

Conservatorium Colonials: Patterns of evolving leadership in Australian and British music institutions.

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As part of the cultural infrastructure of any society, the conservatorium of music is a key component in shaping social futures. Australian conservatoriums emerged in the late nineteenth century as direct descendants of the British model. A century later, a different landscape has dramatically altered the identity and role of those who lead Australian music institutions. Shifting cultural and higher education policies in the United Kingdom and Australia have brought new challenges to leaders in each national context.

This paper is founded on research into contemporary conservatorium leadership. It examines the evolving cultural contexts which shape the leadership in Australian conservatoria, and explores existing and potential relationships with their international colleagues.

Keywords: conservatoria; higher music education; leadership; organizational change

This paper emerges from research into contemporary conservatorium leadership as it is shaped by the impact of higher education and cultural policy. Data from this research revealed that there are parallels and divergences among the Australian and British models of a conservatorium. As in other fields like agriculture, architecture and social practice, early Australia seemed determined to establish her schools of music in the English likeness, regardless of any difference in context and a lack of musical and social infrastructure. Only over time have the discrepancies become more obvious. The contemporary Australian conservatorium is now quite unlike the British model in structure, governance and in some cases, curricula. These distinctions have a direct impact on the role and status of Australian conservatorium leaders and the direction they bring to their institutions. Leadership role and status is one of the most significant

differences. Ironically, the distinctions also offer potential for partnerships between conservatoria in the two countries.

This research was a qualitative study which analysed 55 interviews with conservatorium leaders in 10 countries. Of the total sample, 34% were Australian and 20% British, offering a reasonable cohort on which to base this comparison. The interview data were confirmed by surveys, and the results shown here are drawn from both sources. The focus here is on the realities for conservatorium leaders in Australia.

Colonial Conservatoria

Since their beginnings, most conservatoria have been relatively autonomous institutions, usually state-funded and administered by a board, the earliest incarnations of which did not necessarily include musicians. Initially such boards left little administrative decision making to the conservatorium leader. As in academia, instead of administrators, leaders are usually ‘professionals in residence’ – highly respected musicians with artistic credibility which is expected to enhance that of the institution.¹

What Australians refer to as a ‘conservatorium’ is usually called ‘academy’, ‘college’ or ‘school of music’ in Britain. They are dedicated to the study of music, primarily in performance and composition, typically in the European classical tradition. Far from being elitist, the conservatorium is part of the cultural infrastructure of the city in which it resides. The extent to which this potential is realized relates directly to the vision and energy of each conservatorium leader.²

Conservatoria emerged in Europe at a time when aristocratic patronage was slowly being overtaken by fascination with the concert hall. The Royal Academy of Music (RAM) first opened its doors in 1822, but for some years was dependent on government rescue packages and the admission of paying students who lowered its intended lofty standards. Without established social and artistic infrastructure, cultural pioneering in colonial Australia was ‘almost as heroic as digging postholes on an outback run’.³ Europe had Mozart and Beethoven; Australia had convicts, ‘ten pound poms’ and Chinese gold-miners.

Nonetheless, the first Australian conservatoria emerged only seventy years later. Coincidentally a report into the 'state of musical education at home [in Britain] and abroad' had just been published, underlining weaknesses in the Academy's structure, operations, finance and resources, leadership, curricula and quality.⁴ Significantly, it records lengthy debate on the criteria for leadership: should the principal of a national academy be 'an educated *non*-musician with administrative ability, [and] a gentleman of course,' or a musician who had 'passed through all the vicissitudes?'⁵ A report of such relevance should have triggered concern among those Australians aspiring to create an institution on the same model. It did not.

Instead, Australia followed the same hazardous route: conservatoria were established on the RAM model, even though its record until then had been unproven. The first two Australian conservatoria emerged as separate entities under university umbrellas (Melbourne 1895 and Adelaide 1898). Indeed, the Melbourne University Conservatorium began in rented accommodation on the understanding that it would pay its own way, and Elder Conservatorium at the University of Adelaide was established only because of a generous benefactor. It was not long before The University of Melbourne divested itself of the Conservatorium (although the name was applied to the Faculty of Music for some years), and the leader of Elder Conservatorium bowed to university priorities. The initial (and then unique) university-conservatorium model was left in disarray, or at least on the backburner for another century.

