

Ruth Flockart and Dr Wood: a crucial relationship in the development of Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College music program

Louise Jenkins

Jenkins Consulting

Abstract

This paper explores the notion that particular working relationships within school music programs can have a significant affect on the program's development and progress. To explore this notion the research focussed on the working relationship of a music teacher at Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College (MLC), Ruth Flockart (1891-1985) and the principal Doctor A. Harold Wood (1896-1989). The research included an analysis of personal memorabilia, music manuscripts, newspaper articles, magazines and relics. Also, a range of oral history interviews were completed with family members, friends and former students of Flockart and Wood. The paper discusses the reasons for Flockart and Wood's significant influence upon the MLC music program. A shared religious devotion, a strong work ethic, excellent communication and the provision of mutual support were crucial to their successful working relationship. Significantly, a shared vision of the school music program was also vital. School music programs to this day rely upon the relationship between the school principal and the music teacher, hence the findings of this research can speak to contemporary schools with music programs. The findings may encourage understandings about working relationships in school music programs and lead to better outcomes for music.

Key words: school music programs, Ruth Flockart, Dr A. Harold Wood, working relationships, Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College

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Introduction

Too often we overlook the importance of collegiality and familial support in the work of school music teachers. Influences upon school music programs such as curriculum, funding and social changes are often considered as influential, but the significance of working relationships can be undervalued. This paper explores the notion that particular working relationships within music programs can dramatically affect the development and progress of a school music program. The story of Ruth Flockart (1891-1985) and Doctor A. Harold Wood (1896-1989), and their

influence upon the Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College (MLC), exemplifies the type of working relationship which can change dramatically the face of a school music program.

Flockart was a significant figure in the Melbourne music world in the first half of the twentieth century. Her outstanding work with the MLC choirs, and her formidable directorship of the MLC school choral program, are legendary. Yet Flockart's success was not achieved in isolation. As outlined in Jenkins (2007), Flockart greatly relied upon her sister Annie on the home front. Without Annie's support, it is probable that Flockart would not have been able to pursue her career with

such vigour. However, the research indicated that Flockart also relied upon the support of the Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College Principal, Reverend Dr. A. Harold Wood. They were a highly successful team of dedicated and religiously devout educators. The context and tone of this important relationship will be explored, with reference to Flockart and Wood's musical and religious philosophies and the impact their successful working relationship had on the MLC music program.

To contextualise the analysis of the Flockart/Wood working relationship, the paper will present an overview of Flockart's life and musical work. Details of this that have been hitherto unknown have been sourced through personal memorabilia (letters, scrapbooks, references, hand-written speeches, university transcripts) music manuscripts, newspaper articles, magazines and relics. Oral history interviews were also completed with family members, friends and former students of Flockart.

Flockart's life and career

Flockart was born in Lancefield, a small town in Victoria near the Macedon Ranges, on 23 March, 1891 (Children's Fund Registration of Birth). Her parents were Samuel Chalmers Flockart (1862-1949) and Louisa Gubbins (1865-1958). Samuel was a Methodist Minister and Louisa was a stay-at-home mother and a constant support to her husband in his ministry work.

Although born in Lancefield, Victoria, as a consequence of her father's occupation, Flockart spent her childhood in manses in both Melbourne and Tasmania (Wood, 1985). When her father was transferred to Victoria from Tasmania, Flockart came to Melbourne Methodist Ladies' College as a boarder (Flockart, 1956). MLC is an independent girls' school in the leafy Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn. It was founded in 1882 upon Christian principles, and is still a well-known Melbourne girls' school with a large student population. She was a keen music student at Melbourne MLC, and achieved a commendable number of musical

awards and prizes, including the Senior Grade on piano through the Trinity College of Music (MLC, 1908, p. 8).

