

# ARTPLAY Melbourne Symphony Orchestra CITY BEATS

Broadening the offer of creative music to primary school students



ArtPlay Backyard

City Beats

Evolution

Signal 37

The ACCESS Program: An Australia Council for the Arts Creative Community Development Initiative



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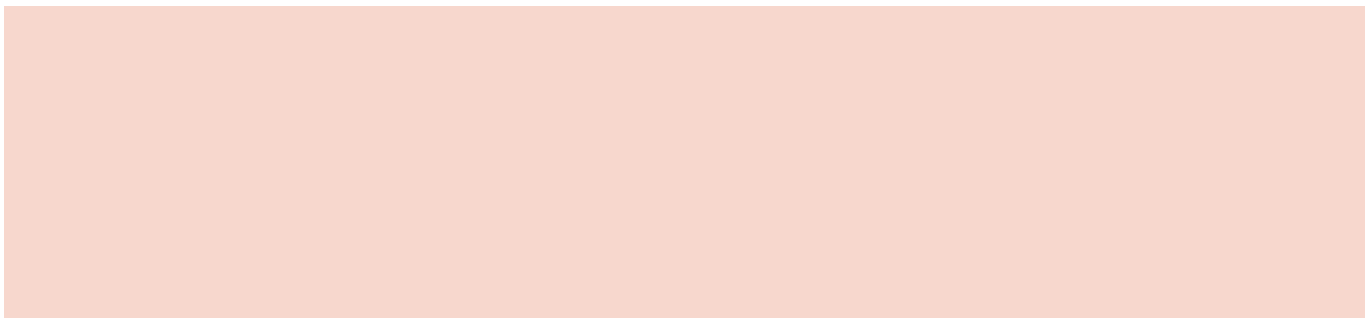
This report responds directly to the goals of the Creative  
Community Partnership Initiative of The Australia Council  
for the Arts. Separate reports for each of the four projects  
in the ACCESS Program are available at: [http://education.unimelb.edu.  
au/news\\_and\\_activities/projects/artplay/the\\_access\\_program](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/artplay/the_access_program)

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When they perform the work for the first time, one girl working with a xylophone is clearly concentrating very hard, mouthing the notes as she plays. The boys are very enthusiastic on the drums, playing as loudly as they can and getting their whole bodies into it. At the end of the performance there were lots of giggles, 'yeah!' and 'I like it' ... and a clear sense of accomplishment.

## Background

ArtPlay and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) have had a long partnership involving workshops with MSO musicians and ongoing ensembles since 2004.

The ArtPlay MSO City Beats project was implemented in 2009 as a free holiday program that targeted disadvantaged children from a public-housing estate. The attendance was limited, largely because it relied on the participants travelling to ArtPlay independently. In 2010, as part of the ACCESS Program<sup>1</sup>, the City Beats project was reconceptualised as a free school program targeting schools seen to be disadvantaged and with limited access to instrumental music.



### ArtPlay and MSO Partnership Objectives

- *Encourage and engage permanent MSO musicians to take a leadership role in the development of and participation in the MSO ArtPlay partnership.*
- *Develop a sustainable creative music program that engages children and communities from disadvantaged and culturally diverse backgrounds.*
- *Provide a unique, high-end music program to engage young musicians in a creative and collaborative environment.*

1. For more information re the ACCESS Program go to For more information go to the ACCESS Program Report [http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news\\_and\\_activities/projects](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects)

## The Project

Over 2011 and 2012 the project involved eight schools. One group of 20 to 25 students from each school participated in four, two hour workshops scheduled throughout the year. The workshops were designed and run by Gillian Howell who acted as facilitator and conductor, and worked with up to four MSO musicians.