Subsequent early Australian institutions were even closer to the British model – independent of universities, established by education authorities in New South Wales, Tasmania and Queensland, to a formula which ensured that they were consistently underfunded. Nothing had been learned from the RAM example. To further exacerbate the situation for Sydney Conservatorium, it was created on the basis of a controversial political decision, setting the tone for ongoing uncertainty. Many would argue that there is little difference today.

Conservatorium Colonials

Even the leaders of the first colonial conservatoria came direct from the motherland (and occasionally they still do). Ignoring local potential, both Melbourne and Adelaide Universities ‘looked to Britain for the right man’ for their first professors of music, and they eventually became the first Australian conservatorium leaders.⁶ In fact, the choice of energetic practicing musicians for university roles virtually guaranteed the establishment of conservatoria instead of (or alongside) faculties of music. And energetic they were: constant battles ensued between leaders in Australian conservatoria and their statutory bodies. Appointed Professor of Music by the University of Melbourne in 1891, G.W.L. Marshall-Hall was ‘a man of forceful artistic personality’ who established the Melbourne University Conservatorium with a vision which was ‘out of step with the basically conservative views of his new home’.⁷ After a particularly rough ride, the university refused to renew Marshall-Hall’s contract, but he continued to run ‘his’ conservatorium in competition with the university’s depleted music school.⁸ This precedent set a pattern for music institutions in Melbourne which survived for more than a century.

Equally British but less visionary, Joshua Ives established the Elder Conservatorium program on the Cambridge model. Servant to both university and conservatorium, Ives ‘wrangled with his university masters, the private music-teaching fraternity and the press alike,’ and found himself without a job by the turn of the century.⁹ Thence followed Henri Verbrugghen at Sydney Conservatorium – ‘British by choice rather than by birth’ – whose desire to establish a conservatorium in Scotland was sublimated by realizing his dream in Australia.¹⁰ Verbrugghen arrived in 1915 with the Euro-centric opinion that local musicians were not good enough to work in the new conservatorium. He resigned when a change of government reduced the conservatorium funding, threatening its role within the emerging cultural infrastructure.

At Queensland Conservatorium, British composer William Lovelock also locked horns with the Department of Education over what he considered challenges to his role as director. He too resigned, his parting shot being the publication of a controversial article on how the conservatorium *should* be run.¹¹ Like Verbrugghen in Sydney, Lovelock was also disparaging about the local teaching scene. These pioneers set a precedent for feisty leadership in Australian conservatoria, not unlike that of the early RAM experience in London.

New settings

Recent history has shown that reliance on the leader's artistic profile may cause the downfall of an institution.¹² Although early institutions required only the artistic role model, the contemporary conservatorium asks much more of the potential leader: it has evolved into an institution of higher education, accountable to government policy and social expectations. With little or no training in management, leaders are challenged to balance artistic and academic issues with administrative demands in an ever-evolving environment, with shrinking financial resources and no time. Selected primarily for their artistic expertise, once in the job they are expected to provide varying degrees of artistic direction, academic leadership, curriculum design, administration, financial management, facilities management, event production, marketing, public relations and community liaison.¹³

Nonetheless, informants in this study shared overwhelming agreement that the leader of a conservatorium should be a musician: 80% of each sample endorsed this fact, despite an ongoing concern that the combination of artistic and administrative (particularly financial) skills required for the role 'don't usually reside in one person'.¹⁴ For Australian leaders, the issue sometimes extends to whether the leader is imported: 'we keep going around the same circle: we [import] an artist-type in the nineteenth century sense ... because it looks good artistically ...and I wish we would have learned this lesson by now'.¹⁵ Yet, regardless of a heavily administrative university-based context, Australian conservatoria continue to target renowned professional performers and composers as leaders. A recent search for a leader states that applicants 'must have an outstanding reputation nationally/internationally in performance as a soloist, chamber musician and accompanist or as a composer'.¹⁶

