

# Catching a glimpse of the future: One year on in a youth string project

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## Abstract

The provision of musical experiences for youth, especially in low socio-economic areas (SES), requires funded support and imaginative resourcing. This paper presents data from the Penrith (NSW Australia) Youth String Program offered in partnership by the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO), Penrith Symphony Orchestra (PSO) and The Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre (The Joan) over a period commencing in 2015-2016. The current context for young musicians in the locality is one of inequitable distribution of educational resources and access to knowledge. Consequently, this research is framed by Opportunity to Learn theory. The program has been designed to encourage young string players in the Penrith area through a program of guided rehearsals and tutorials.

The evaluation plan incorporates the following data: student practice logs; and student, parent and tutor focus groups as well as site visit observations to capture information about the quality of program implementation. This paper reports on the research question:

What did the participants gain from their involvement in the program?

Findings demonstrate that the participants developed both skills in performance and expressive ensemble playing. Implications are that the program has encouraged the students to be aware of their own progress and to develop personal goals, whether they are to play a challenging piece of music well or to imagine a future in professional music making. The impact of the carefully spaced rehearsals in the program, the combination of local and visiting tutors and the development of personal goals suggest avenues for future research.

**Key words:** Youth orchestra; Opportunity to Learn theory; informal learning; possible selves theory; deliberate practice.

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## Introduction

A community orchestra can be constructed as a learning community, a “hermeneutic circle” of learning (Slattery, 2006, p. 139), in which ideas circulate, rather than being presented by a teacher and learned by a student. The development of expertise is part of this learning community experience (Barrett, 2011). The

Penrith Youth String Ensemble Program can be seen as such a learning community. The students are presented four times per year with a repertoire of four musical works over a period of three weeks. These young people did not audition. The students were asked to apply stating their name and age and how long they had been playing. The call for applications was placed on the Orchestra’s website: “Build your

ensemble skills in a supportive and exciting environment, led by tutors from Penrith Symphony Orchestra and the world-renowned Australian Chamber Orchestra."They applied to the Penrith Strings Administrator of the Penrith Symphony Orchestra (PSO, an amateur orchestra that may eventually benefit from this program). A group of 27 instrumentalists responded (eight+ eight violins, three violas, seven cellos and one double bass; a second double bass was added in 2016). The principal violin and the second violin and cello section leaders have had an impact on their sections by their engagement in rehearsals, their posture and technique, and their grasp of expressive suggestions from conductor and tutors. Following a review of literature, the paper explores discussions with parents, orchestral tutors and students alongside observations of rehearsals and performances, paying particular attention to the impact of the PSO tutors and the ACO professional musicians. The nature of the student data necessarily changes in the second year as their awareness of their own development became a focus of data gathering through practice logs and focus groups.

## Literature

The literature that informs this evaluation is framed by Opportunity to Learn theory (Carter & Welner, 2013), explained below. It also includes Green's work (2008) on the importance of social and informal learning for young musicians, including the use of modelling strategies, and the Possible Selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In education, Opportunity to Learn (OTL), a term originally used for whether students received adequate amounts of instruction, has been discussed in the context of inequitable distribution of educational resources and access to knowledge (Carter & Welner, 2013). Providing all students with a fair opportunity to learn (OTL) is a challenge facing educators everywhere. Morgan (2007) and Naidoo (2009) have commented on the mix of affluence, with major industries, and disadvantage,

with poor housing and infrastructure that exists in the Western Sydney region. Further research (Fagan & O'Neill, 2015) provides explanation of the disadvantage focusing on the spatial-social mismatches in Western Sydney's regional labour market. A few examples are quite telling:

- By 2011, only 60.8% of resident workers in Greater Western Sydney (GWS) had jobs in the region.
- There are large commuting flows for workers to other parts of the city.
- GWS lacks the economic drivers, hard and soft infrastructures and regional political institutions afforded to cities like Brisbane or Perth which have similar populations.

Moving beyond the original notions of OTL – access to content, resources or instructional processes – Moss, Pullin, Gee, Haertel and Jones Young (2008) reconceptualise OTL in terms of interaction among learners and elements of their learning environments. This reconceptualisation sits well with the kind of learning access that the Penrith String Program sought to provide and highlights the gap in the region that preceded its commencement.