Gillian seeks out significant themes suggested by the children and co-develops these into a musical narrative over the four workshops, a final performance of which takes place at ArtPlay and at the school. Gillian described the aims of the project as,

*giving the students a rich, intensive music-making experience. They will play percussion instruments, invent their own music, and develop performance and ensemble skills in an inclusive, encouraging, collaborative environment. The program acts as a pathway to bring new young people from diverse backgrounds to other programs for young musicians at ArtPlay and with the MSO.*



The group composition is developed into a multi-sectioned and multi-layered piece throughout the workshops and involves a variety of activities. The MSO provided melodic and non-melodic percussion instruments. The children often work in small groups to develop musical interpretations of personal 'stories' and imagery, they share newly created sections with the whole group and peer teach as they develop the final performance. Three or four MSO musicians, who play a variety of instruments, assist Gillian, but they are not the same at each workshop depending on who is available. They facilitate the small group creations and provide individual advice. During whole group work, they co-create and play alongside the children, under Gillian's direction. One MSO musician described her role as "unleashing the students creativity", and another "helping the kids to fine-tune their ideas." A number of teachers accompany the students to each workshop, where they participate as co-learners and provide encouragement as needed.



## Project Summary

- Four schools per year participated in four, two hour workshops scheduled throughout the year
- Schools targeted: cultural diversity, economic disadvantage, limited access to music and/or other social and well-being needs
- Free of charge with transport provided
- No need for prior music education
- Focus on both exploration and accomplished performance
- Students actively involved in experimentation, composing and performing.

### Outcomes

- 160 students participated over two years
- One Year 5/6 class from 8 metropolitan schools participated
- 8 teachers participated
- 8 professional musicians, 7 from the MSO involved
- 97% students enjoyed the workshops
- All participants and teachers surveys were overwhelmingly positive about the program
- All participants surveyed said they would like to participate again
- All participants said they would like to participate in other Artplay programs
- High levels of engagement observed and reported by participants, teachers and MSO musicians
- Considered valuable by teachers for providing musical activities otherwise inaccessible
- Activities pitched at an appropriate level for participants to engage successfully
- Emphasis given to creative musical exploration and group work engaged students in a positive community-building experience
- Artist modelling and access to professional-quality instruments exposed students to high levels of musical accomplishment
- Students were engaged by co-music making alongside professionals
- Students experienced the creative processes employed by professional musicians directly
- Collaborative compositions initiated from child and adult experience stimulated engagement
- Playful games facilitated engagement, alleviating initial participant uncertainties
- One-on-one interactions between musicians and children were crucial to engagement and learning
- Small group work supported student creative exploration and input
- The workshops generated an innovative and accomplished final composition
- Strong indicators of social connectedness were evident through observations and reports from participants, teachers and MSO musicians
- The project promoted team-work and empathy amongst the students
- Students were considered capable of dealing with complex and deeply-felt issues
- Students exposed to musical concepts not encountered before
- Teachers facilitated engagement by learning alongside students.

## Research

The ArtPlay MSO City Beats project research involved multiple methods including pre and post participant surveys, observations, photographs and interviews with students, teachers and musicians. Two schools, Ardeer South Primary and Kinglake Primary were examined in some detail. For more information on the research design for this project see the ACCESS Program Report<sup>2</sup>.

### Participants

The MSO Education unit, in consultation with ArtPlay management, and the ACCESS Coordinator<sup>3</sup>, recruited eight schools identified as marginalised and disadvantaged. Developing the relationship between the schools and ArtPlay was integral to providing the students with access to the project. A key part of this was working closely with the teachers. The teachers described City Beats as a rare opportunity for their students to gain authentic cultural exchanges with the musicians and all were enthusiastic to participate in the project again. It is unclear whether the MSO has sustained these relationships with the schools as the City Beats project involved a different set of schools in the following year, 2012.

