



ART SCARS

written by Dr Anita Collins

I had the privilege of being in a meeting a few weeks ago with a Head of School of a large private school. She was addressing her cross-school music staff as well as a large number of people from the school business units and those with various responsibilities in leadership at the school.

She was sharing her vision for music learning at her school, the sort of big broad strokes from which this large and varied team were charged with implementing her vision. As part of her presentation, she shared her own experience of music learning at the start of high school.

She was moving into a private high school with a large and high-profile music program after having attended a public school for seven years that had no music program at all. She had never had the chance to learn an instrument, to sing in a choir that focussed on vocal

production or part singing, and she did not know how to read music.

She described an experience where she was led into a very impressive and overwhelming school assembly hall and then lead onto the stage in a line with the other new students in her year group.

A teacher stood centre stage and another teacher was on the piano and she was told to sing the start of the national anthem. She started singing, but by the second line of the anthem song the teacher said stop, indicating that she should move to one side of the stage, and the next student stepped up.

This school leader soon figured out that the side of the stage she was on was the failures, the students who couldn't sing. The students on the other side of the stage could clearly carry a tune and were the musicians.

After this experience they all left the stage, but it took her many years to realise that this one test had determined the musical opportunities she would have for the rest of her time at the school. She was labelled as unmusical and consequently was never offered the opportunity to learn anand instrument, join a choir or even audition for a musical.

Why was she sharing this story with this large group of teachers and school staff? She was sharing it because she wanted the group to understand the basis upon which her values and vision for music at the school she was now leading were based on.

Music, she said, was for every child and the program needed to balance opportunities for participation and development with expectations of high performance and achievement. But I was struck by something else. I was struck by how our past arts experiences can have so much impact and influence

on the way we consume, view and lead arts experiences for our own children and our students.

Social psychology author Brene Brown uses the term Art Scars, which are experiences people have had as children in the arts that are deeply affecting. Through her research she has found that "85% of the men and women who I interviewed remembered an event in school that was so shaming, it changed how they thought of themselves for the rest of their lives."

I have had this experience a number of times where someone, maybe a parent or a school leader, a stockbroker turned philanthropist or a person I am sharing a lift with has shared their art scars with me. I think it comes after I mention that I am a music teacher and researcher and they feel they can tell me about their tiny but intensely personal experiences.

The art scar which almost moved me to tears was a father who had attended a presentation I gave to a parent group. He had been every quiet throughout the presentation but then discreetly came down to chat to me after it had all finished and I was packing up.

He wanted to asked me if he could ask me a question. Of course, I said. I should preface his question by sharing that I had talked a lot in the presentation about the power and purpose of singing to our young children for language development, social cohesion and inclusion, and stress and anxiety management.

The father half asked/half stated "I can't sing, and I didn't sing to my children when they were babies. Have I hurt them by not singing to them?"



I wish I could convey the prosody, the emotional content, in his speech. He was deeply concerned about that his own inability to sing to his children in this important window for connections and was wondering if he had fundamentally impacted their development and his relationship with his children.

I asked him if he thought he had hurt his children and why he was so sure he could not sing. What followed was a description, not unlike the one I heard from the Head of School, of an experience in his childhood that made him believe that he could not, and should not, sing.

A music teacher had said to him more than once “stop singing, your voice is painfully out of tune, you are causing me pain”. Here was his art scar. Here was a scar that had not only stopped him from singing, it had caused ongoing anxiety about using his voice for everything from speaking in meetings or sharing how he was feeling.

Art Scars might just be an unacknowledged influence in music learning advocacy. How many parents are encouraging their children to learn an instrument because they didn't have the chance, or discouraging them because they don't want their own children to experience the anxiety they did when they got on stage?

How many non-music teachers encourage their students into sports over music because sport is where they felt they developed their positive sense of self while they felt lesser than others in the music sphere?

How many school leaders are building music programs in the same image as

their own school experience, or the anti-image, without recognising the driving force behind their educational decisions?

I am not suggesting we need to walk up to everyone and ask them what their art scars are. That would be confronting and unproductive in most cases. But I do think we can listen out for those stories that help us understand where a person's current point of view about music learning might have been forged.

I think it may just reveal where the barriers and sticking points are living and help us to advocate in a way that is gentle but effective and ultimately maybe even healing.

"85% of the men and women interviewed remembered an event in school that was so shaming, it changed how they thought of themselves for the rest of their lives."

-Brene Brown