

Personal background and motivations for research:

I am an undergraduate student at the Australian National University studying History, Science Communication and Environmental Studies. I have never studied music and my only musical instrument experience was learning piano from the ages 7 to 13. I completed my 3rd grade exams reluctantly and as such the last three years of learning was not a positive experience. I am currently a senior mentor the Peer Assisted Learning program which requires facilitating study session for first year science students. In this role I have become interested in understanding how group learning occurs. I decided to participate in this String Project course as I wanted to see how group learning processes occurred in a different environment. I also wanted to challenge myself and my existing attitudes to music making by taking part in the String Group. In the process of participating I became interested in the motivations and barriers experienced by adults involved. I decided to draw on my historical research background to approach this project.

Social Scaffolding for Amateur Adult Violin Players:**A comparison of colonial Australia and 2013 MEP String Group****Introduction**

Australia has a very low rate of engagement in active music making (West 2007). This has not always been the case, as active music making was more common place in colonial Australia than it is today. The reasons for this decline in active music making in Australia and the US has been summarised by West and Pike (2013) as being the result of the gradual decline in social scaffolding (Sloboda 1999); increase reliance and awe of specialist skills and talents and the increase of music in formal education having the effect of disengaging students. This paper will adopt an historical perspective to explore the decline in social scaffolding between music making in colonial Australia and the amateur adult violin playing experience of participants in the 2013 ACT Musical Engagement Program (MEP) String Groups. Sloboda's ideas of social scaffolding will be adopted as the theoretical basis for this analysis.

Sloboda begins from a psychological position to explain that music has demonstrated psychological benefits yet people cannot appreciate music unless they become emotionally involved. Despite this he argues that traditional music institutions have come to inhibit and discount this aspect (1999, p. 6). As such he explains that population outcomes in musical achievement are embedded in wider social and cultural phenomena (1999). This perspective is also useful as it helps to situate musical engagement within its broader social context and allows comparisons to be drawn across time. Sloboda contends that two of the key barriers to musical achievement in society are:

1. A significant reduction in societal scaffolding that allowed people to occupy intermediate funds on the ladder of skill progression

2. Increase framing of official discourse and music performance in terms of talent, achievement and success, rather than *community, fulfilment and achievement*. (Sloboda 1999, pp. 456-7)

Sloboda refers to the decline in social scaffolding as reflecting the decrease in the number of social institutions where having different levels of skills was encouraged and celebrated. For example music being played and sung in the homes, pubs, village festivals and churches is no longer common place. This paper will develop this idea by examining the playing of violins in Colonial Australia and comparing this to the social music environments available to MEP String Group participants. Taking this approach will help identify social barriers that cannot be overcome in MEP sessions alone, and provide space for suggestions to overcome these challenges.

The social barrier being created by official discourse and music performance being framed around achievement is supported in the work of Davis (2009). Davis examines US instructional violin texts throughout the period from 1800-2009 to demonstrate that there has been a shift from a 'Recreational' to an 'Achievement' model of violin instruction. A key difference Davis identified between these approaches was a shift from a 'focus on enjoyment and ease' to a 'focus on accuracy and skill development'. In present day Australian society the violin is held up as a difficult instrument to learn and as such this barrier is clearly apparent. Davis (2009, p. 234) suggests that the growth in formal music education, the influence of immigration from Europe and Africa, technological developments, the professionalization of music and a widening gap between high and low culture were all central to this shift in violin instruction. However there is more to learn about what this historical shift means for present day attempts to engage adults in violin playing.

Discourse around how to teach adults musical instruments often compares this process with teaching children including how teaching styles should be altered to suit mature learners. Johnson (1996) explains that in order to motivate adults to learn an instrument they need to be able to see progress and for this to occur teachers should ensure that adults are prepared to put aside time each day. This is a particular challenge for adults as they most likely have busy professional lives (Johnson 1996). Although time is clearly a challenge to learning, the issue of motivation is more complex. If people are motivated and value playing then they will reprioritise their time to include music. According to Sloboda the challenge in present day society is that this social scaffolding does not exist and music making is seen as an external individual pursuit that no longer performs a social function. 'It takes unusual family environments necessary to replace the social scaffolding that local communities can no longer provide' (Sloboda 1999, p. 460). The current challenge articulated by Sloboda is that"