Flockart went to The University of Melbourne Conservatorium in 1911, after finishing school, however, she said of this transition period 'I had no sooner left, than Dr. Fitchett invited me to return, as a junior resident member of staff to take Junior piano students, & at the same time go on with my own musical education at the university' (Flockart, 1956). The Rev. Dr. W. H. Fitchett was the principal of MLC from 1882-1928 and was a staunch supporter of Flockart in her early teaching years. Hence, while studying at the University of Melbourne, Flockart stayed at MLC as a resident teacher, living at the school in the boarding house. This was the beginning of her '48 years of unbroken service on the staff of M.L.C.' (Wood, 1986, p. 5). After finishing her Bachelor of Music, Flockart continued to teach at MLC as a piano, theory and singing teacher until 1934, however, in 1930 there seemed to have been a change which set the scene for Flockart's future at MLC.

In 1930 there was a curt entry for Flockart for 'Special Choral Work', in the MLC Special Teacher's Account Book. A perusal of the *Minutes of the Finance and Advisory Committee Meeting Notes* from this period suggests that a change was taking place in the leadership in the music area at MLC. In 1930 the notes stated 'the Musical Director [Mr Frazier] received a salary of £230 per annum and that this was not justified by the amount of work at present done' (*Minutes of Finance and Advisory Committee*, 1930, p. 3). The committee decided to end the arrangement with Mr Frazier, and asked him to take the choral work at a suitable salary. It appears that Mr Frazier was not satisfied with this and by July the 'President reported that he was making arrangements for Miss Ruth Flockart for the choral work of the Upper School in preparation for Speech Night' (*Minutes of Finance and Advisory Committee*, 1930, p. 2).

From 1930 to 1932 Flockart undertook the choral work at the MLC. In May 1932 the school celebrated its Jubilee and as part of this organised a concert at the Melbourne Town Hall. For this

Jubilee concert Flockart was 'entirely responsible for the formation of a special choir of about 200 girls' (*Australian Musical News*, 1932, p. 13). Rehearsals for this concert began in February, which gave Flockart three months to prepare all the works. This mighty feat had its toll, and in June 1932 it is reported in the *Minutes of the Finance and Advisory Committee* that, 'we desire to express our sincere appreciation of the work done so faithfully and ably done by Miss Flockart in connection with the Jubilee Concert...we express our sympathy with Miss Flockart, our regret that her health has been so seriously affected' (*Minutes of Finance and Advisory Committee*, 1932, p. 3). Flockart must have worked herself into a state of complete exhaustion as she did not return to work until the following year.

In 1933 Flockart went on a tour to 'England and the Continental musical countries' (*The Australian Musical News*, 1934:12.) for 'a year's post graduate study' (*The British Australian and New Zealander*, 1933) to 'study various forms of choral conducting, and investigate methods used in school music and modern teaching in generally' (*The Australian Musical News*, 1934, p. 12). On her return she was elevated to the position of Director of Music (*Minutes of Finance and Advisory Committee*, 1934, p. 2). Flockart had been at the school as a music teacher for twenty-three years and was now forty-three years old.

Flockart continued her work at MLC under the leadership of the Rev. J. W. Grove until 1939 at which point a significant relationship began which consolidated her work at MLC and established her as an important Melbourne music figure; the Reverend Dr. A. Harold Wood was appointed principal.

Flockart and Reverend Doctor A. Harold Wood (1896-1989)

Wood was the principal of MLC from 1939 to 1966, which was a significant part of the time that Ruth Flockart was the Director of Music. It was during this period that the MLC choral program flourished and whilst Flockart was

clearly instrumental in this success, her working relationship with Wood, the school leader, seems to have played a crucial role.

Wood initially studied law but his daughter Janet Secomb, who was a student at MLC from 1939 to 1944, stated that 'when he became a candidate for the Methodist Ministry he was told to drop law, with one year to go, and do Arts instead. He also took out a Bachelor of Divinity, later Doctor of Divinity' (Jenkins, 2006d). As a complement to these academic skills, Wood was also a keen musician, and this aspect of his life provided a strong connection between himself and Flockart. He was, according to his daughter, a gifted pianist, but he did not pursue studies in music (Jenkins, 2006d). His musicality was confirmed by several former MLC students. One student, Laurel Mackechnie¹, suggested Wood may have had a Doctorate in music (Jenkins, 2006c) because of his clear musical skills. Whilst this was inaccurate, it reflected the perception of Wood as a very musical man.