#### *Kinglake Primary School*

Kinglake Primary is located in an area severely affected by the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires, which resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire. As part of a program of support for the Kinglake community, a Catholic Care counsellor, Aicha Brogan, was employed. In this capacity Aicha saw the opportunity to engage in the ArtPlay MSO City Beats project as a means for promoting the well being of the students. As she noted:

*Knowing that the community of Kinglake is still finding 'recovery' difficult, and that the children from the school, living in a 'peri-urban' community, had less opportunities in terms of cultural development, was an incentive to find a program such as City Beats to fit with them.*

#### *Ardeer South Primary School*

Ardeer South Primary School, is a culturally and socio economically diverse school in Melbourne's western suburbs. Ruth, an Ardeer South Primary School teacher noted that,

*Without the on-going commitment of ArtPlay, money, parental availability, parental interest, knowledge of facilities, value of artistic activities, viewing parental role as participator in educating the child beyond the classroom, are all factors which would prohibit these children from ever participating in a City Beats program.*

2. For more information re the ACCESS Coordinators role go to the ACCESS Program report at [http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news\\_and\\_activities/projects/artplay/the\\_access\\_program](http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/artplay/the_access_program)

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## Access

City Beats was a free project that included funded buses to bring the students to each workshop. The teachers indicated that if there had been a cost associated they would have most likely been unable to participate.

The music activities were designed to be accessible to participants with little or no prior experience and the activities were focused on awareness and attitude to music rather than technical proficiency. Gillian and the MSO musicians were careful not to use too many technical terms and rather than using words like crescendo, for example, Gillian would simply explain that they needed to get louder. One teacher described how “the children were immersed in an environment which facilitated children with very little formal musical experience, in using their raw and innate musicality.”

Many of the students from both the case study schools indicated that playing the different instruments was the most memorable part of City Beats program. Teachers from both Kinglake and Ardeer South reflected positively on the opportunity their students had to play instruments many had never used before.

*The City Beats program was totally committed to involving every child in the development of a child-owned and child-directed piece of music. The theme of the composition directly related to the journey which allowed all children access to the ‘story’ of the piece and kept all children motivated and feeling completely able to contribute and relate to the composition. Teacher, Ardeer South*





# Engagement

All child and teacher surveys were overwhelmingly positive about the project indicating they would like to participate again in the ArtPlay MSO City Beats project, as well as other ArtPlay projects. Most of the time in each workshop involved playing an instrument. When the students played together there were intense looks of concentration between them, the MSO musicians and Gillian. The students were often deeply engaged. For example, a group of boys from Ardeer South played the drums loudly and moved to the music with their whole bodies. The students remained on task and were attentive even when they were waiting for their turn to play. Gillian introduced a game called 'Parking' with the students from Kinglake, where the students could play their instrument as long as nobody else played theirs at the same time. This game stimulated high levels of engagement as the children were constantly looking around the circle to see who was playing, or about to play, and used only eye contact. There were no disputes about going out or disengagement once a student was out of the game, they were so intent on the process. This use of games helped to alleviate initial hesitations amongst the children. Playful and social, the introductory games effectively promoted concentration and listening, established teamwork and introduced the young people to rhythm ideas and the creative process. Gillian made the games progressively more complex and concluded with a quiet listening activity.