Green (2008) wrote that learning occurs through "listening, watching, imitating, and talking," (p. 10) and she adds that processes in informal learning include working "alongside friends, through self-directed learning and peer-directed learning" (p. 10). Consequently, the young musician learns by the modelling of others, whether in person or in a video clip. Green also discusses the importance of the social aspect of informal learning contexts, with conscious and unconscious learning taking places in groups. The repertoire for such learning is described as "real world" repertoire (2008) in that there are no adaptations or modifications to simplify challenges.

Finally, it is important to focus a little on the formation of the role and identity of musician. 'Possible selves' is a theory describing a future self or selves. The selves represent

desired, expected, or feared future selves, and sometimes a combination of these states (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In broad terms, these possibilities are representations of an individual's future, sometimes described as their ideal self (Freer, 2010). Markus and Nurius (1986) first conceptualised Possible Selves theory and understood it as having three strands. The first was what a person would like to become and the second was what they expected to become. The third strand was a feared self, or that which a person wants to avoid (Powell, 2015). In this paper, attention will be drawn to the first, what a person wants to become.

This paper also draws attention to the role of 'practice'. Barrett (2011, drawing on Lehman & Gruber, 2006; Jorgensen, 2008; Papageorgi et al., 2010) explains that the key component of such attention is the kind of deliberate practice that addresses specific challenges (p. 281). Barrett further explains that such practice focuses on improving the skills you already have and on extending the range of your skills. Referring, among others, to Ericsson, Prietula and Cokely (2007) Barrett also places strong emphasis on expert monitoring of practice (p. 264).

## Method

The evaluation research project utilised a multi-method design combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including site observations, focus groups and interviews with the young players, their parents, the PSO tutors, manager and conductor and the ACO tutors. The evaluation plan incorporates the following data: systematic student practice logs; interviews with the strings administrator and conductor; and student, tutor and parent focus groups. The plan includes systematic observations of program implementation to complement focus group data. The site visit observations capture information about the quality of program implementation (description of program activities) as well as student behaviours (related

to social skill development and instrument performance over 2015-2016). The participants are 27 young string players and their parents (10 accepted the invitation to comment), the PSO tutors (n=4), strings administrator and conductor and the ACO tutors (n=5, including a double bass tutor).

Ethics approval from Western Sydney University was granted for all elements of data collection and reporting. Students and parents, PSO and ACO tutors all completed consent forms. Only those participants who freely gave consent had their responses to the research interview protocols recorded. Focus group questions are shown at appendix A, according to cohort: students (S), parents (P), PSO and ACO tutors (T).

At the rehearsals, focus groups with students were conducted, asking about what the students felt that they had learned that they were not able to do before the program commenced. Focus groups with parents were also conducted asking about what parents noticed about their child's motivation to practice. The practice logs were distributed to students and the method of collection was established as photographing the relevant page. In addition, the researchers took field notes and video-taped the rehearsals for purposes of being able to check the language between conductor or tutors and young players as well as changes they made in playing. There were two focus groups with students in 2015 and two with parents. In 2016, data came from 59 Practice Log Book entries; two focus groups with seven and four young musicians respectively; a focus group with six parents including parents of new members for the Penrith Strings; a focus group with three PSO tutors and another with three ACO musicians. The focus groups and interviews in 2015 established some particular emphases in the groups: parents advocating for their son or daughter's interest; tutors with expectations of improving technique and meeting challenges; and students with clear understanding of their own goals. Thematic discourse analysis (King, in Cassell

& Symon, 2004) was selected to provide a detailed and nuanced account of themes where broader assumptions and meanings were seen to underpin what was articulated in the data from each group of participants.