Wood was not only a performer and singer, he was also capable of conducting the school choirs, even if only in an emergency. In 1938 Flockart was injured in a nasty tram accident in which she hurt her back (Sinclair, 1957). The newspaper reported that Flockart was 'preoccupied with some administrative problem...slipped and fell from the train and spent the next five months in a plaster cast with a broken spine' (Sinclair, 1957). As a result of this accident, Mackechnie remembered that Wood 'had to conduct us in the Annual Church Service in the Auburn Methodist Church...we always used to have the most beautiful Introit, 'Holy, Holy, Holy' (Jenkins, 2006c). Marie Touzeau²,

1 Laurel Mackechnie, (née Lockwood), was a student at MLC in the 1930s and 1940s. She was very involved in the music program and had a great deal of contact with Ruth Flockart through her school music work.

2 Touzeau was a student at MLC from 1942 to 1946. After finishing school she worked part-time as Flockart's school assistant while studying at the University of Melbourne. Touzeau maintained contact with Flockart until Flockart's death in 1985.

a former student of Flockart, reinforced the view of Wood as a competent musician saying that he sang very lustfully in assembly and that among an almost all-female teaching staff he had a 'lovely singing voice, and of course [he was] the only man there for a long time!' (Jenkins, 2006e). Mackechnie agreed and added that when the choir sang in assembly they 'always had to double the bass for Dr. Wood' (Jenkins, 2006c). Wood was a good musician, a fine singer and pianist and capable of conducting if required; according to his students.

To complement this musical appreciation, according to Secomb, Flockart and Wood had 'identical tastes in music' (Jenkins, 2006d). A letter from Wood to Flockart of 1967, after they had both retired from MLC, states 'I am also working for a new Hymn-Book (which unfortunately cannot have all the Charles Wesley hymns we now have)' (Wood, 1967). There is a sense that Flockart would understand Wood's sentiments and would concur with his disappointment that all the Wesley hymns could not be included due to limitations on space. After years of working together this type of understanding is not surprising, but nevertheless it suggests that Secomb was correct in her summation about their identical tastes.

Music provided Wood and Flockart with one important link; their love of music and recognition of its value enabled music to be placed high on the list of priorities at MLC. However, a love and appreciation of music would not have been enough in a busy school environment, to lift the profile and standard of the music program. Other common factors gave the working relationship certain energy and focus which enabled the music program, and particular the choral work, to become both so revered.

A shared Christian faith

Both Wood and Flockart were devout Christians, and this provided another basis upon which to build mutual understandings about their work. Flockart's father was a devout Methodist Minister

as had been both her paternal grandfather Robert Colquhoun Flockart (1820-1896) and her uncle David Flockart, her father's brother. Samuel, Ruth's father, served for 'forty-four years...in important circuits, including Preston, Hamilton, Devonport, Launceston, Geelong, Sandringham and Burwood'³ (*The Spectator*, 1949:492). Despite Peter Flockart describing Samuel as 'cheerless' and Samuel and Ruth's mother Louisa as 'a bit forbidding' (Jenkins, 2007b), Samuel appears to have been a demonstrably emotional man when preaching. Touzeau said 'I have heard that dear old Sam Flockart...was so passionate about it [his Christian convictions] that he actually used to cry when he was giving his sermons' (Jenkins, 2006e). Ruth Flockart's commitment to the Christian faith came very early as she was a member of the MLC Student Christian Union, 'I remember with gratitude our I.C.M. Meetings and Bible Study Circles under the leadership of Miss Fitchett.' (Flockart, 1942). Miss Fitchett was the daughter of the school principal, Reverend Fitchett.