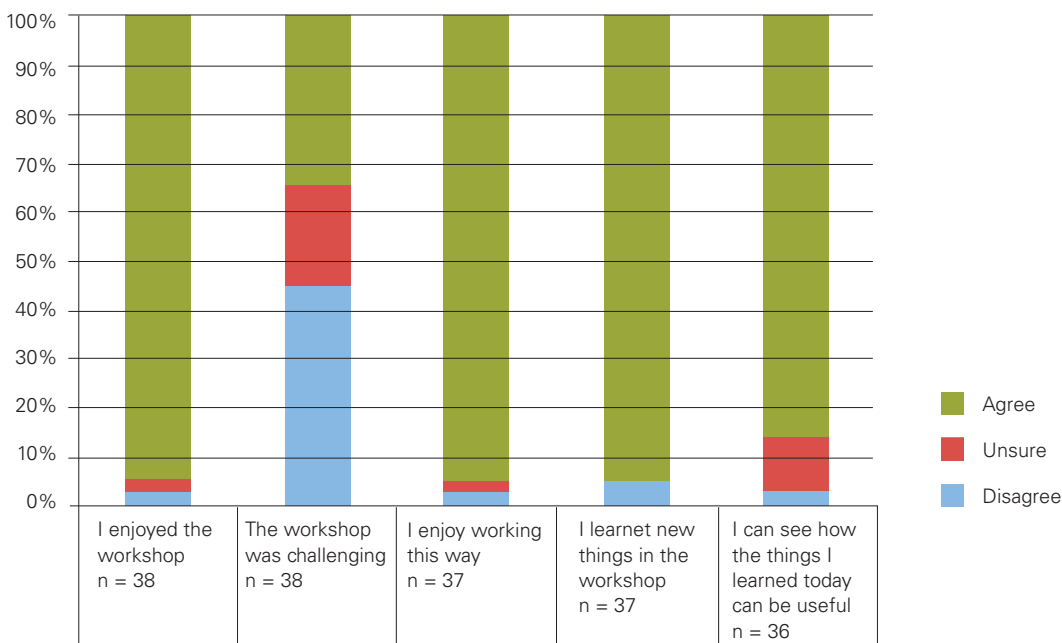
The students valued meeting and working with the musicians who provided one-to-one and small group guidance. When asked what was most memorable about City Beats, students responded with comments such as,

*When I played the xylophone with Sarah and she helped me when I needed it. I love playing the xylophone.*

*With Jen playing the drums. Jen is very helpful and very nice*

*When I was working with Sophie because it was the first time. I have ever played the xylophone. Sophie helped me a lot.*

**Figure 1: Survey - Engagement**



The MSO musicians felt that the students responded differently to the activities, with some more physically active and excited and others more subdued but still focussed. The MSO musicians thought that the children coped well and stayed on task. The feeling that Gillian sensed from the groups was that they did not want to leave at the end of each session, something she believed was a strong sign of engagement. She also noted that the students worked hard during the two hour workshops, which demanded high levels of concentration and teamwork. She described a particular case of one student who was initially disinterested but became very engaged once he understood what was expected. Gillian explained:

*From then on, he was the first to respond when I raised my hand for quiet. He gestured sternly to people in his section when they started playing their part at the wrong time. He kept his eyes glued to me – absolutely glued. A transformation of understanding and meaning had taken place for him in the two hours we worked together.*

Teachers, acting as co-learners, modelled their engagement, and when necessary, acted as 'translators' between the musicians and students, explaining and at times prompting further clarifications from the artists.

The student survey items relating to engagement were very positive (Figure 1) overall. It is interesting that the majority of students either didn't find the workshop challenging or were unsure about their opinion yet the majority "learned something new" and felt that what they learned would be "useful".

*The students were engaged from the time Gillian started, until the time we left. All the activities were fun and the students relaxed and committed themselves to whatever was asked of them. They were involved from the time they suggested their 'story', chose their music and rhythms until they produced their final piece. Whenever we left the sessions the excited discussions that followed were, 'Did you see it when I...?' or 'Did you hear it when I was playing ...?' Teacher, Kinglake*





## Creative and Artistic Practice

The focus on improvisation and the collaborative development of an emergent composition gave emphasis to creative process and promoted open exploration. This was particularly the case in the early workshops when student input was sought in relation to their interpretations of how to play an instrument and to the development of the 'story' for the musical piece. When interviewed teachers noted that the students had many opportunities to explore their creativity through developing their stories, music and rhythms. One student explained how she learnt to "compose music from words and that ANYTHING can be music. When different pieces of music are put together it can make a totally different piece of music." Gillian reflected that generating compositions with the students,

*.. sounded confusing to them when I first explained it, I suspect. They needed to experience just how we would put the pieces together in order to understand the process. And the process works. By the end of each session, we had completed a five-minute arrangement of one of their compositions, some with quite complex structures and section transitions, in which everyone had an instrument and a part to play.*

The latter part of the workshops shifted from creative development to team work and individual instrument playing so as to achieve an accomplished final performance. Whilst the short amount of time given to this project, combined with the limited prior orchestral musical experience of students, restricted the technical ambition of the final composition, a skilful musical narrative was produced.