'We need living and socially relevant forms to replace the church choir and village bands...we need to recreate social institutions that focus on musical enjoyment and personal fulfilment' rather than 'the need to be the best' (1999, p. 461)

This paper will examine the ACT MEP 2013 String Groups as a case study attempt to make progress in this direction. The MEP is based on a the philosophy that 'active music making is the most important goal of any music learning, fundamental to this is the premise that all humans are innately musical and that lack of participation due to fear or concerns about 'quality' are socially constructed and can therefore be deconstructed (West and Pike 2013). Instead the MEP aims to place music in a social context and encourage participants to focus on helping one another, this is termed the Music Outreach Principle which 'considers

the social outward-directed nature of music making to be its most important characteristic' (West and Pike 2013, p. 6).

In practice the String Group consisted of member from the ACT community of varying ages to participating in free group beginner string sessions for an hour once a week over a two month period. The sessions were led by Dr Lauren Davis a qualified violin player and teacher. The lesson were conducted in line with a 'Recreational' model of instruction whereby there was very little focus on skill, and instead given the opportunities to play simple songs from the first lesson, if someone in the group did not feel comfortable playing a particular part there were always open string options to choose so that everyone could be involved regardless of their ability. The sessions were designed to create a relaxed fun environment where everyone was encouraged to have a go.

This paper will examine the effectiveness of the MEP String Group at addressing the barriers created by the decline in social scaffolding for amateur adult violin players in Australia. The social motivations and challenges experienced by String Group Participants will be compared to key supporting characteristics of social music institutions commonly available in Colonial Australia. Areas of key contextual difference will be identified.

Methodology

This project will adopt two differing qualitative approaches to inform this comparative analysis. The first involves a brief historical investigation of adult music making and amateur violin playing in Australia from the nineteenth century. This period was selected as it encapsulates a time where social music making was common place. Secondary sources describing characteristics of social music making from this time will be used to identify key elements of the social environment that supported amateur adult violin playing. Primary sources of these experiences appear to be rare as music making was seen as

a regular experience and therefore most likely not worthy of noting. Many attempts to write about the history of colonial violin playing have been dominated by writers with musical backgrounds attempting to document the development of music as a profession rather than as a social activity. This is done by taking particular violinists and or pieces as the starting point for research. Instead as a history student I will explore the social function of music over the chosen time period and use this to draw conclusions about the social conditions that helped facilitate this function.

A similar approach was adopted in interviewing participants of the MEP String group about their experiences. At the completion of the program participants were asked about the motivations and barriers to their past, present and future involvement in violin playing and music making. The questions participants were asked are outlined in *Appendix A*. Adults involved in the program were asked to self-nominate if they would like to participate in an interview. As a result ten adults were interviewed, including people from a variety of musical backgrounds.

Comparisons will be drawn between the historical purposes of adult colonial violin playing and the experiences of String Group participants in 2013. The focus of this analysis will be on identifying the key similarities and differences in social support within each context.

Historical Overview

The function of the violin player has changed over time. In sixteenth century Europe the violin occupied a lower social position than it does today, serving the principle functions of being played for dancing or entertainment and to double vocal music or to accompany it. Many string players at this time performed dance music from memory and therefore did not require the skill to read music. (Boyden 1965). The purpose of violin playing was therefore

not to produce music for its own sake, but rather to provide the background of accompaniment that allowed other people to be involved in the enjoyment of music either through singing or dancing.

In colonial Australian music making performed a similar social purpose. As fiddles were relatively portable instruments there are many accounts of them brought with colonialists from Europe to both the US and Australia. The *Wiggins* family is the earliest documented family of violin makers and players in an Australian colony, with Samuel Wiggins arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1803 (Lonergan 2003). Many of the Wiggins descendants throughout the nineteenth century were known to be very musical and play by ear. It has been noted that as the Wiggins violins were leisure time activities for the family it is very unlikely there has been any information written about them, instead stories were passed down in family hearsay (p. 138). As music making was common place and a leisure time activity there are challenges to finding documentary evidence of players' experiences and even less references explicitly made to the violin. Instead passing mentions and accounts of occasions and places where people played can provide a broad picture of the social purposes of violin playing in the colonial period.

