

The role of tertiary music academics in facilitating cultural capital in community music organisations: A case study.

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Abstract

This paper considers the important role the tertiary music institution has as an arts organisation within its community. It will focus primarily on the role of the professional musician, employed at the tertiary music institution, and the artistic contribution they make to amateur music organisations. Community music can bring enormous pleasure for those who make and hear it, yet its purpose in relation to the arts industry is unclear. Therefore these arts organisations often fall outside of government funding guidelines and appear as ‘second cousin’ to other arts activities that appear under the ‘community’ umbrella. Many community organisations can benefit from carefully targeted help and support beyond the obvious provision of grants and funding. This shortfall of formal government support can be provided through collaborations with tertiary music institutions. This paper considers a case study of one such collaboration and the way this has produced ongoing benefits for both the tertiary institution and the community music organisation. These benefits have continued to multiply for both partners providing the community at large with greater opportunities to enjoy arts events either as participants or observers.

Introduction

Creating music and participating in musical ensemble activity forms a large part of artistic activity in many communities throughout Australia. For the majority of people, singing in a choir can provide the easiest access to ensemble activity. The skills required to join a choir are minimal and the experience of making choral music together can be enjoyed throughout life. Age is no barrier to this type of musical activity. Young and old can come together to sing and each generation can learn from each other through the study of varied repertoire and styles. Ideally, a thriving choral group can embrace singers of varied musical ability and interest thus providing cultural and aesthetic input back into the community.

In contrast to this, participation in orchestras and bands does depend on each player having some level of technical ability. Furthermore, there is a financial commitment from each participant, as they must own their musical instrument and the equipment needed to make this work, whether these are amplifiers, microphones or just a large station wagon to carry around a drum kit or a double bass! These issues account for some of the barriers that prevent communities establishing thriving orchestras and bands. Adequately trained players and the right mix of players are needed so that the ensemble can actually function. Many communities find they can only sustain an orchestra or band for a short time and the ensemble can fall to pieces when key players or leaders leave the district.

As a result, there are many more amateur choirs and informal singing groups in Australia than orchestras and bands. Some of these choirs are large independent organisations and many others are small groups established through church communities or groups of like-minded individuals who want to make music together. Some choirs are strongly rooted in a community cultural identity such as those associated with Welsh coal miners in areas such as Ipswich in southeast Queensland. There is a strong Eisteddfod culture throughout Queensland with annual regional eisteddfods held in North Queensland and south-east Queensland each Easter and local annual eisteddfods in many regional cities. These eisteddfods create opportunities for large numbers of choirs to gather together in a festival atmosphere and encourage artistic growth and development through friendly competition.

Marcus Breen's 1994 article looks at a wide range of community music activities in Australia and notes that they can be described along a wide continuum of activity taking in a diverse range of styles and genres. He notes that some community music

activities, funded publicly, have been constructed around orthodox models of choirs, orchestras and folk groups. While these groups bring enormous pleasure for participants and audiences, their purpose in relation to Australia's arts industry is unclear.

If it (community music activity) is examined in relation to principal policy institutions such as the Australia Council (the Federal Government's Arts Funding Body) and various state and local government ministries, it is a second cousin to other arts activities that appear under the 'community' umbrella. It needs to be more fully defined and developed as a creative activity by funding organizations. (Breen, 1994, p. 314)

This observation presents a challenge to communities, arts administrators and their funding bodies. Certainly, these mainly orthodox arts activities continue to function in many Australian communities and their continued survival and artistic growth relies on individuals whose artistic leadership is provided on a purely voluntary basis or sponsored by another educational body such as a school or tertiary institution.

John Thompson's report (2002) adds to this debate by considering the role of the social entrepreneur in community building. His article teases out the function of the social entrepreneur in the business and voluntary sectors. Taking the results of case studies from the United Kingdom, he draws conclusions that resonate with the Australian situation concerning how voluntary organisations operate within their communities. One of his early conclusions states that many community organisations can benefit from carefully targeted help and support, beyond the obvious provision of grants and funding. He purports that "many volunteers do demonstrate the adage that 'ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things' if they set their mind to the task in hand and remain committed" (Thomson, 2002, p. 414).