The City Beats workshops focussed on improvisation, playing by ear and contributing ideas to the composition, all of which are associated with highly creative processes such as originality, re-structuring and elaboration. Artistic experience was encouraged through working with musicians as co-creators and co-players. The creation of the composition was strongly led by Gillian who drew from the children's responses and a systematic approach to reflection supported by video-recordings of each workshop. An emphasis on exploration rather than technical accomplishment, stimulated confidence amongst the children to invent and experiment. The conventions of whole-group music at times limited individual input, though the high ratio of professional musicians to children allowed regular opportunities for one-to-one and small group musical creative inquiry.

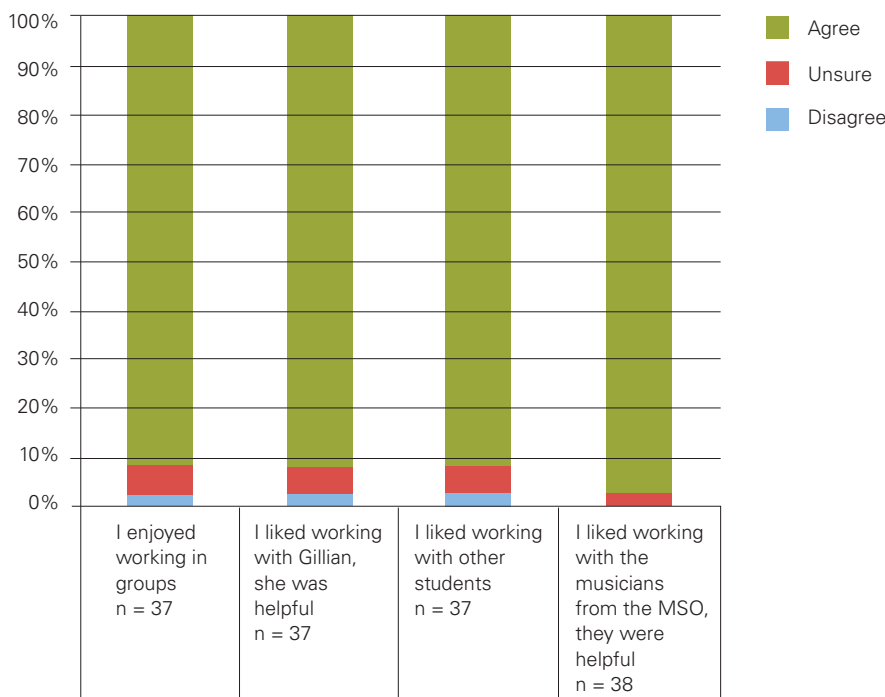


## Social Connectedness and Cultural Citizenship

There were numerous indicators of social connectedness throughout the ArtPlay MSO City Beats workshops. The warm up activities and whole-group compositions encouraged playful social connections amongst participants. While students already had established relationships with each other, the workshops required them to work with others in a different way. A number of students indicated that they enjoyed playing music together with their school friends, something they had never done before. The final performance at each group's school provided an opportunity for the children to present to others including their families. Further opportunity to perform publically, including to the other schools involved in the City Beats project, would extend the possible social and cultural connections realizable by this initiative.

The vast majority of the students enjoyed working in groups (Figure 2) and enjoyed working with the other students. All of the students enjoyed working with the MSO musicians and all but one (who wasn't sure) enjoyed working with Gillian who they found helpful.

**Figure 2: Survey - Social Connectedness**



It was evident from the students' reactions that they enjoyed direct personal connections with the musicians. As Gillian noted, "Several [children] came up and hugged me to say hello. In fact, I got hugs from people in each group across the two days, which was nice!" During the breaks, the MSO musicians actively engaged with the students, talking with them and showing them their instruments and at times playing for them. When MSO musician, Tony, began playing his saxophone, a number of students watched and listened quite enthralled. Another of the MSO musicians, Sophie, told the small group she was working with that she had recently played with Jessie J at the Logies, something that greatly impressed the young students.

