

## MOORAMBILLA VOICES - MORE THAN JUST A CHOIR!

MICHELLE LEONARD AND MARGIE MOORE

*Michelle Leonard and Margie Moore give us an insight into a regional focused choir and arts organisation designed to give our students access to multi-arts programs...*

Moorambilla Voices (Moorambilla) is more than a choir. It was founded in 2006 with the aim of creating a regional choir of excellence that encompasses regional children and youth. Moorambilla Voices has expanded to include dance, Japanese Taiko drumming, lantern making and visual art.

It is a regionally focussed arts organisation that seeks to empower children and youth to think big, dream widely and connect to Country<sup>1</sup> and their communities. Moorambilla does this through an exceptional annual multi-arts program of workshops, cultural immersions, artistic commissions, residential camps, tours, recordings, performances and more recently an award-winning online learning platform, '[Moorambilla Magic Modules](#)'. Moorambilla fosters team cooperation through group performance: in choirs, Japanese Taiko drumming groups and dance, which develops general cooperative ability, confidence and leadership skills. Like our rivers in flood – our creative capacity is powerful, breathtaking and immense.

### **Moorambilla Voices:**

- includes voice, dance, drumming and visual arts;
- is a universal access program with equality of access for all.
- unrelentingly pursues excellence in artistic expression, pedagogically informed learning and performance.
- supports children's mental well-being, resilience and self-esteem.
- celebrates and incorporates the Indigenous languages and worldview of regional Australia through consultation and collaboration.
- develops social capital through teamwork, community inclusion and group capacity building.

Moorambilla's commitment to, and connection with, living culture in regional NSW is vital to empower participants and audiences to initiate conversations at

every level that encourage and celebrate inclusion and respect. Raising cultural awareness, recognition and respect is at the heart of what we have done since 2006. The use of Indigenous languages in the songs that are performed and the telling of the stories through dance, singing and drumming facilitates this cultural communication and links directly to the broader community agendas of promoting knowledge and learnings of our shared cultural history in an empowering and life affirming way. Our Indigenous elders, community leaders and student participants are vital to the success of the program and, as Elders and leaders from the regional communities share their themes and stories with the artists, they collectively weave them through our yearly program, so we all grow and learn cultural competency year on year on year. Ongoing conversations and support for the Moorambilla program come from the Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Wiradjuri, Wailwan, Ngiyampaa and Ngemba nations.

Moorambilla prides itself on engaging children from the remote regional area of NSW. We operate regardless of the background or financial circumstances of our participants. Many children on remote properties, and from small towns, are disadvantaged and lack opportunities to engage with creative arts. Rural and remote Australia hosts many areas of disadvantage, with Australia's lowest levels of income, education and employment. This coincides with high levels of Aboriginality and cultural disconnection and poorer chances of advancement.

Schools in the region lack resources in terms of learning aids, instruments, computers, appropriate buildings and access to consistent internet services. It is common for schools' internet service to be unreliable; this was exacerbated during the recent floods and mouse plagues (e.g., mice ate through cables to white boards and other electrical equipment). Staff turnover

at all levels in the educational system is high and many children move from community to community resulting in disjointed educational exposure- exacerbated during COVID-19, and beyond.

Moorambilla strongly believes that everyone, particularly in a regional or remote part of Australia, should not be limited by education, aspirations or belief in their capacity to live a life rich in opportunities. Moorambilla Voices has a well-developed and focussed planned approach to delivering its program. This ensures Moorambilla continues to contribute to a brighter, and more inclusive, future for our regional communities and the wider Australian arts ecology. It has made the incredible commitment, over seventeen years, to ensuring the pillars of excellence equity and opportunity are upheld and is the longest serving arts organisation in one third of the state.