However, he goes on to comment that external, expert help when provided for voluntary organisations can bring added benefits in the development of social capital within these organisations and their wider communities. While the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu first articulated the notion of social capital in 1973, he later expanded the definition of ‘capital’ to define other forms of ‘capital’. He defined the term ‘cultural capital’ to represent the totality of those non-economic factors upon which individuals can draw to enhance their chance of success in their lives (Bourdieu, 1997). Falk and Kilpatrick (2000) use an Australian-based case study to forward a new definition for social capital: “Social capital is defined as an accumulation of the knowledge and identity resources drawn on by communities-of-common-purpose.” Teghe and McAllister (2006) adopt the term ‘cultural capital’ to refer to

the specific and often unique collective cultural assets of a community, upon which it can draw, and exploit commercially. Cultural community capital thus differs from, but it is interdependent with, other forms of capital such as social capital, public capital and human capital. (p. 119)

Clearly, there are links between these definitions that serve to provide a theoretical backdrop for our paper. The scope of this paper does not allow for a full discussion on the level of activity in community choral and orchestral groups across all Australian states and their contribution to social and cultural capital, rather, it includes a case study of a successful partnership between one community choral group in Mackay, central Queensland and the academics of the Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music. By outlining some of the key features and benefits of this partnership, this paper will address a number of important issues and lessons and thus provide further arguments to advocate that the tertiary music institution and its academics play a vital role in community sustainability and development through their contribution to community cultural and aesthetic capital.

A brief history of the Mackay Choral Society

The Mackay Choral Society has been established for over 60 years. It has provided a vast array of music making opportunities during this time for Mackay citizens ranging from the performances of full-scale oratorios to staged music theatre productions. It has a proud history of music making and has drawn upon the talents of many local musicians who have filled the artistic leadership roles of artistic director/conductor and accompanist. Through the years, these leaders have included professional musicians and experienced music educators. During this time the choir has experienced various levels of numerical membership. Subsequent artistic success was largely based on the ability of these leaders to manage the artistic and social demands of the choir.

One early example of a professionally trained musician who led the choir was Alfred Epplere who studied at the Stüttgart Conservatoire with luminaries such as Max Schilling and Richard Strauss (Koschel, 2006). During Epplere's leadership from 1951 to 1959, the choir numbers increased to 75 and the choir was able to field an 'A' grade choir in the North Queensland Eisteddfod.

However, the fortunes of the choir were not always so positive. During the 1960s and 1970s the choir membership dropped to 12 with two choirs competing for members in the Mackay region.

During the early 1980s Alex Henderson, a band conductor, led the choir. Henderson had high expectations of musical ability of the choir members, expecting them to be able to read music. There was a subsequent drop in numbers.

In 1982, the other choir of the region had folded and Bernice Martin was appointed choir conductor and led the choir for 14 years. The choir grew in numbers to contain about 40 members. Martin had great success at eisteddfods but was careful to ensure the repertoire chosen matched the ability of the choir at the time. Examples of works included Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury* and Faure's *Requiem*.

In 1996, Cathy Neil was appointed as conductor. Neil brought many years of choral experience and training as a local secondary music specialist to the position. The choir again grew to have, at its peak, about 50 members. Neil was transferred to another regional city and once again the choir was in need of a conductor and artistic leader.

The choir experienced another unsettled period and the choir numbers again dropped. The choir regained its confidence with the appointment of Jabin Mills, another secondary music specialist, with a strong interest in choral singing and an ability to inspire the members artistically. He was instrumental in the production of a successful concert performance of Schonberg and Boublil's *Les Miserables* and condensed versions of the oratorios *Elijah* and *Messiah* all performed with orchestra.

Under the current artistic director and conductor, Kim Kirkman, who was appointed in 2003, the choir has continued to build in numbers and artistic acclaim. Kirkman's vision of creating major choral and orchestral events has seen presentations of *Elijah*, *Messiah*, Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Faure's *Requiem* all performed with orchestra and professional soloists from Opera Australia and the Queensland Opera alongside

students from Central Queensland Conservatorium of Music (CQCM). For these major events the choir can boast between 90 and 100 members with 40 in the orchestra. Few previous conductors had the skills to draw together a choir and an orchestra.

The partnership

When CQCM was established in Mackay in 1988 as a campus of the Queensland Conservatorium of Music, members of community music organisations, such as the Mackay Choral Society, played a vital role in securing start-up funding and on-going financial and community support for the fledgling CQCM. Under the inaugural directorship of Associate Professor Helen Lancaster, it established itself as a flagship for cultural activity and training in the central Queensland region as it employed expert performers and educators who, in turn, could provide cultural leadership back into the community. This was facilitated through leadership of workshops and seminars and also as invited leaders in special community artistic projects. When CQCM dissolved its tie with the Queensland Conservatorium of Music and came under the auspices of Central Queensland University in 1998, these community bonds were strengthened through a wide variety of community projects where CQCM staff played a critical role of artistic leadership.