Violins were often played in public places for people to dance and sing to. There are numerous stories of the Wiggins men giving up their time to provide music at functions such as local weddings and local halls or barns, as well as stories of people walking miles to dance at these events (Lonergan 2003, pp. 147-8). English, Irish and Scottish social institutions of taverns, pubs and music halls became popular places in Australia until the mid-nineteenth century as colonialists brought instruments and musical traditions with them. The pub fiddler was mentioned in colonial newspapers and memoirs from 1803 until Gold Rush times where the violin was very much a folk instrument before it entered concern

halls (Manifold 1957, p. 7). Tunes of English music hall songs were brought to Melbourne by Charles Thatcher in the 1850s and were adapted to relate to the experiences of immigrants and political issues. For example songs such as 'Take me to London again' reflected the poor living condition in Melbourne at the time and experiences of the Gold Rush also inspired new lyrics to old tunes (Anderson 1960). With the introduction of pianos to pubs in the mid nineteenth century, professional fiddler abandoned these places. Instead amateur fiddlers were common phenomena in the Gold Fields and outback. In settled districts, violin players were in high demand to play at dances, as volunteers or for a small fee (Manifold 1957, pp. 7-8). Informal venues for amateurs to play for the entertainment of others were common place during this period. The violin was evidently was not an instrument simply to be performed as in the classical tradition but instead was an integral element for facilitating opportunities for others to sing or dance and engage with the music with their families and friends.

Amateur adult violin playing was encouraged by the social institutions of the time. Violin playing fulfilled a social purpose that was valued by society as it provided others with the opportunity to participate. Spaces for this sharing of music were common place as people did not have the convenience of pressing a button on a device to be entertained. Davis (2009) and a Sloboda (1999) suggest that the technological developments and commercialisation of music has contributed to the lack of social scaffolding that supports engaging with music for the enjoyment. Towards the end of the nineteenth century social spaces for this form of music making declined. The shift was accompanied by the gradual shift to an achievement based model of instruction. A piano music book published in 1907 demonstrates this shift. The introduction to the book explains that,

The editors hold that music displaying perfection and form and structure is not necessarily difficult to play; that on the contrary, many of the most priceless compositions in the musical world are played with ease (University Society 1907, p. 1).

This statement is interesting as it suggests that there was an alternative prevalent view that the perfection in music had to be difficult to achieve. The songs included in the book are referred to as 'old favourites' songs with Scottish and Irish origins that would have been commonly sung in public spaces in the nineteenth century. Significantly the book also includes illustrations showing groups of people singing and playing instruments together. An illustration titled *The Family Concert* depicts a family playing together including a man on violin, another on cello and a lady with bells (p. 48). Demonstrating that violin playing in the homes for leisure would have been a common occurrence in an earlier time. The playing of instruments in the home would have been symptomatic of a broader culture of social music making which would have declined with a growing emphasis on perfection.

Experiences of Participants in MEP String Group

Based on this historical overview it is evident that adult amateur violin playing in colonial Australia was supported by social institutions that provided supportive and widely accessible spaces for this interaction and that this music making was motivated by a desire to provide music for others, either for singing or dancing. As a result the social environment provided a sense of social purpose to the music making. This philosophy is central to the MEP program (West and Pike 2013). However there are difficulties in pursuing this in weekly hour long violin sessions. These sessions provide temporary spaces for this social interaction and allow participants choice to play songs that they prefer. However it is likely that the social background of participants is important in determining whether they

continue to feel that their music making fulfils a social function. These ideas will be explored in the participants' responses to interview questions about their motivations and challenges.

When participants were asked, what motivated them to become involved in the MEP String Group, most people gave social reasons for their participation. Fiona explained she wanted to become involved as it was an opportunity to 'be with other people' when learning the Cello. Other indicated that they knew people involved in organising the program. A few others suggested that they became involved because they saw it as a great opportunity to learn with their children. Anna explained that she thought it would be 'fun for all of us', whilst Jill said that she saw it as something to do with 'mother and child'. Only one adult explained that they had been motivated by the idea of individual skill development, 'I wanted to learn to play the violin... I had got a violin a couple of years earlier' (Jane). These comments suggest that a key motivator for people choosing to be involved in this group was that it would allow them to share their musical experience with others.

