

Through American Eyes: String Education in Australia **by Daryl Silberman**

Imagine a place where the government funds music programs, where ‘pull out’ private or semi-private stringed instrument lessons during school hours are acceptable, children start state-sponsored preschool at age three, where the quality of a child’s education is a primary concern in the society as a whole, where they actively conserve energy for environmental reasons, where ethnic diversity only positively impacts the culture and food of the region, where caffeine is sipped often not as an obsession but rather as a norm, and Shiraz red wine reigns supreme. Oh, and if you are a talented string player who has completed conservatory-level training you actually willingly get a teaching certification and enter the workforce as a well paid, respected strings educator. Once you have that job as an educator, you are on staff with many other equally well trained musicians. And, you have the opportunity to be a member of an educational organization that champions strings education as well as performance. Is this Utopia? No, it’s a country, a continent – Australia.

I was honored to have been an invited clinician and performer for the AUSTA 2006 conference in Brisbane (“Brizzie” as they say) last July. AUSTA – the AUstralian STRings Associaion – is a 30+ year old educational organization composed of Australia’s many strings teachers. They hold their national convention once every three years in one of about eight primary cities of Australia. In addition to the Aussie delegation presenters, this year’s convention featured Scottish fiddler Catherine Fraser, jazz violinist Ian Cooper, emerging classical violinist Niki Vasilakis, and Dalcroze instructor Paula Melville-Clark, and the American artists: Louis Bergonzi, Sandra Dachow, Peter Rejto, and me. There were over 300 conference participants, mostly Australians, and there were a few invited orchestras whose students attended many of the hands-on sessions. Though there were some Alternative Styles clinics (jazz, Scottish fiddling, and my six clinics) the conference was primarily focused on traditional strings education. I was excited to meet Australians Loreta Fin, Keith Sharp, and Stephen Chin who among them have written over 200 original compositions covering all levels of playing. They are compositional stars there, as well as experienced and well respected educators.

Music education is well funded by the government in Australia. Many schools have multiple teachers on staff to cover all the symphonic instruments. In the government schools (the public schools) children usually have semi-private lessons, three to five children in a group, and only meet as an orchestra one day per week. They can opt to have private pull-out lessons in

some schools. By the time the children graduate from year 12 (high school) they might have had the opportunity to have taken three instruments and have learned them to some decent degree of ability.

One exclusive private school I visited and performed at is Wesley College – “college” is their term for a K - 12 private school. At Wesley there are twenty-five full time educators on the Music Staff for a school of 1500 students. And additionally there are part time teachers who come to teach private lessons. Wesley’s music education is very thorough--the students sing in solfege starting in year 1 (1st grade).

So, how did the Australians respond to me, an Alternative Styles artist from America? Very well! But, differently than in the United States. First of all, the knowledge of, attitude towards, acceptance of, and interest in non-classical styles is similar to that of the United States about ten years ago--but they have a few advantages. For one thing, given the amount of information available on the web these days, anyone who is interested in exploring Alternative Styles has many websites available to them to guide their learning, show them instruments, suggest ways to learn more, etc. That wasn’t the case ten years ago in America. The motivation for wanting to learn more about how to play Alternative Styles and how to incorporate these styles into a class curriculum is slightly different Down Under. In Australia, teachers aren’t concerned with the threat of ‘losing’ their program--strings education is well funded and respected. But, since children have the option of trying a violin, then trying a trumpet, then trying a drum, the teachers still find themselves dealing with the issue of trying to retain good students. Similar to the United States, one reason many teachers are interested in Alternative Styles is so that they can continue to explore their own instrument. Alternative Styles is great that way – it helps us reconnect with our own instrument and, in a roundabout way, get back to classical, too (my favorite byproduct of Alternative Styles!).

In my brainstorming sessions, I was pleasantly surprised how easily Aussie educators came up with ways of incorporating contemporary styles into their curriculum. I have a feeling that given the strength of the programs and the cumulative knowledge base of the educators Down Under, Australians will quickly fold Alternative Styles into their existing strings curriculum.

Now, if only Australia wasn’t 9000 miles away, I’d move. But, it’s certainly a great place to visit and observe... and dream!

For more information about AUSTA, navigate to www.austa.asn.au.

Daryl Silberman, violinist and violist, is a nationally recognized clinician, performer, and educator residing in Los Angeles. Daryl balances her professional life between private studio teaching, youth orchestra directing, teaching beginning strings classes, and freelancing with both classical and contemporary groups. Daryl specializes in finding the connection between classical and contemporary music, and in using alternative styles to motivate string students. When not working or teaching, Daryl spends time with husband, and former Turtle Island String Quartet member, Daniel Seidenberg and their 2 young children. More information about Daryl can be found at www.daryls.com