### MOORAMBILLA AND MUSIC AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Evidence demonstrates the clear benefits of music and artistic education programs in breaking children free of disadvantage. Many recent studies confirm the significant value of carefully planned and well taught music/arts programs in all education and their developmental advantages for young people:

- Music improves self-confidence, self-expression and fosters creativity. It is a powerful tool in fostering health and well-being (Hallam, 2010).
- Music develops neural pathways and enhances brain function. Music stimulates incomparable development of a child's brain and leads to improved concentration and memory abilities (George & Coch, 2011)
- Music promotes teamwork and collaboration. Children are brought to the highest levels of group participation requiring intense commitment, highly developed skills in coordination and a highly evolved sense of musicality and expressiveness (Schellenberg & Mankarious 2012)
- Involvement in arts practice can help children develop an understanding of, and respect for, real and fundamental cultural awareness (Bloomfield & Childs 2013)
- Dance supports student learning through student engagement, critical and creative thinking, and stu-

dent self-concept (Fegley, 2010)

- Participation in group drumming can lead to significant improvements in multiple domains of social-emotional behaviour. This sustainable intervention can foster positive youth development (Ho, Tsao, Bloch & Zeltzer 2011)

Over the past 20 years, multiple studies (Saunders, 2019; Lorenza, 2018; Meiners, 2017; Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lacrin, 2013; Bryce, Mendelovits, Beavis, McQueen & Adams, 2004; Fiske 1999) in Australia and elsewhere have demonstrated better personal and educational performance by those involved in the arts and music. These outcomes include measures such as national school results, student well-being, attendance, reduced need for school discipline or exclusion and better self-control.

### ARTISTIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORK FOR MOORAMBILLA VOICES



Moorambilla, in Gamilaroi language, means 'place of deep fresh water'. This image of ancient rock art represents the physical manifestation of the *Brewarrina Fish Traps*<sup>2</sup>. These are one of the oldest man-made structures in the world. The image is a mark on Country and represents our core program's geographical footprint in Western New South Wales, Australia. It is a visual symbol of excellence manifest. It represents cooperation, innovation, transference of culture and knowledge, creativity and collaboration, as well as ethical and economic sustainability through aquaculture. This image was adopted in 2018 as the visual representation of our core program and, as such, sits at the heart of what we do.

We recognise that water connects us all to each other – water is vital for human survival. The analogy of the Brewarrina fish traps allows us to connect the economic, cultural and creative importance of water to all Australia.

lians. Within this analogy, we have interconnecting slip streams in the Moorambilla Voices flow, which lead either a fish or fingerling to leadership opportunities.

Our core program was established in the state of NSW, Australia. Our fish fingerlings<sup>3</sup> swim through, in and out of this, as part of the ensembles of:

- *Birralii* (Year 3 mixed group);
- *Mirray*, primary girls (ages 8-12);
- *Birray*, primary boys (ages 8-12)
- and grow into the *MAXed-OUT* youth company (ages 12-18).

The program starts with skills development workshops, based around music and dance, in schools through which participants are selected, not auditioned. Candidates are selected in workshops for the annual program based on natural ability and tenacity. For many the defining feature is their strong desire to positively contribute to the ensemble.

Our Moorambilla Voices program grows from fingerlings, at various stages of development, swimming through the bends in the flow radiating from our core program. As they swim through this structure, they tour, perform, increase in skill and knowledge, and potentially create new bends in the river (contributing to the wider arts ecology as alumni and associate artists).

Candidates and professional artists engage with, and find their own flow in, the system. Because of the transient nature of our candidates and artists, they will enter into this system at various points in their educational life cycle. This sophisticated structure is fluid enough to support change as the child or artist grows.

Moorambilla enables individuals to enter the slipstream or the natural flow in our program through our core ensemble program, or as an associate or featured artist, volunteer or audience member. Artists show our candidates career flow in action and the capacity for creative fluidity. Their connection to the program does not have to be linear; it can happen within the individual's creative journey and life cycle.

Our program supports a mentoring framework across all our associated art forms. The engagement of composers, choreographers, visual artists and performers of the highest calibre supports our fingerlings to grow.