### **Findings: What the parents talked about**

The comments from parents in the focus groups were varied. For one father, for whom study was a priority, a balance was achieved through music and sport. Another parent noticed that his son was more interested in different types of music, having been exposed to four new ensemble works in one session. One student's mother had noticed that her son was more focused on practice. She said: "Sometimes he needs a little prodding but he's 12." She thought he had become more organised in that he would do this in the mornings when he was fresh: "He was finding when he came home from school, he was not ready to concentrate on music. His adjustment of practice time has really helped him learn and he enjoys it more." This sample of parent comments shows their main concerns being: that involvement in the Penrith String Ensemble balanced the demands of schoolwork; that through participation, exposure to a broader range of music was possible; and that maximum benefit was drawn from the experience through organised practice.

### **Findings: What the PSO orchestral tutors and the ACO musicians talked about**

The orchestral tutors were members of the Penrith Symphony Orchestra and a sample of their comments is drawn from the first months of the program. The repertoire chosen for the first session of three rehearsals was Bartók *Romanian Folk Dances*; Mozart *Divertimento* K. 136, selected movements; Grieg *Ases Død*; and Handel *Messiah*, *Sinfonia*. Asked to comment on the repertoire, the

PSO tutors thought it "...satisfying for both players and listeners without it being perfect." Going more deeply into the challenges of the repertoire, the violin 1 tutor (the leader of the PSO) thought there was a high degree of difficulty. The second violin tutor (a teacher with more than 20 years' experience) said that it was quite "...challenging for all the seconds. The daunting factor was the tempo (in the Handel and Mozart). The Bartok appeared impossible to the young players, probably in part due to the much-marked parts, but it turned out to be the favourite." This tutor also commented on specific technical demands, drawing attention to: "bowing, especially at the frog; moving quickly to and from 3rd position; rapid fingerwork in the left hand; phrasing and shaping the music; plus learning orchestral etiquette about who turns pages and who plays top or lower lines. The viola tutor said: Challenge is important, and it wasn't out of their reach by week 2. Slower pieces were still stylistically challenging; *divisi* parts meant that students who were not comfortable with higher positions had an option." Choices of repertoire in 2016 have shown different challenges: Jenkins' *Palladio*; Newbold's *Arabian Dreams*; and Grainger's *Lincolnshire Posy*. Through the evolving choices of repertoire, the PSO tutors monitored the deliberate practice of the students.

ACO comments are drawn from the final month of 2015. The mentor cellist from the ACO spoke about the learning combination of formal elements and informal elements. In the Penrith ensemble, he saw important informal learning: how to behave around each other socially within an organised group; and the conventions and agreements that are part of orchestral playing. He identified the learning as cumulative, an important outcome of the length of the program. The mentor viola player stated: 'When you're playing with people that are better than you, it lifts you, no matter who you are.' The mentor violin, said: 'I'm trying to get the musicians to move from the paper and get to the emotions, the physicality of the music.' The ACO musicians provided a different

support for the students in a kind of mentoring that shared the way in which they participated in rehearsals as a professional ensemble. Their focus was always on the aspects that contribute to performance. The combination of support from community musicians and from internationally recognised ACO musicians has been important to the deliberate practice of the students and their perceptions of their own progress.

### **Findings: What the students talked about in 2015**

The students talked in 2015 about the improvement they had noticed in their sight reading skills and that they were pleased about that. They enjoyed meeting and talking music with the other students. There were many comments from violin and viola players about standing and moving along with the music, in the manner of the ACO musicians, being a way of getting fully involved with the music. Some of the young players stated that initially they found it daunting to sit or stand next to the ACO players but that they later found they were so approachable. The principal violin said "I feel I now need to practise producing a better sound with my violin. Comparing my playing in the Mozart Divertimento to the way the ACO leader plays, he produces a better sound with notes that are clear and rich. I feel I need to practice to reach that level." This aligns with the wished-for possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and is the kind of goal setting that shows self-motivation.

### **Observation of rehearsals**

Before the rehearsal period began, the Penrith Symphony Orchestra (PSO) Strings Administrator sent the music to the participants. The long-term vision was to build orchestral skills in young musicians in Western Sydney, and a pathway towards other opportunities such as membership of a community orchestra or, for some, a career in music.

