

tuning in to school life

SIGNIFICANT TRANSFORMATIONS ARE UNDERWAY AT ACT'S CANBERRA GRAMMAR SCHOOL, ENRICHING THE LIFE OF STUDENTS AS WELL AS THE WIDER COMMUNITY.

BY ANASTASIA CASEY

Canberra Grammar School (CGS) staff and students are marching to the beat of their own drum. Up until just four years ago, CGS was an all-boys school. Today, 44 per cent of its 2200 students from Primary to Year 12 are female. “We were very consciously wanting to recognise that our job is to prepare students for a dynamic and rapidly changing world,” head of school, Justin Garrick, says. “When our school was established 93 years ago, men and women were destined for different life experiences and that’s just not the case anymore.” And now, the school is undergoing another transformation, the development of a 1400-capacity auditorium, due to open this year.

The reasons behind this development are varied but mainly stem from the school’s recognition of the many benefits of music in education, which is reflected in the growing music and performing arts program at CGS. “The music curriculum is something that has always been an integral part of the life and culture of the school, but it’s really flourished over recent years and involves large numbers of students all the way from Primary to Year 12,” Justin says. “Music has demonstrable educational value in its own right, but it also enhances intellectual development, memory development, collaborative skills and creative skills. That’s why music was such an important opportunity for us.”

“So much about what’s important about music in school is that it’s a vehicle to teach so many other skills that students will take into the rest of their lives,” Dr Anita Collins, music educator and a leading researcher in the field of brain development and music learning,

known as neuromusical, adds. Anita’s groundbreaking research led her to create a short film for TED-Ed in 2014, which became one of the platform’s most-watched programs. And it was Anita’s own education that prompted her research. As a student struggling to read, she began playing the clarinet and noticed significant improvements in her reading.

“I did my PhD in neuroscience and music education, which was at the time a really new field and it’s one I’ve come to be an expert in. But, ultimately, I was trying to answer the question: did the opportunity that was given to me to learn an instrument and learn how to read music fundamentally change the direction of my life because it changed my ability to read?” Anita says. “So now I run a consultancy that works globally to help people use the neuroscientific research to enhance their music programs.”

And while Justin says that Anita’s research and expertise has no doubt helped shape and inform the development of the school’s music curriculum, Anita, who’s been with CGS in some capacity for 25 years, says that CGS has helped do the same in terms of her research. “The school has informed me to seek the next big thing, just like the school does for all the kids,” she says.

Studies have shown that the neural pathways created while learning music, and the discipline required to do so, strengthen different functions of the brain, which students bring into other areas of their learning. Such benefits include enhanced memory, listening, concentration and problem-solving. And while *listening* to music has its benefits, it’s the act of *making* music that stimulates both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, providing a

THIS PAGE: Justin (below left) has seen the school’s music curriculum — which includes music theory, composition, instrumental, orchestra, bands and more at various levels — flourish during his 12 years as principal of CGS.





“*The act of making music stimulates both the left and right hemispheres of the brain, providing a ‘full brain workout’*”

THIS PAGE: Anita, along with Justin and the school’s director of music, has worked closely with the architecture and construction teams to help bring the new auditorium to life.



“full brain workout”. So not only is it complementary to children’s academic studies, but it strengthens it — and it’s something the students take into their adult life.

“I like the fact that we’ve provided a pathway for music to be their career or the experience that informs their career,” Anita says. “One past student who’s now a stockbroker told me that when he examines results and graphs, he can almost hear it as music in his head and there’s a moment of clarity that helps in his decision-making.”

But aside from a component of the curriculum that strengthens students’ academic pursuits, it’s an activity they enjoy, one that creates a sense of community and is hugely beneficial to their wellbeing and mental health. In fact, as I chat to Justin over Zoom, he tells me that outside his office window, students are currently setting up for the school’s annual House Music Competition, which begins in just a matter of days. “It’s great fun, two days the school comes offline and everybody is cheering for their houses and you get some exquisite performances,” he says. “We do it at the end of second term, that’s the dark, mid-winter term where everybody is tired and it’s cold, and you have this uplifting event.”

Even senior students who elect to study music find it beneficial. “We strongly encourage it because of the complementary nature of how it enhances their wellbeing, particularly during those two final years that are quite

stressful,” Anita says. “It feeds your soul and it feeds that sense of wellbeing that we know is so important for kids to perform at their best academically.”

And both Justin and Anita agree that the timing of the auditorium’s development couldn’t be better. “We have this thriving music department, but not a music performance space,” Justin says. “It’s being finished at the right time for the music program to explode, both the number of kids involved and the musical heights that we can now reach because we’ve got the space to do it. The acoustics are going to be transformative,” Anita adds. In due time, CGS will also open up the auditorium for use by the public. “Schools are a part of a community, they are significant central hubs of activity so we would like our surrounding community to be able to use and enjoy the facility as well,” Justin says. “We have the capacity to provide something to the community that they don’t have, which is an auditorium of this size and style and, while it’s situated in a school, it is a gift to the Canberra community,” Anita adds.

And, of course, along with the development, Canberra Grammar School plans to grow its music department even further. “As we grow into the new space, the program and staffing will grow with it,” Justin says. “This really is one of those transformative opportunities that will change not only the physical frame of the school, but also culturally put music literally front and centre of the life of the school.” **AC**