As cultural sector leaders, we reference this framework through our online, spoken and written word to support and nurture the creative flow of this program within the

wider arts ecology. All artists, volunteers and candidates make a commitment to shared cultural understanding through singing, language art and dance, guided by cultural immersion on Country. Furthermore, we make an artistic commitment to recognise, acknowledge and celebrate our shared understanding of marks on Country from fingerling to fully grown fish.

### **A COVID SILVER LINING – MOORAMBILLA MAGIC MODULES**

Moorambilla Voices is an organisation that seeks to empower children and youth to think big, dream widely and connect to Country and their communities. More recently, to support this aim, Moorambilla Voices has created a Nationally award-winning online learning platform - [Moorambilla Magic Modules](#).

These modules won the award for the APRA AMCOS National best educational program 2022.

#### **COVID-19, floods, mice and Moorambilla Magic Modules**

In early 2020 the world changed. At the end of March 2020, it became clear that the normal mode of delivery for the program was about to undergo significant change due to the emerging restrictions unfolding for COVID-19 risk mitigation.

By April 2020, Moorambilla Voices made the decisive and empowering decision to support all of its associated artists and create pedagogically sequential 20–30 minute modules in consultation with the Artistic Director. Twenty-nine artists were eventually employed to create these modules as the backbone of the 2020/21 program. Artists were paired with an educator so there was industry knowledge coupled with curriculum expertise, and so that the pedagogy is embedded in the content created.

These modules subsequently connected our established and emerging artists to our regional children and their communities, offering skills, humour, hope and a sense of connection at a time when the arts ecology felt like it was fraying beyond repair.

Each module showcases the specialised artistry, integrity and immense capacity of the individual artist delivered in a way that was engaging, sequential, empowering and palatable for regional children and youth already experiencing isolation, lack of resources and opportunity before COVID-19.

In March 2020 floodwaters were swiftly moving across the region that had until that point been a dust bowl; in April 2021 the same region experienced the might of a mouse plague and then floods again in 2021 and 2022, yet still the resilience and commitment to creativity and connection has been maintained by our communities and the Moorambilla team.

Now all of the Moorambilla Magic Modules (157) have been mapped to the NSW syllabuses (music and dance), as well as visual arts, drama, and PE syllabuses to further support their use in the classroom. Now regional educators who have the will but not the skill to engage with the creative arts, can engage in professional development at school with a sequential empowering resource, of which 42% of the content is First Nations led, created or consulted and where every artist has an understanding and connection to the region.

The Moorambilla Magic Modules demonstrate in a tangible way that we have the knowledge and experience in the arts industry to develop and provide online curriculum content for schools.

### Connection to current Syllabuses

Existing evidence, underpinning the Moorambilla modules, supports the clear benefits of artistic education programs in helping students develop better self-confidence and self-efficacy.

These modules are based on direct instruction and are designed to create the maximum level of engagement in students<sup>4</sup>. They integrate educational theories and practical approaches for differentiated teaching to challenge and cater for the needs of all learners<sup>5</sup>

These modules represent a collection of resources (strat-

egies, techniques, processes, ideas, tools, digital technologies/ICT) that support participation and engagement for all learners in arts-based classroom experiences<sup>6</sup>.

They use a range of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to manage learning, participation and engagement<sup>7</sup>.

Evidence shows that arts learning promotes teamwork and collaboration. We focus on collaborative tasks which require intense commitment and promote the development of coordination and expressiveness.<sup>8</sup>

Each module is built on differentiated teaching pedagogies embedded in the design of their structure, content and delivery. The Dance modules employ explicit instruction using imagery, descriptions and metaphors to 'feel/experience' the movement<sup>9</sup>. The music modules are presented sequentially through embodied learning starting with a simple phrase reinforced cumulatively<sup>10</sup>. The modules use sequential and scaffolded learning taking the children from the known to the unknown, providing a firm foundation which is built on, so the students feel supported as they develop their knowledge and skills.