The first rehearsal was with the conductor of the PSO. His approach was to get the students playing music without too much interruption. He began with Grieg's *Death of Ase (Peer Gynt)* and did not stop to repair some uncertainty in the attack. He gave few directions other than "more here" but he modelled breathing before phrases. During this period of the orchestra playing together, the section leaders from the PSO moved chair to play alongside students. This gave the opportunity to hear how each student was managing. The conductor next rehearsed the Bartok dances, working on dynamics for the low strings when they entered without the melody and how they would adjust that when the first violins' melody entered. When the orchestra broke into sectional rehearsals, they had those two works on which to focus, in order to be more secure when they regathered as a whole orchestra after a break for refreshments. In the first violin sectional, the tutor provided both technical advice and opportunities to trial certain positions to play a series of notes. She encouraged them to 'breathe' in order to prepare phrases; and she discussed her preference for certain positions – 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> and had players try different ones. In the final section of the full rehearsal, the orchestra played the Handel and the first section of the Mozart as well as revisiting the Grieg and Bartok. The second rehearsal proceeded in a similar fashion, setting up a type of practice that was deliberate, highly structured and monitored.

In the third rehearsal, the young musicians and PSO tutors were joined by five members of the Australian Chamber Orchestra (ACO) and here, new strategies were introduced. Dominant among these were a range of modelling strategies. The use of imagery and metaphor is one. Slattery (2006) confirms that metaphor is necessary to construct meaning (p.294). At the rehearsal in April, the ACO orchestra leader, in order to create a particular sound colour for the violin melody in the first *Romanian Dance*, led the group in establishing a picture of a gypsy man. All the first violins were

invited to add details to this word picture. As the group added details to the image, the process released the players' imaginative powers and the sound changed as that happened, darkened and became more intense.

There were many different types of modelling strategies that the ACO players introduced to the young players. A second type involved discussion and demonstration. The leader drew attention to the tenuto mark in the score and asked how the young orchestra members interpreted that performance mark. This drew forth answers that built on each other, followed by a demonstration to clarify that the bow would not be lifted after the note was played so that it was not short but played with more weight. Yet another model passage showed the group how to lean towards 'interesting' notes in the phrase, to bring light and shade to the performance. When the group came to play the Bartok again, the Leader explicitly modelled the start of performance: "When I go like this (large circular down bow gesture) latch on so that we go together."

There were elements of informal learning, involving the assimilation of skills and knowledge from the others in the group in the string rehearsals. There was also conscious instruction but not done in a way that might overwhelm the young players. When the orchestra began to play the Grieg, the Leader modelled the level of quiet playing that the music demanded by showing the group what he called 'one hair' bowing. He asked the string players to turn their bow away and imagine catching the strings with just one hair of the bow. He also showed them where to position the bow in relation to the fingerboard. At no stage did he bother with technical terms like *sul tasto*. Such terms might come later. This experience was all about exploring colour. In preparing the Grieg, he had all the strings play on one note, first playing just at the tip of the bow with the bow tilted and the bow positioned near or on the fingerboard, then moving towards the bridge with more vibrato, explaining "That's basically

our colour palette." At the end of the rehearsal period, the families of the students were invited to hear what had been achieved in the first session of three weeks. This puts into action the idea of public performance as a key element in the middle years of development.

### **What developed in 2016**

In 2016, the students talked and journaled in their practice logs in varied ways, explaining how they think about problem solving. The students discussed the ways they would prioritise the music on which they were working, considering what needed their immediate attention. The students described strategies like 'air-bowing' and playing the music on the desk (rhythmically and fingering for pitch) when they were away from their instruments. In practicing, they would warm up with scales and then would commence with more intricate music, the music that they identified as providing challenge. They would practice more difficult sections slowly and then speed up, using a metronome. Two explanations from students give samples of their comments:

James: "I break the music down into different sections and practise each of those until I've got it right. I usually don't play the entire piece unless it's immediately before I'm performing something. I've found that's how it works best for me."

Emily: "Mainly when I practise, I focus on the bits I need to work on. Usually with a metronome and speed up the metronome pace as I go. Once I feel I've got it up to speed, then I'll go from the bar before the passage and run it from there."

Both these young musicians have articulated personal goals of becoming professional musicians. For others, the experience of playing music as well as they can is a big part of their lives. They were aware of their own improved progress. Table 1 shows the improvements the young players were able to identify in their playing.