However, it was not until 2003 that a more tangible relationship was established between the Mackay Choral Society and CQCM with the appointment of CQCM academic Kim Kirkman as artistic director and conductor of Mackay Choral Society. According to Koschel (2006), Kirkman stands in a long line of prestigious conductors who contributed significantly to the cultural life of Mackay.

As with any fledgling partnership, there were times when the relationship was strained and lines of communication were tested, however, today the partnership remains strong and viable with benefits for both parties continuing to grow. One particular benefit for both partners is the ability to draw together an orchestra for these special projects. During the early years of CQCM, a professional chamber orchestra, resident at CQCM, was established to provide the Conservatorium with a wide variety of specialist teaching staff and to also provide the Mackay community with a rich variety of cultural experiences.

With the demise of government funding for the professional chamber orchestra, it fell to staff at CQCM to nurture orchestral activity in the city. As stated in the introduction to this paper, such activity is difficult to maintain on a regular basis , but through the work of Kirkman a number of high quality choral and orchestral projects have been undertaken that drew upon community members and past and current students of CQCM. The project-based approach has worked extremely well in developing this type of artistic activity in the city and the benefits flow in many directions.

The Conservatorium students benefit from the increased number of opportunities they have to participate in major artistic events, thus gaining a wider experience of repertoire that would normally only be performed in much larger centres. The Choral Society also benefits in that there is an increased level of artistic excellence that has also been recognised through regional arts awards and commendations. Central to this activity are the facilities of CQCM itself. The purpose-built building can

accommodate large rehearsals with specialist orchestral instruments easily available and a library that has come to be the repository for a large collection of orchestral and choral scores. Some of this specialist music collection has come from the Mackay City Library as well as from a partnership with the Mackay Youth Orchestra that also rehearses in the CQCM facility.

Discussion of the case study

The case study indicates that the role of professionals within a community choir play a vital role on its ongoing development and lasting sustainability. Throughout its history, whenever professional conductors have been directing the choir there has been documented success in producing cultural events of a high standard for the community. Such events do not occur without careful planning and understanding of the artistic challenges presented in such projects. Certainly, the input from the conductor is vital to ensure a choice of repertoire that has the right degree of challenge in both musicianship and style. The musical training and background of the conductor needs to be thorough to ensure this successful marriage of repertoire to performers. However, a significant consideration in this discussion is the delicate balancing act that the conductor must play between providing artistic leadership and just ‘taking over’ all aspects of the artistic activity. At all levels of interaction, the artistic leader in a community music organisation needs to exercise a high level of interpersonal skills so that individuals within the organisation are empowered by their involvement in the group, and are therefore encouraged to continue to play a role in its artistic growth and social cohesion.

The rise and fall of choir membership of Mackay Choral Society can largely be tracked against not only the musical and artistic skills of the conductor but against

their interpersonal skills. This is true of many community organisations and highlights the fine balancing act that always underpins successful leadership.

In regional communities, accessing professionals to work within community music organisations, such as choral societies, can almost be a matter of good luck and timing. Such professionals may move to a community for other reasons and therefore take up the challenge of working with the community music group. However, because of the nature of the organisation and its purpose within the community, finding and funding a professional conductor can be a difficult task.

The Music Council of Australia (MCA, 1999) reported on a survey conducted by the Australian National Choral Association (ANCA) of its choral conductors and leaders. Despite the fact that choral conductors are vital to start, lead and develop many of the choral activities that thrive in our Australian communities, about 45% of the sample had no training as conductors or had training amounting to a semester or less. Furthermore, the survey indicated that many conductors did not earn a living from the work. The article suggests that government funding for orchestras assumes that orchestras can be professional bodies and the lack of government funding for choirs assumes that all choral work is amateur.

Breen (1994) suggests that there are three levels at which community music operates “(1) It exists for its own sake as an art form; (2) It exists as an expression of community development; (3) It exists to feed into and develop the music industry” (p. 314).

The case study presented here suggests that the Mackay Choral Society exists for its own sake as an art form and as such can sometimes be taken for granted within the wider community and certainly falls outside of the usual funding guidelines of various government funding bodies. It has to sustain itself financially and artistically. The organisation itself plays an important role in managing this sustainability, but this case study has shown that the input from a professionally trained conductor is vital to the artistic growth of the choir as well as its social cohesion.