The modules support student learning through student engagement, reflection, critical and creative thinking, and improving students' sense of self-concept.<sup>11</sup>

### Development of the Modules

Interactive video modules were developed for primary and secondary students, covering and mapped to the NSW Educational Standards Authority's creative arts syllabus. They include song, dance, art, craft, taiko drumming, photography, drama, literacy and Indigenous culture. They are distributed across three learning stages and five curriculum categories:

Learning Stage	Dance	First Nations	Music & Singing	Visual Arts & Drama	Percussion & Rhythm	Total Modules for each stage
2 (early primary)	17	42	34	19	5	70
3 (late primary/early secondary)	32	54	37	22	6	94
4 (secondary)	39	56	44	30	30	137
Total						157

Some modules overlap categories, and several can apply to more than one learning stage.

Subjects and artistic presenters are shown in Appendix 1. Top national performers and mentors have been used throughout. Singing coaches include previous members of the Song Company (Anna Fraser, Hannah Fraser and Andrew O'Connor). Taiko artists explain taiko and general percussion (Anton Lock, Kerry Joyce and Sophie Unsen), Modules have been created by some of Australia's top dance educators and performers (Jacob Williams, Courtney Scheu, Tai Savage) and many well-known Indigenous artists (Frank Wright, Amy Flannery, Neville Williams-Boney). All of these workshops feature Australian music composed by well-known Australian composers – Kevin Barker, Alice Chance, Andrew Howes, Elena Kats-Chernin, Elizabeth Jigalin, Josephine Gibson, Riley Lee, Christine Pan and Oscar Sweeney and more.

All modules are activity-based – there is no listening without doing. All demonstrate a level of energy matching that of the students.

[Click here](#) for 2020 Module Highlights Video (4m28s): In June 2021, Michelle Leonard, Moorambilla Voices Artistic Director, met with school executives for initial interest consultations around utilising this resource, potential barriers and how to overcome them.

The modules were pilot tested through workshops delivered at schools located in Dubbo and Gulargambone, providing the opportunity for Moorambilla to evaluate the modules' efficacy as a learning tool and their further market potential. The learnings gained from these evaluations were used to fine-tune the development of the modules being created at the time.

This cycle of testing and review will continue over time, as we work with the schools while we are still developing modules so that we can apply feedback in real time. *"They are going to be very useful to teachers because the modules are so well designed by professionals who have done it all before."* **Brad Haling, teacher Gulargambone Central school.**

Gulargambone Central School has used the modules the way Moorambilla anticipated:

- Primary teacher's expectation (17sec) <https://vimeo.com/527594061>
- School principal's impression (45sec) <https://vimeo.com/527016229>
- Primary class learning from Hannah Fraser (13 sec) <https://vimeo.com/526787115>

- Michelle Leonard summary (33 sec) <https://vimeo.com/526777663>

Other teachers contacted by Moorambilla have reviewed the modules, with strong positive results.

*"The modules are an exciting and dynamic online program that have made an enormous difference to my teaching of the Creative Arts. The students have enjoyed the diverse lessons and have made a great connection to country. The units are easy to follow and enjoyable to teach, especially for teachers with no experience of dance or music."* **Kate Harper, Balranald Central School.**

All modules developed to date through the Moorambilla Magic Modules are sequential in nature. Skills are taught, reinforced, built upon and extended throughout each individual module as well as each set of modules.

Most modules begin with a warm-up and end with a cool down exercise. Each module's activities move from simple to more complex activities, carefully scaffolded so that the students experience success by the end of each module. This may be the performance of a First Nations' sitting down dance (taught through direct instruction) that teaches each movement in context and reinforces each movement phrase along the way; or the drawing of a First Nations animal or fish using the x-ray drawing technique carefully explained and demonstrated bit by bit; or the performance of a complex percussion or taiko drumming pattern learned cumulatively phrase by phrase through speech, movement and imitation.

Most of the modules are in sets of 3, 6 or 12 modules, with each module building on the one before, so that by the end of the sequence students have built a strong skill set in that particular arts area and experienced creative, joyful and successful learning experiences.