Whether expert or not, artists confront the reality that music is no longer a monoculture, and future musicians may not appear as they do now. Because the conservatorium has the potential to be part of the cultural infrastructure of the community in which it resides, the situation of conservatorium leaders is even more significant. Decisions made by these leaders have the potential to impact well beyond conservatorium

walls. Still, the emphasis on a high artistic profile is consistent with a need for credibility at the top, a condition relevant in artistic and academic environments.¹⁷

Despite acknowledged administrative pressures, most leaders in this study would agree with the notion that ‘you *can’t* have a non-musician in these roles. ... Often you make a decision which is not rational or objective but it’s based on an evaluation of musical importance’.¹⁸ One British import at Elder Conservatorium in Australia described the need for artistic credibility thus:

I don’t think it’s reasonable to expect people to take your direction to follow unless you are prepared to establish that kind of professional credibility from the outset. Without that you’re sunk, really. You become a mere administrator just shuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic.¹⁹

Few Australians find themselves leading British institutions. At the time of this study, there was only one – Dame Janet Ritterman at the Royal College of Music – an appointment more likely to have been based on her British experience in the education sector than her Australian nationality. With a belief in corporate rather than individual leadership, Ritterman was less insistent that the incumbent should be a musician. Instead, she noted that being able to create at any time a situation in which the leadership doesn’t rest with one particular person is the best thing’.²⁰

Although there was a strong preference that leaders should be musicians, there were qualifying comments which acknowledge that being a good musician may not always translate to being a good leader. More than one informant made reference to the appointment of cellist Lyn Harrell to the Royal Academy of Music, one of them explaining that:

I don’t think these days that it’s possible to turn a creative musician into a director of a conservatorium. They failed at the Royal Academy when they appointed Lyn Harrell. [He’s] a wonderful musician [and] cellist, but he was not an administrator.²¹

Arguably, it was Harrell's long absences as a performer which undermined his position. The contemporary conservatorium does not allow for frequent absences such as leaders may have enjoyed in earlier times. Even then absences had their consequences. Sydney Conservatorium suffered the impact of an absentee director more than once, beginning with the discontent which abounded when Verbrugghen was travelling regularly with the Conservatorium Orchestra. Yet although his travels may have generated restlessness within the institution, ironically they also placed the Conservatorium at the heart of Sydney's evolving cultural infrastructure. While Verbrugghen may have managed to do both, in recent times it has proven more difficult. John Hopkins was Director of Sydney Conservatorium at the time of amalgamation with Sydney University – a crucial period which required closer attention than Hopkins was able to provide with his busy conducting schedule. In 1991, when the amalgamation was at its most raw, Hopkins took leave, relying on his 'really good team' to keep the Conservatorium running.²² Unfortunately for both the Conservatorium and its leader, Hopkins' absences 'seemed to signal an ambiguous commitment ... at a time when the institution faced unprecedented challenges'.²³

Significantly, informants in both countries delivered the same line: that the required mix of artistic, academic and administrative skills is rarely found in one person. Yet because high-profile musicians are still preferred, the demands of the contemporary context add substantially to the selection criteria. One informant likened the application process to 'searching for Jesus Christ':

They want somebody first of all who has a terminal degree [...], they want someone who has distinguished themselves as a scholar or as a performer or in the field of music education. They want someone who's proven themselves [sic] to be an effective teacher over the years. They are always looking for someone who is an experienced administrator, that has a track record of dealing with policy issues, with personnel issues, *and* they're looking for someone [...] who is a fund-raiser.²⁴

Evolving contexts

How did we get to this point? Despite any early parallels, the current divergence results from contexts triggered by shifting government policy over a century of change, the larger proportion of it recent. The last twenty years have seen the Higher Education Policy force all autonomous Australian conservatoria into the university sector, the 1999 Bologna Declaration demanding adjustments to allow student and staff mobility between institutions across Europe, and access and exit initiatives announced by the Higher Education Funding Council of England.²⁵ Together with a range of other policies, these have extended the divide between British and Australian music institutions.