Former students spoke of Flockart's Christian dedication, one in particular, Enid Woodhouse, confirmed that 'She [Flockart] definitely had a very strong faith, not a shadow of a doubt' (Jenkins, 2006e).⁴ Flockart's family background was steeped in Methodist tradition and religion was a driving force behind her work and the motivation for her years of tiring work at MLC.⁵ Wood stated upon her retirement that 'she thought of nothing else but the good of the girls, not only musicianship, but in Christian influence and example' (MLC, 1959).

3 Preston, Sandringham and Burwood are suburbs of Melbourne, Devonport and Launceston are provincial cities in Tasmania, Hamilton is a rural town in Victoria and Geelong is a provincial city in Victoria.

4 Enid Woodhouse (née Rowe) was a student at MLC from 1935 to 1946. She was a soprano in the madrigal group, and a member of the senior choir and glee club.

5 Flockart suffered a physical breakdown in 1932 following an extremely arduous preparation for the MLC Jubilee Concert.

To an extent, Christianity was a support system for Flockart, as it provided her with an ongoing conviction in her achievements.

Methodist Ladies' College was, and still is, a school built upon the Christian faith. The first four principals, Fitchett, Grove, Wood and Woodgate were all ministers of religion. Secomb said of Flockart's time at MLC 'the whole focus of the school...was Christian education' (Jenkins, 2006d). Wood as principal, tried to keep fees as low as possible 'to enable girls from Christian homes and Church homes to be able to come' (Jenkins, 2006d). Shirley Flockart, Ruth's much younger sister-in-law, told a story which exemplified the link between Wood and Flockart's thinking about the importance of a Christian education, 'Jack [Shirley's husband and Ruth's brother] would donate money for scholarships to MLC. Ruth was persuasive, she would tell Jack sad stories about girls who couldn't afford to go to MLC, and the next thing Dr. Wood would tell Ruth that someone had donated money for a scholarship, Jack wouldn't let on that it was him' (Jenkins, 2007a). Shirley was sure that Ruth was well aware that her 'sad stories' would most likely motivate a generous brother to help. Flockart and Wood had the same mind-set about the value of Christian education and the need to provide as many girls as possible with the opportunity to have a Christian education. This mutual faith and Christian outlook provided a strong basis upon which to discuss school matters, plan for school functions which nearly always included Christian inspired music, and drive their strong work ethic.

A common work ethic

A strong work ethic was another commonality between Flockart and Wood which supported their working relationship and collaboration in relation to school functions. Demonstrably Flockart was a hard worker. While a student at MLC she gained many prizes and awards and then while studying at the University of

Melbourne and working as a resident teacher 'school pianos were always in demand...so to get her own practice done Miss Flockart hired a piano from Allan's, and installed it in her bedroom. She worked for two hours daily on the piano before breakfast, and at other times during the day' (Douglas, 1959, p. 4).

Shirley Flockart described Flockart in the following manner 'she had particularly good physical strength and health...she also had an awful lot of energy. The work ethic, that was a real Protestant thing...you are here in this life to do good things' (Jenkins, 2007a). Shirley told a story about Flockart when she was in her nineties. A relative came to visit her at her retirement home and they were admiring an exercise bike donated to the home, 'what happens that Ruth hopped on the bike, she was in her nineties, and was peddling away' (Jenkins, 2007a).

Flockart was not the only one with a strong and vigorous work ethic. Dr. Wood was as energetic, if not more so. His daughter recalled his weekend activities 'On Sundays he would preach somewhere every Sunday, morning, night, sometimes in the afternoons...he would go to the country, he would leave at 6 o'clock in the morning to get up to Swan Hill⁶ to take a service, and then come down to Echuca⁷, take a service there in the afternoon, and then to Bendigo⁸ at night. He would often not get home until 2 o'clock in the morning...He had incredible stamina. He was one of these people who just worked all the time' (Jenkins, 2006d). The combination of these two work ethics must have created an atmosphere of constant planning, preparation, activity and productivity.