Although this social motivation existed this was the first time many of the participants had actively taken steps to learn string instruments suggesting that the opportunity to learn in this social way are clearly not as accessible as they were in the past. Most adults interviewed suggested that time and costs were the biggest barriers to having started playing the violin prior to this program. Simone explained that she hadn't started in the past as she had been 'thinking that it would take a long time to get anywhere' and she had no time in her life to practice'. This concern was echoed by another participant who said she 'Didn't have the time in her life to devote to practice' (Zsuzsa). The conception that time has to be devoted to practice is characteristic of an 'achievement' model approach to learning. Practice also has connotations of an isolated acidity which sits in contrast to the key social motivation put forward by participants. If the key motivation for playing is social

but the act of learning is through to require long periods of time on your own, it is not surprising that participants felt that did not have the time for taking the violin up in the past, as the purpose of making music was thought to be defeated by the process. Yet when those participants interviewed were faced with the opportunity to learn at a low cost, they all managed to find the time. Demonstrating that if a space can be provided where music making also serves a social purpose people will be motivated to reprioritise their time.

This importance of sharing the music making process was also evident in responses to questions about what adults had enjoyed and disliked most about the sessions. Some participants explained that they were most motivated to play when everyone was playing around them as 'no one is listening and secretly assessing you' (Hector) and 'you didn't feel any pressure to have perfected anything' (Jill). Others explained that the most enjoyable part was the 'fun of playing in a group' (Anna). It was enjoyable as you got be part of something beyond the individual, 'even when I was making a scratchy sound, I can always hear there is a bigger sound' (Frank). Being able to be involved and play the songs regardless of ability was also really enjoyable for some. Be given the options to choose parts and when to participate in playing songs was really valuable as it meant people did not feel excluded, 'I liked playing the songs... I particularly liked the playing of the music... I liked that there were different options' (Petra). Comparatively most people interviewed did not really like the game Copy Cat (a game which involves taking in turns to make a miscellaneous sound that other had to try and replicate). The main reason given for this was that people felt that they were not good enough and did not like being 'put on the spot' (Anna). The Copy Cat game did not provide the space for adults to feel like they were sharing in a process of music making but instead it was seen as a musical learning exercise, rather than having a high

social purpose, 'I recognise that it's probably a valid part of a music lesson, but I wanted to play music and it wasn't music' (Petra).

Participants in the String Groups were not instructed to practice between sessions, instead they were just given the resources so they could play if they felt like it. Having the social support to motivate this playing was an important precursor to adults decided to play in their own time. Those that did not play between sessions suggested that it was because they did not see the point of doing so on their own or couldn't find the time. Jane explained that she had tried but 'every time I did it didn't sound right, I suppose it was because I was playing the parts'. She explained that she would have preferred to play with others, but having not known anyone in the group it would have been too hard 'trying to fit it all in with new people'. Others that did find the time to play generally did so with other people, two mums explained that they had enjoyed playing with their kids, 'Sam and I got together and had a try' (Anna). Participants that were able to get their friends and family involved found these the most rewarding experiences. Jill who also explained that she didn't think she would make violin a lifelong hobby said that she had a great experience at her brother's house where it had turned into a 'family music jam'. She explained this had occurred since, 'a couple of times I did play with the family, I loved that and it was awesome, it made me actually want to practice so I could play better with them' (Petra). This example is significant as it shows that if there are supportive networks and spaces for amateur playing available then the violin playing can be a social experience rather than an individual pursuit that adults have to make time for. Hector explains that his family played 'like crazy' with 20min sessions turning into 2 hour blocks occurring almost daily because the entire family enjoyed it so much, it would 'start when someone wants to practice and others would want to come and join in'. This idea that supportive networks and spaces are required is also supported by

the experiences of those that did not practice. Jennifer explained that 'I don't like to be listened to individually... I am more likely to practice when no one was at home'. Zsuzsa explained that she had wanted to practice but hadn't found the time, she also explained that she had asked her partner if he would like to join in and he said no'. This raises the question of whether she would have made time to practice had someone else in her household also been involved.

The experience of not having the space or the social support to play between sessions was also confirmed by my own personally experiences being involved in the program. As I am a student living on campus with 500 other students, there are no spaces in which I could play the violin without being heard and as a result I decided not to. The expectation that you only play an instrument if you have reached a certain skill level made me feel too uncomfortable to have a go. I also did not have any close family or friends going through the same learning process to share the experience with, although towards the end of the program I became motivated to play music with my sister when I am next at home.

It is evident that having the space and social support to play violin as an amateur is essential. Without the social scaffolding to provide the motivation to stay involved in the music making, it becomes an isolated activity for those that initially decide to engage for the social dimensions.