The greatest difference lies in governance. With the exception of one private institution, all Australian conservatoria now reside within universities, the result of forced marriages. Whilst they negotiate relationships with university partners, most British conservatoria remain autonomous. The samples for this study therefore comprised three different types of conservatoria: those which are autonomous, those governed by universities, and those university music departments which exert conservatorium tendencies through their performance-based programs.

Australian conservatoria stumbled into the university sector with mounting exasperation and varying degrees of success. Leaders accustomed to an artistic focus became part of the university management team, facing an increasing proportion of administrative and academic issues. This adjustment was exacerbated because of different organisational cultures: conservatoria did not understand the university environment, nor did the universities appreciate the conservatorium culture. Most particularly, the conservatorium's vocational mindset has required significant adjustment to a setting reliant on research-based funding. Over time, as each university gradually restructured around the conservatorium, most conservatorium leaders found that administrative tasks consumed most of their time, with artistic issues taking a secondary role. Even those who manage to maintain both, claim that they have little decision-making power, a situation shared by heads of other academic departments in universities where executive 'superdeans' preside over huge faculties.²⁶

With the constancy of change experienced over more than a decade, Australian leaders indicated a greater resistance to change and capacity for further change. To a

large extent, this lack of capacity to change is directly related to the level of power now afforded the leader in any Australian conservatorium – for some it is non-existent.

Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM) offers a clear picture of the impact restructuring might have on leadership. CQCM was established in 1996 as a college outside the faculty structure of Central Queensland University. The Foundation Director was one of the senior managers of the university, reporting directly to the Vice Chancellor. As leaders changed in 1999, the CQCM merged into the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts, and the new director reported to the dean of the faculty. Five years later, his replacement became ‘Sub Dean’, an academic also responsible for academic management without any effective budgetary control or decision making power. Within five years the CQCM status and bargaining power within the university was considerably reduced, and the leader’s role diminished.

Informants described a number of repercussions related to the disparity in governance. The first is the level of financial stress, higher among Australian conservatoria than British. The second is reflected in higher incidence of organisational restructuring among Australian institutions which is more than double that which has occurred within their British counterparts. The third consequence is in concern for retaining the culture of the conservatorium. Among Australian institutions there was a sense that it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the traditional focus, whereas British informants were more confident that the conservatorium culture remained strong. This confidence may stem from the premium funding which supports British institutions more generously than does the Australian higher education system. In Australia, the level of funding is at the discretion of the university, and few choose to offer anything above the base level provided by government.

Specific examples describe the altered reality of leading a music school in Australia: One leader was challenged to ‘turn it around or close it down’, another “crumble[d] under the additional roles of chief bean counter and beggar to the bank, roles she is neither intellectually or [sic] emotionally equipped for”, and yet another conveniently reversed the notion of quality, insisting that quality “is about satisfaction in the client”.²⁷ A few applied change with positive gain: Anthony Camden moved Queensland Conservatorium into the cultural precinct of Brisbane’s South Bank,

initiating a city presence for the conservatorium's new partner Griffith University, and consolidating the conservatorium's place in the cultural infrastructure of the city. Curiously, a key factor here was potential gain for the University, not the Conservatorium.

Over the last decade, music institutions in Britain have been challenged to increase student access, staff and student mobility, and successful graduate outcomes. Whilst many have developed partnerships with universities, they remain largely in control of their artistic futures. Nonetheless, they have not escaped the impact of policy altogether. For example the (now prestigious) RAM has made a significant adjustment to the intake of undergraduate piano students in order to improve graduate destination statistics.²⁸ Concerned about how widening access might affect the quality of full-time programs, the RAM and other institutions have instead expanded outreach initiatives to meet government access objectives.