## Discussion

In answering the research question, about what the participants gained from their involvement in the program, there are indications that the learning environment has been rich. One of the key factors has been the way the time span (2015-2016) was divided into four periods, each of three rehearsals, leading to a performance. The learning that took place was both formal and informal. Some of what the participants learned came from their peers, aligning with Green's (2008) work on social and informal learning. Attending rehearsals for the research, it was plain that some players in the section picked up what to do by osmosis from the section leaders. Learning was reinforced by family support. The families of these students, who have participated in focus groups and attended concerts where the Penrith String Ensemble have played, confirmed that they consider music important in the lives of their children. Moreover, eight of the young participants played with the community orchestra during the course of the program, an outcome that has made the parents proud of their children's success and has pointed the way to an increase in community orchestra ranks. Without such a program, the parents would not have been able to offer their children such a musical experience.

What is different in the Penrith String Ensemble program is the access to expert mentoring. This aligns with Barrett's (2011) research on deliberate practice, with expert monitoring. The program provides evidence that young musicians, who might not otherwise have had an opportunity to learn from experts, have been changed by their experience. The expert monitoring of practice is a key factor along with the feeling of shared learning that provides the sense of collective development. As was demonstrated in Table 1, the students are conscious of their improved progress. They know that the time they give to this project on the weekends is helping them to develop significant skills. The students have grown in confidence in performing and have connected socially with students who have common interests; they have had their imagination stimulated, learned new techniques and orchestral protocols, and had the vision of possible future selves expanded.

## Conclusion

The Penrith String Ensemble program has achieved rich learning for its young musicians and the potential of continued impact in the community. A limitation of the Penrith String Ensemble program is that it does not have a large number of participants – 27 young players. However, it points to some significant

**Table 1: Skills improvement.**

	To what extent have your skills as a musician improved in Penrith Strings Program?				
	1 (a little)	2	3	4	5 (a lot)
Bowing		1	6	6	5
Pizzicato	4	8	2	1	3
Ensemble Skills			3	9	6
Following a conductor		2	6	4	6
Fingering	4	3	3	4	4
Tone production	1	2	5	7	3
Observing Dynamics			6	6	6
Following a leader		1	4	5	8

implications. The combination of local and visiting tutors has proved very beneficial in developing the skills of the young musicians. Through rehearsals that have been carefully spaced to optimise learning time in intensive periods of three weeks at a time, the young musicians have had a number of different, experienced eyes on their progress. They have also been stimulated to think and reflect on their learning and identify what they have learned. Programs designed for young musicians might well use such a combination of tutors or mentors, as an avenue for future research.

This is a program that has encouraged the young players to develop personal goals of varying kinds. Some participants certainly have expressed interest in the life and work of a professional musician. The majority have talked about the fact that they have been pleased that they were 'more in control' of their instrumental tone and had learned to play music they would otherwise not have done. The program has offered young musicians the chance to play with a local community orchestra and this has been a wonderful motivation for them. Programs that have been designed to provide musical experiences for young people in low SES areas might well consider such motivation to continue positive links with parental support, another avenue for future research. The common factor among the students and their tutors was enjoyment: in playing together, in interpreting the repertoire and in bringing pleasure to audiences.

## **Appendix A**

### **Student Focus groups (S)**

1. As the year comes to a close, can you identify the things you have learned about playing your instrument this year?
2. Which of those things do you feel was most influenced by being part of this program?
3. What do you think about when you practise?
4. What does your teacher think of your progress this year?
5. What are the things you have most enjoyed about this program?
6. Do you have a favourite piece that the ensemble has played this year?
7. Do you prefer to play solo or in a group? Why is that?
8. Will you continue in the program next year?

### **Parent focus groups (P)**

1. What were your expectations of the program at the beginning of the project?
2. Comment on what your child has achieved in the project over the space of one year.

### **PSO and ACO tutors (T)**

1. What skills do you notice the young players acquiring? Can you comment on the technical and musical challenges?
2. Did the format of rehearsals work for you and the young players?

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