The opportunity to engage with professional musicians over several workshops enabled a close relationship between children and the artist, one that engendered positive social relations. One of the MSO musicians, Jen, described:

*I think, probably, to begin with, they probably just see us as scary MSO musicians, and then as we progress through it, not so much. I think they're quite comfortable with engaging with us by creating a piece of music together. I think it also helps that I've been with the project for three out of the four sessions during the year.*

Strong connections between the MSO musicians was, however, limited by the fact that the same musicians were not available for each workshop because they were restricted by other work priorities with the MSO. ArtPlay had little input into the selection of MSO musicians for the City Beats project. When interviewed, the musicians noted the pros and cons of retaining the same professionals throughout each City Beats workshop. While the continued involvement by a few musicians supported closer relations between the children and the artists, opportunities to work alongside a diverse range of musicians, with expertise in different instruments, broadened the learning experience offered to the group.

To some extent the students recognised that that the MSO musicians were professional which made this experience very special. A 10-year old girl from Kinglake Primary described how she "liked how the people from Melbourne Symphony Orchestra find time to come and visit us to teach us." The potential of this relationship, though, could have been further realized. A recommendation put forth by some teachers and students was further opportunities to learn about and experience the MSO players as professional musicians. Ruth from Ardeer South explained:

*Even though the children still don't really have any idea of who they were playing alongside they are immeasurable richer for the experience. The only change I would make to the City Beats program would be to factor in a session where the children get to see the MSO perform, and to actually walk through the orchestra, meeting the musicians they already know, and being introduced to others. Otherwise individual musicians met at ArtPlay remain out of context and the children are still disconnected. These children are unlikely to access the MSO on their own terms, and will almost never feel that they know people in that Orchestra whom they can recognize and with whom they have formed a connection.*

The City Beats program engaged young people a cultural citizens through practices that emphasised collaboration and consultation. Throughout all of the activities students contributed their ideas; from suggestions of rhythms in the warm up games, choice of which instrument they would like to play and the opportunity to take leading roles in small groups by helping the other students learn their parts. When the participants embarked on the collaborative composition, it was the students who came up with the story. Breaking up into smaller groups so that each group developed a section of the story allowed contributions from all of the students. A key focus of ArtPlay MSO City Beats project was the co-creation of a musical performance that necessarily required children to connect with each other's musical input. The musical 'stories' drawn out in the workshops directed the children to reflect on shared experiences. In the case of bushfire-affected Kinglake Primary school children this led to the development of deeply felt song lines including:

*We're feeling lost and nervous.  
Everything is confusing.  
Tell us the way to go home.*



By enabling the children to reflect on their uncertainties and insecurities, Gillian acknowledged their capacity to express deep-felt personal views. During whole class work, Gillian consulted the participants about how they wanted to put their ideas together. They would try different suggestions and then decided as a group what sounded best. One teacher noted that, "Gillian and the other musicians consulted with the students throughout and interpreted their ideas beautifully." Whilst the workshops were explicitly structured to incorporate the ideas of students into the composition, such input was coordinated by the creative direction of the artists and by the shared ambition of all participants who were motivated to produce a proficient final performance.

## Conclusion

The City Beats project was highly engaging for students, and while many involved had prior musical experience, working as part of an orchestra with professional musicians was a unique experience. Structured to promote both creative experimentation and performance skills, the project provided an opportunity for the young people to see themselves as co-creators and musicians. For the professional musicians, City Beats provided an opportunity for direct community engagement, one that extended awareness and confidence amongst students and teachers to the potential of creating music. City Beats is now a continuing program at ArtPlay. It has stimulated ArtPlay and the MSO to engage in a deep and ongoing dialogue that will drive the future directions of this partnership, particularly in relation to promoting musical excellence with diverse communities.