Despite the political emphasis on access, relatively few British institutions have moved away from traditional conservatorium training. Trinity College of Music is one of those few. Acknowledging that 'there's nothing so motivating like [sic] the threat of the gallows,' Gavin Henderson used Trinity's new location to create a dance/music academy with Laban in response to the prospect of additional funding offered by the expanding higher education system.²⁹

Parallel differences

Thus over the course of time there exist parallels and differences between Australian and British institutions, with consequences for the leaders in each context. Parallels take the form of challenges wrought by changing government policies and shifting social preferences. Issues uncovered by this research reveal strong similarities among the challenges which contemporary conservatorium leaders face in both countries. At the same time there are significant differences in their capacity to respond, and the extent of response to each challenge.

With the constancy of change experienced over more than a decade, Australian leaders indicated a greater resistance to change and capacity for further change. To a large extent, this lack of capacity to change is directly related to the level of power afforded the leader in any Australian conservatorium – for some it is non-existent.

Although there are more than thirty music institutions in Australia, only a third now pretend to be a conservatorium in the original European sense. Some Australian conservatoria have already made substantial adjustments to their core business: two institutions have abandoned the study of classical music altogether, and others have invested in non-traditional programs.

Cultural infrastructure is directly related to opportunities in musical training, regardless of the philosophy and intention of the individual conservatorium. No matter what the quality or similarity, students in Australian conservatoria rarely experience cultural infrastructure in the classical genre on the same scale as is ever-present in Britain. On the other hand, there are non-classical programs in Australia which have competitive value on an international scale.

The potential for offering Australian students exposure to British experiences and programs, and conversely allowing British students access to the variety of programs available in Australian institutions should lead to an obvious question: with high-speed real-time technology now easily accessible, one wonders why institutions in each country are not exploring ways in which it might become the foundation of the next generation of collaborative music training.³⁰

NOTES

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- ² Helen Lancaster, 'Leading Conservatoria Through Change'. PhD Thesis (University of Queensland, 2006).
- ³ Diane Collins, *Sounds from the Stables* (Sydney, 2001).
- ⁴ C.Ehrlich. *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century*. (Oxford, 1985).
- ⁵ Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. *First Report of the Committee on the State of Musical Education at Home and Abroad*. (London, 1885), quoted in Ehrlich, *Music Profession*.
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- ¹² James Gandre, 'And Then There Were Seven: An Historical Case Study of the Seven Independent American Conservatories of Music That Survived the Twentieth Century'. Ed.D Thesis (University of Nebraska, 2001).
- ¹³ Helen Lancaster, 'Leading Conservatoria'.
- ¹⁴ Curtis Price, interview with author conducted in 2002.
- ¹⁵ Informant 34, interview with author conducted in 2004.
- ¹⁶ University of Newcastle, 2006
- ¹⁷ Helen Lancaster, 'Leading Conservatoria'.
- ¹⁸ Informant 51, interview with author conducted in 2004.
- ¹⁹ Charles Bodman Rae, interview with author conducted in 2003. Bodman Rae was Dean and Professor at Elder School of Music from 2002-2006.
- ²⁰ Dame Janet Ritterman, interview with author conducted in 2003.
- ²¹ Informant 36, interview with author conducted in, 2004.
- ²² John Hopkins, interview with author conducted in 2003.
- ²³ Diane Collins, *Sounds from the Stables*, 210
- ²⁴ David Tomatz, interview with author conducted in 2004.
- ²⁵ John Dawkins, *Higher Education: A Policy Statement* (Canberra, 1988). *What is the Bologna Declaration?* (Utrecht, 2002). *Funding of Specialist Higher Education Institutions*. (HEFCE, 2000).
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²⁷ Clive Pascoe, email to author (2004); Kelly Burke & Katrina Krosnakova. 'Chorus of Disapproval as Music Merger Nears its Finale.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*. 31 May 2001; Greg Whateley interview with author conducted in 2002.

²⁸ Curtis Price, interview with author conducted in 2002.

²⁹ Gavin Henderson, interview with author conducted in 2002. Laban is a renowned school of dance.

³⁰ Helen Lancaster, 'Virtually there: Real-time Interactive Technology applied to Instrumental Music Teaching', presented at the *Reflective Conservatoire Conference*, Guildhall, London, 2006.