have music because it is good. It’s the only art that functions in the abstract, and what it does for the heart and the mind and the souls of children is immeasurable and priceless,” he comments.

“People forget that children go to school to learn how to learn, and to learn how to think. And music, mathematics, geography are accesses to the brain and thinking in different ways.

“Music provides brain development and habits of listening, and intensity in the habit. The evidence is in that the brain responds phenomenally to music, more so than any other activity.

“It raises the level of listening so they develop powers of aural discrimination...being able to hear the differences in sounds, the combinations of sounds, when sounds function in different ways like a bass line works in a particular way, and a treble line works another way.

“They’re very complex activities for the brain to do, and I don’t mean children who are played Mozart in the class while they are doing their arithmetic, or children who sing pop songs, I don’t mean that.

“I’m talking about serious education, genuine learning. Those children are advantaged in every way.”

Gill believes generalist classroom teachers 100 years ago had to be a lot better equipped than many specialist music teachers today.

“In 1902, Joseph Bradley was one of the superintendents of music in New South Wales, and a kindergarten teacher could not graduate to get into a kindergarten, unless she could play a hymn, a march and a song, at sight, and sing in solfège, all the major and minor key signatures using a tuning fork,” he says.

"I'd be hard-pressed to find a high school music teacher that could pick up a tuning fork and, say, sing me C-sharp minor descending melodic scale from the tuning fork. I reckon there'd be a lot who couldn't do that.

"And kindergarten teachers had to do it before their graduation. So something was going really well in 1902 and we've slipped into the abyss since, and I don't know why."

While Gill, who heads-up the Sydney Symphony's education program, believes breadth, depth and rigour in the school music curriculum are extremely important, he says classical music is only part of the answer, not the whole answer.

On the growing international response to the success of the music development program introduced in Venezuela called "El Sistema," Gill believes a similar program here would show that through music the nation could have both an education revolution and a social inclusion agenda.

"The El Sistema concept is that music can create communities, music can socially include, music can bring people together. What Venezuela has demonstrated is that by making a commitment you can turn the country around. We could do the same thing here.

"I am pleased to say that the education program run by the Sydney Symphony is without parallel in Australia at every level, catering for orchestral training, composition, music appreciation and conductor development."

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The Sydney Symphony's education program is now in its 25th year.

The Program includes a high school composition competition, the Sinfonietta Project, which provides a unique opportunity for high school students across Australia to have their original compositions workshopped and performed by the Sydney Symphony's elite chamber ensemble, the Sydney Sinfonia.

The Sydney Symphony also offers training in professional performance under the mentorship of Sydney Symphony musicians to selected talented full-time tertiary students. Successful applicants have the opportunity to:

- > Play as part of a professional orchestra;
- > Build skills in sight reading and ensemble playing;
- > Learn orchestral techniques and philosophies through the guidance of specially designated mentors; and
- > Experience a range of repertoire and breadth styles