6 Swan Hill is a city in the North West of Victoria. It is approximately 4.5 to 5 hours drive from Melbourne.

7 Echuca is a Victorian town approximately 3 hours North of Melbourne.

8 Bendigo is a provincial Victorian city approximately 2 hours North-West of Melbourne.

The Importance of Communication

Flockart and Wood's relationship was, as was customary in those times, quite formal, and it is amusing in retrospect that at all times they called each other 'Dr. Wood' and 'Miss Flockart', even in a social situation (Jenkins, 2007a). However, despite their excellent rapport and working friendship, Touzeau, who became Flockart's school assistant after completing school, did emphasise that Flockart 'would battle for concessions to be able to rehearse the orchestra, with Dr. Wood...she had to work around him a bit. She had her ways and means' (Jenkins, 2006e). At this point in the interview Touzeau did a 'look' with her face, which caused Mackechnie to collapse into laughter. Mackechnie responded, 'oh yes, I remember that face!' Flockart had a 'look' which indicated her disapproval, or if appropriate, her seriousness about a matter. She was rather a confronting person in conversation and according to Reverend Howard Secomb, Wood's son-in-law, invaded peoples' personal space 'She was the sort of person who when she was talking to you she would come up and be about that far away from you [Howard demonstrated by walking right up to his wife's face] and she would look straight into your eyes. She didn't give you much of a chance to say much, just tell you what you were supposed to do. Janet's father [Dr.Wood] was often commenting about that, she would get him into a corner and not give up until she got what she wanted' (Jenkins, 2006d). Wood himself recounted that at one stage Flockart rang him at 8.00 o'clock at night and kept him talking until 11.00pm about school related matters (Wood, 1986, p. 4).

A good working relationship

Wood provided a great deal of support for Flockart and recognized the importance of the music program. This was exemplified via a story recounted by Joan Earle, the school pianist in

the 1940s⁹, who said 'they stopped me playing hockey and stopped me playing tennis because it would damage my hands...Dr. Wood called me in and said that in terms of responsibility to the school, they needed me' (Jenkins, 2006b). From then on Earle was encouraged to swim instead, which she did after school every night. This type of support from Wood enabled Flockart to rely implicitly upon Earle as the committed school pianist without the constant fear of her sustaining a sporting injury and therefore being unable to meet her duties.

Earle described the Wood/Flockart combination as follows, 'I think he relied implicitly on her. I am sure they must have had discussions as to the kind of music that they would want and the sort of functions that would be prepared. I know myself, you have the planned program for the next year, from the work that we did it must have been planned the previous year, the programs matching the requirements of chapel services and official functions and speech nights. It is a "must have been done", a logical conclusion, to get the appropriate hymns with the descants. We were always learning hymns with descants, and the orchestral parts had to be written, there was a huge amount of preparation.' Having done this type of work herself, Earle was speaking from her personal experience as a music Director, and as a former student who knew Flockart well. She emphasized the level of collaboration which was crucial to the high standard expected by MLC in its music program 'You don't get those kinds of programs, and the quality of programs, as outcomes to anything but very careful planning and a very agreeable communication, collaboration between those two camps' (Jenkins, 2006b). Whilst their two strong personalities had the potential to cause friction in their working relationship, instead their 'very agreeable communication' and collaboration laid the basis

⁹ Joan Earle was a student at MLC from 1939 to 1945. Ruth Flockart was her piano teacher. Earle was the school pianist.

for excellent long term planning and development of the music program.