This is where a tertiary music institution can provide an important community service through the engagement of its music academics with the artistic development of these organisations. All parties benefit from this association. The community music organisation gains the expertise of professional musicians and conductors who also have wider skills in specialist teaching and training of musical ensembles. The tertiary music academic becomes engaged in creative opportunities that build their own level of expertise as a scholar and professional performer. The tertiary music institution benefits from their contribution to its measure of scholarly output and, in the changing political environment surrounding research in the creative arts, there is a growing recognition of practice-based research and its importance to the ongoing sustainability of tertiary music institutions. As the bonds between community and university are strengthened through these types of activities various research opportunities can often arise which value-add to the creative projects that are engaged upon.

As stated earlier in this paper, the theoretical work of Bourdieu suggests ‘cultural capital’ represents all the non-economic factors upon which individuals can draw to improve the quality of their lives (Bourdieu, 1997). The challenge of measuring these

benefits provides an opportunity for further research and development of this case study, as many of these benefits are intangible and thus difficult to measure with conventional research instruments. As supported by Teghe and McAllister (2006), “the phenomenon [cultural capital] is hard to quantify, yet despite its intangibility, community cultural capital can be a significant asset” (p. 120). They go on to state “sustainable development may also be promoted by such factors as the capacity of locals to make innovative use of intangible assets” (p. 121).

One such benefit, that is possible to measure to some extent, and could be defined within the umbrella of the creation of ‘social’ capital, is the health benefit of singing. Clint and Hancox (2001) report on two studies undertaken in England that look at the perceived benefits of active participation in choral singing.

In the first study, 84 members of a university college choral society completed a brief questionnaire that asked whether they had benefited personally from their involvement in the choir and whether there were ways in which participation could benefit their health. A large majority of respondents agreed they had benefited socially (87%) and emotionally (75%), with 58% agreeing they had benefited in some physical way, and 49% spiritually.

Anecdotal evidence from the members of the choir discussed in this case study indicates that they perceive benefits across the same range of health descriptors: social, emotional and spiritual well-being and some physical health benefits.

Central Queensland University, in May 2006, launched a new research flagship in Healthy Communities. In broad terms, it will be investing in research projects throughout the central Queensland region around the theme of healthy communities and this paper will help to draw attention to the way the tertiary music academics can

play an important role in community health and well-being through community music activities, especially singing.

An example of this type of initiative is seen in the project ‘Victoria Sings’. Since 2005, VicHealth has committed \$100,000 per year for three years to develop this project, and its key purpose has been to “test the value of community singing as a contributor to community health and wellbeing” (Community Music Victoria). This type of funding has resulted from years of voluntary and partly funded labour by members of Community Music Victoria to advocate and promote music making among all Victorian communities.

Summary and research challenges

Regional communities rely on their citizens to participate in community events and activities that will enhance the social and emotional wellbeing of all. However, local government can only take some of the responsibility for creating a sense of wellbeing in the community. It often comes down to voluntary organisations to provide the vehicle for the development of ‘cultural’ capital, where citizens can draw upon non-economic factors to improve the quality of their lives (Bourdieu, 1997). Such non-economic factors are often realised through arts activity and include social and emotional benefits and those more closely related to physical health and wellbeing. Many of these are difficult to measure but, nonetheless, they play an important role in community building and sustainability.

Realising such benefits often requires partnerships between several organisations and the result can be positive for all parties involved. The tertiary music institution can play an important role in its local community merely by the fact that its expertise can

provide important leadership and artistic guidance in arts activities. There is often a fine line to tread between supporting community arts organisations with artistic leadership and ‘taking over’ their activities, thus stifling the local participants. Obviously the art of diplomacy is a necessary skill for the tertiary music academic.

Furthermore, as public funding for community music activity becomes scarcer, many orthodox activities, such as community choirs, orchestras and bands, increasingly rely on local professionals to provide the artistic leadership necessary for their ongoing survival and artistic success. Tertiary institutions and their academics are often called upon to ‘fill the gaps’ in community music activities and, in doing so, perform an important service to their communities in the creation and maintenance of ‘cultural’ capital.

As reported in this case study, there now exists a significant level of trust between the Mackay Choral Society and CQCM and an opportunity to continue to build artistic capital in the Mackay community through this partnership. Furthermore, this case study also highlights the benefits back to the university of community engagement, particularly in regional centres. The level of scholarly achievement that can be attained through joint creative and artistic projects brings important benefits to tertiary institutions. As they measure the quality and impact of research and scholarly output in new and varied ways, academics need to draw on wide resources that can, and often do, include community organisations.

Furthermore, the growing interest in the broader political agendas surrounding community health and well-being, creates new opportunities for research projects

based around community music activity that present an exciting opportunity for tertiary music academics in the years to come.

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