

 **THE AUSTRALIAN**

December 18, 2008 01:38am AEDT

Garrett puts music's power and passion on the agenda

Corrie Perkin | December 18, 2008

Article from: [The Australian](#)

MUSIC programs for children in public schools and music training for primary teachers will be part of the 2009 national curriculum debate following the Rudd Government's reconnection with its pre-election arts and education policy.

This follows a series of meetings in recent weeks between federal Education Minister Julia Gillard and Arts Minister Peter Garrett. Gillard has invited her cabinet colleague to address the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs in Adelaide in March.

In Melbourne yesterday one of Gillard's education advisers, Tom Bentley, met conductor Richard Gill, music director of Victorian Opera, to discuss music's role in the proposed national curriculum.

Gill, a long-time advocate of mandatory music education in schools, has had several talks with Garrett since the 2020 summit in April, when arts and music education was acknowledged as a high priority.

This is in line with the Government's September 2007 pre-election policy that declared: "Labor will work with state and territory education authorities, teacher employers and universities to review the provision of music education through the entire education system."

The policy added: "This is the first step in creating a comprehensive music education program in our schools and educational institutions."

In February the Cultural Ministers Council, chaired by Garrett, also agreed "to initiate action to increase access to school music education, with an initial focus on primary schools which have no music programs".

Gill says he is optimistic, following yesterday's meeting with Bentley, that music training for students and teachers will be given attention in national curriculum planning.

"I get the feeling the Government is listening," Gill says. "There's a big job to be done in music education and it has to happen now. If we don't do something quickly we will slip far, far behind the rest of the world and will become a 10th-world backwater."

Gill maintained contact with Garrett's office through the recent debate over the withdrawal of \$2.5million in federal funds to the Australian National Academy of Music, a tertiary institution based in Melbourne.

Under a new structure, ANAM will become part of the University of Melbourne's school of music and train about 55 elite classical musicians each year, a concept Gill supports. But he says that music knowledge and participation should be available to all children, not just those who can afford private tuition or who attended private schools with strong music programs.

"If we have universal music training, places like ANAM will have a much bigger crop from which to pick," he says.

Debate in recent months about the proposed national curriculum has drawn attention to standards of teaching in core skills of literacy and numeracy, not music.

But politicians, and arts and education bureaucrats, were caught off guard by the strong community interest in the ANAM debate.

It reminded them that music, whether experienced through a choir, a concert, a CD or an iPod, is treasured by Australians.

In addition, Gill says, music can enhance a child's capacity for learning.

"Because music is quintessentially an aural art, it requires great focus, listening and concentration, the

results of which are transferred to other areas of learning," he says.

"It is one of the few activities that human beings do (that) involves the left and right brain. All children can participate in music on any level, whereas not all children can be in the school play, not all children can play in the school hockey team. But every child can sing, every child can play a percussion instrument."

The MCEETYA agenda has not been finalised but it's likely Garrett will try to convince the nation's education ministers about the critical role of music and the arts.

"I think there is overwhelming evidence that creative learning and experiences assist students develop a range of complementary skills - numeracy, literacy, co-operation and the like - as well as allowing greater opportunities for artistic expression," Garrett says.

"I am looking forward to discussing these matters with the MCEETYA when we meet in March."

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