



To Stephen King (Presiding Commissioner), Julie Abramson (Commissioner), and Harvey Whiteford (Associate Commissioner),

**Re: Submission to Productivity Commission on *The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health***

Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's call for submissions to the Issues Paper on *The Social and Economic Benefits of Improving Mental Health*.

As an organisation that is committed to the artistic development of young people (aged 6-25) we appreciate an opportunity to submit a short profile of SYO, as well as key issues faced in mental health.

**About Sydney Youth Orchestras**

SYO is one of the largest youth orchestral training organisation in Australia and a vital part of the cultural fabric of Sydney and NSW. SYO was founded 45 years ago by Peter Seymour, a legendary music educator. Since then SYO have trained thousands of talented young musicians by means of an outstanding educational program across the primary, secondary and tertiary segments through to the pre-professional stage. Not only does current SYO membership include 550 young musicians in weekly training, there are another 300 musicians participating in open programs. In 2019 and beyond, SYO expects these numbers to rise.

As the leading provider of orchestral training in NSW, SYO is committed to reaching across the state to provide greater access for all young musicians and challenge the barriers to participation. Recently SYO established the Western Sydney Youth Orchestra based in Parramatta and covering the Western Sydney area, the first time ever a youth orchestra has existed in that part of Sydney. SYO's regional outreach program consists of delivering orchestral training and education across NSW, most recently in the Central West (Dubbo), South Coast (Bermagui) and North West (Tamworth).

SYO is the training ground for many young musicians in forming pathways to a professional career in music. Among our alumni are distinguished musicians Richard Tognetti, Nigel Westlake, Jane Rutter and Dimity Hall. About one third of SSO players come from SYO and nearly every chamber and orchestra music group in Australia includes SYO alumni.

**Young people and mental health**

Research has found that an alarming number of young people are at risk of mental health issues, with 14% of 4-17 year olds and 18% of 16-24 year olds. The mental illness most adults experience has its onset in childhood or adolescence, with two thirds having their first episode (anxiety or affective disorders) by the time they are 21 ([Department of Health, 2009](#)).

As SYO's program caters for a broad range age range (6-25), statistically, the risk of mental health among our members is a significant one. During a young person's time with SYO, had

they joined at 6 years old and left after 25, they will have moved through several profound life transitions including from childhood to adolescence, primary to high school, adolescence to adulthood, dependence to independence and education to employment.

While the treatment of mental health is not officially part of SYO's remit as an organisation, SYO recognises that it can play a role in contributing to the mental health of our young musicians. We believe that our program has an indirect contribution to the well being of our young musicians in several ways.

### **Facilitating social participation**

During the program, SYO members are in close contact with a large group of their peers for most of the year with each member expected to attend at least 40 rehearsals, several performances, and at least 1 weekend camp, with a large number attending tours. SYO have received reports from parents of members that their child although isolated in their school environment has found a wide and accepting social circle within SYO largely due to a shared interest in music. In addition, a recurring comment in our surveys among SYO alumni is that during their time at SYO they had 'made friends for life.'

### **Engagement and connectedness**

Our program requires for each member to work towards a common goal, usually a series of performances. The act of creating music together is itself an act of connectedness, requiring cooperation, active listening, and unity. Audiences listening to performances can share similar feelings of participation through emotional response and enjoyment. This communal experience is a powerful catalyst for building belonging, self-worth, and a mutual feeling of achievement within the group.

### **Productivity in employment**

Within SYO there are many opportunities for young musicians to build their skills as professional musicians. Many are offered commercial opportunities to perform as well as being able to access mentors and industry contacts to help them navigate the music industry.

### **Benefits of music training for young people**

It is well documented that engagement in music programs has the potential to yield a variety of benefits for young people. Positive associations have been drawn between the study of music and academic achievement, language development, increased IQ, cognitive capability, spatial temporal intelligence, and an improved ability to focus.

### **Child Safety**

SYO is wholly dedicated to the advancement, support and wellbeing of young people. The safety and wellbeing of participants in our program and their families is of paramount importance. We are proud to be unequivocally resolute in our requirement for a best-practice, child-safe organisation. SYO is a mandatory reporter under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act which requires staff to be trained and aware of indicators that a child may be at risk of significant harm.

### **Strategic Partnerships**

One major way that SYO aims to create a stronger connection between mental health and young musicians is through a partnership with a major mental health clinic in Sydney. This program offers select groups of musicians and parents the opportunity to attend mental health workshops and presentations on positive mental health strategies with a focus on building resilience. Through this partnership, SYO aims to build an environment for young musicians where all aspects of their development are nurtured including positive mental health.

## Challenges

A major challenge for SYO is accurately measuring the true impact of its program on the state of mental health among its young musicians. Gauging such measurements and applying a clinical perspective would require significant investment in time and resources, however it would make for worthwhile study as we believe that for young people, participation in any creative endeavour, particularly activities that occur in groups yields a multitude of mental health benefits for the participant.

This information would be significant in drawing clearer the lines between creative pursuits and improved mental health among young people. Such connections should be referred to when considering the formation of primary and tertiary education policy.

Arts subjects including music programs are often first among a seemingly expendable group of subjects when school budgets are restrictive, particularly in the public-school system, and in a crowded curriculum with a focus on mandated performance in core subjects like literacy and numeracy. With the recent government allocation of funding towards early learning and school STEM initiatives, arts programs in general are pushed further down the list of priorities for schools, and a result, students miss out on the benefits of these experiences as part of a well-rounded education.

With a greater focus on how impactful arts engagement can be in benefitting the mental health of young people, policy reform could contribute to a greater number of young people participating in community building activities using creative work as a vehicle.

As an organisation, there is no other like SYO who is training the volume of young musicians and shaping the future of orchestral music in Sydney and NSW. We take pride in the contribution that we make to both making a difference in the lives of young people, and to the greater creative ecology.

SYO appreciate the opportunity to have our voice heard. Please do not hesitate to contact our offices if there is any area of this submission on which we can aid or clarification. We look forward to updates on the outcome of this enquiry.

Regards,

Mia Patoulios  
General Manager  
Sydney Youth Orchestras