The extent of the evident affection and respect Wood and Flockhart had for each other was exemplified by Secomb in an amusing story 'There was...[a] time when she [Flockhart] came to lunch. Dad... was approached twice... to be General Secretary of overseas missions... and he was also approached to be principal of the Theological Training College, Methodist Theological Training College. This was what he really wanted to do. But for both of those he turned them down because he felt he hadn't been at MLC for long enough. I can remember Miss Flockhart being at lunch, dad was in Sydney, he'd gone to the Mission board... they were trying to work out who would be the next general secretary and Miss Flockhart was talking about this. She said to mum "who do they have in mind Mrs Wood?" and mum said "Mr Wood". I can remember Miss Flockhart dropped her knife and fork and she looked absolutely aghast. She said 'You don't mean it Mrs Wood' and she said 'Yes, they've asked him to be general secretary'. She didn't take it well, I think she was just so staggered at the thought. She and dad clicked right from the start and I think it was pretty clear to her that she had an ally in dad. The thought that he might be going off again was too much' (Jenkins, 2006d). Wood did not take up the offer to be general secretary, but had he done so it may have changed significantly the MLC music program, depending upon how Flockhart and the new principal worked together. Flockhart and Dr. Wood's working relationship lasted for twenty years and produced some lasting memories for students, MLC families, and staff alike. Shirley Flockhart was told by a family member of Dr. Wood that when Ruth Flockhart died 'Dr. Wood cried and cried', (Jenkins, 2007a) a clear indication of the esteem in which he held Flockhart and the strength of their friendship. The successful work union was enhanced by Wood's expectations 'that the Director of Music would provide the school with the kind of appropriate music for the appropriate occasion' (Jenkins, 2006b).

Flockhart's work was recognised by the wider community and in 1956 she was awarded an MBE (Member of the British Empire) on the Queen's Birthday List. This was for her services to Australian music. The award confirmed her status as an influential music teacher both within MLC and beyond. It could be conjectured that without Wood's continual support this may not have happened as the working relationship Flockhart and Wood forged was a lynchpin in the development of the MLC choral program at this time.

Flockhart and Wood's Christian dedication, their love and appreciation of music, their strong work ethic and their strong working communication were the foundations for the legendary choral work and music program work which MLC created during the 'golden years', as they were described by Wood to others (Jenkins, 2006d). Their sense of vocation and their need to do the right and useful thing in life and at work, and their particularly good health and high level of energy, perhaps led to them being used a little used by the system. Shirley Flockhart commented that Flockhart 'didn't earn very much' (Jenkins, 2007a), not that she heard her directly complain, but that ill feeling about this would have been negated by Flockhart's belief that she was being 'useful' and carrying out God's work. Wood too worked tirelessly for the school and the community as a minister and principal, no doubt his Christian faith and his sense of vocation and desire to serve, driving this behaviour.

Conclusion

Flockhart's success, and that of the MLC choral program during the 1940s and 1950s, was not achieved in isolation. Flockhart relied implicitly upon her sister Annie to carry out home duties, but she was also dependent upon the constant and energetic support of the MLC principal Dr. A. Harold Wood. It could be conjectured that many working relationships such as this have been the foundation of other school music

programs throughout Australia's history. Earle drew connections between Flockart and Wood's working relationship and her former working relationship with the principal of Cato College, a school which amalgamated with Wesley College in 1989. Earle was the Director of Music at Cato College for many years. School music programs to this day rely upon the relationship between the school principal and the music teacher or music director. The attitude of the school principal towards music can greatly affect the music program, and indeed, common understanding is that it is so influential it can 'make or break' a program. These understandings about the building blocks of successful school music programs can speak to contemporary schools with music programs. It can become a dialogue between the past and the present, informing the development of school music programs and encouraging understandings about crucial relationships within schools that lead to better outcomes for music students. It can be valuable to explore such relationships to enable a more practical understanding of the reasons such programs flourish, languish or die. Such understandings can be used as a basis for improvement and change.

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Dr Louise Jenkins is a director of Jenkins Consulting, a company providing professional development to schools in the area of intercultural understanding. Louise was formerly an Associate Director in Social Policy at Urbis and prior to this was a Research Fellow at Deakin University in the Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation. In 2009 she co-authored a book titled *Building Bridges: Creating a Culture of Diversity*, which includes two modules of teaching materials for socially inclusive schools. Louise spent many years teaching in the Faculty of Education at Monash University following an early career as a classroom music and instrumental music teacher. Louise's PhD was about Australian women music teachers in the period 1890-1930.