When participants were asked whether they wanted to continue learning a stringed instrument, nine out of ten of them expressed an interest in doing so on the condition that it was in a group environment, 'Sam and I both like the social group thing' (Anna). Simone explained that she did not think playing individually would give her the same 'buzz' where everyone gets together and says 'I'll play this part, you play that part and we'll all play together'. The suggested forms a group could take varied between people. Jane explained

that she would like to be involved in a smaller group, whilst Frank explained that he would like to be in a group of the 'same level, moving together'. Whereas Petra explained that she was motivated to play her saxophone again and seek out people to play with as long as she could 'Find the right people, people who wouldn't be judgemental of her inability to play'. Despite saying they would like to continue playing in this environment most people expressed concerns at the logistical challenges of setting a group up. Hector explained that it is 'difficult setting up a community organisation as it requires energy'. Although he had explained that he enjoyed playing with his family he suggested that to continue would require a 'a critical mass of families, people who are enthusiast about getting together', he said that he didn't think just playing within his own family would be motivation enough to continue, he explained that it was 'good to have a push, by having interactions with people outside family, reason to do it'. This demonstrates that even the most motivated participants could see the challenges presented by the current lack of social scaffolding supporting amateur playing.

The MEP String Group sessions created a temporary space for people to share in the process of music making. However outside of this environment the barriers explained by Sloboda still exist. Those with families or friends who are already engaged in music making may be more motivated to continue to stay involved compared to those who are undertaking the process alone and do not have access to spaces where they can feel comfortable playing at an amateur level. It is evident that the issue of not having time to practice can be overcome if the process of making music is also a social one. The challenge is extending this social function beyond organised sessions into the broader community.

Conclusion

In colonial Australia amateur fiddlers were common place, providing music for singing and dancing in music halls, pubs and in homes. Social scaffolding supported players of a range of abilities as the focus was on providing music that other people could engage with rather than on perfecting musical skills. In comparison the dominant model of music making in Australian society is based on achievement, associated with this is a lack of spaces and supportive social relationships where amateur adult players can feel comfortable learning. Whilst the MEP program can provide a temporary space to for adults to learn in groups with social motivations, there are social barriers to musical engagement that need to be overcome if this motivation to play a string instrument is going to last beyond the program.

Although the MEP String Group sessions encouraged everyone to play together and the session were designed to provide options for people of differing abilities so that this could occur, the sessions did not explicitly help people to engage with people outside the realm of this group. More could be done to try and replicate some of the social functions violin playing served in earlier times.

Developing creative ways to help people learn how to engage their existing social networks in their making outside of sessions would be beneficial to participants as it would fulfil their social motivation to play. Their friends and family would also benefit if they could be shown that they didn't need musical experience to be involved. The use of songs that have current political relevance or including opportunities to show people how they can dance or sing or be contribute to the music in some way are avenues that could be further explored. Looking to the social relationships people had with music in the past may provide

valuable insights into how this can be achieved, if combined with an awareness of present day social barriers.

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Anna. 2013. Interviewed by Amanda Tully on 26th October (Audio recording).

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Hector. 2013. Interviewed by Amanda Tully on 29th October 2013 (Audio recording).

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Petra. 2013. Interviewed by Amanda Tully on 29th October 2013 (Audio recording).

Jill. 2013. Interviewed by Amanda Tully on 1st November 2013 (Audio recording).

Appendix A

String Group Participant- Interview Questions

1. a) What motivated you to start participating in the MEP string group?
b) What barriers were there to you starting playing a stringed instrument in the past?
2. a) What motivates you to play in sessions? Have there been any parts of sessions or activities you have enjoyed more than others?
b) Have there been any times when you have not wanted to participate in bits/all of session? Why? (E.g. did you enjoy playing Copy Cat?)
3. a) Do you or have you been motivated to play between sessions? What allows you to do this?
b) What challenges prevent you from playing in your own time? If you don't want to play in your own time, why not?
4. a) Are you keen to continue playing the violin/making music after this? Why? (In what forms e.g. instrument, who with, where, how often?)
b) What barriers are there to you doing this?
c) If you don't want to continue? Why?
5. What musical experiences do you engage in regularly? (e.g. playing, listening)
 - a. By yourself?
 - b. With others?
6. What musical experiences have you had in the past? (Did you play any instruments? Did you family? When did you start? Why did you stop?)