## MAPPING

In order to establish the relevance of the modules for busy teachers and students in schools Moorambilla Voices has 'mapped' the modules to the detailed Outcomes and Objectives of the NSW Syllabuses for primary and secondary schools. The maps contain:

- a summary of what is in the modules (as a lesson plan)
- how it relates to the areas of skill and knowledge development for each subject,
- an outline of the outcomes and objectives covered in the lesson.

- These are supplemented by:
  - links to more information and
  - fun ideas for extending the students engagement and for giving teachers extra material to build on.

This mapping process provides a crucial link between the classroom and the modules that makes them more meaningful and relevant. It also breaks down the educator's time barrier administratively to their inclusion.

## RESULTS

Many of the artistic projects featured in our 2021 Magic Modules were featured in a live context during our 2022 camps and gala concert. Perhaps most importantly, the 2021 Magic Modules provided the means to continue our strong engagement and relationships with regional NSW school teachers and students, ensuring the success of Moorambilla's 2022 life-changing, in-person multi-disciplinary arts programs.

The exceptional standard of the Moorambilla Magic Modules has been recognised nationally, being awarded the 2021 APRA / AMCOS National award for Excellence in Music Education.

## CONCLUSION

Moorambilla is enjoying its seventeenth year celebrating the pursuit of artistic excellence, the energy of collaboration, the creation of new music, the sheer joy of singing, dancing, drumming and making art together in this rich and vibrant program. This is acknowledged by the achievement of many national awards over a number of years. We are thrilled to be an important part of the national conversation around identity and excellence. [Click here](#) for more information on the choirs, the candidates and our program please see the attachments – 2022 and 2019 concert programs and flyers.

## ENDNOTES

1. Country - <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country>

When Aboriginal people use the English word 'Country' it is meant in a special way. For Aboriginal people culture, nature and land are all linked. Aboriginal communities have a cultural connection to the land, which is based on each community's distinct culture, traditions and laws. Country takes in everything within the landscape - land-forms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods,

medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Community connections include cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories and art, as well as all people: past, present and future. People have custodial responsibilities to care for their Country, to ensure that it continues in proper order and provides physical sustenance and spiritual nourishment. These custodial relationships may determine who can speak for particular Country. These concepts are central to Aboriginal spirituality and continue to contribute to Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal communities associate natural resources with the use and benefit of traditional foods and medicines, caring for the land, passing on cultural knowledge and strengthening social bonds.

2. The Brewarrina Fishtraps, or as they are traditionally known Baiame's Ngunnhu, are a complex network of river stones arranged to form ponds and channels that catch fish as they travel downstream. Known as one of the oldest human-made structures in the world, the traps are located in the Barwon River on the outskirts of Brewarrina.

3. Fingerling - A young fish, especially one less than a year old and about the size of a human finger

4. Smithrim, K., & Upitis, R. (2005). *Learning through the Arts: Lessons of Engagement*. Canadian Journal of Education, 28(1/2), 109-127.

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6. Winner, E., Goldstein, T. R., Vincent-Lancrin, S. (2013). *Arts for art's sake? Overview*, OECD Publishing.

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8. Hallam, S. (2010) The power of music: Its impact on the intellectual, social and personal development of children and young people, *International Journal of Music Education*, 28 (3), 269-289

9. Hattie, J., (2009). Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement. New York: Routledge

10. Juntunen, Marja-Leena. (2005). *Exploring and learning music through embodied experiences*, "Music and De-velopment – Challenges for Music Education", The First European Conference on Developmental Psychology of Music Proceedings. 273-276.

11. Fegley, L.E. (2010) Impact of Dance on Student Learning [https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession89-10MIT/Fegley\\_LMIT2010.pdf](https://archives.evergreen.edu/masterstheses/Accession89-10MIT/Fegley_LMIT2010.pdf) accessed 10 June 2021

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Wide Open Sky – Award winning documentary about Moorambilla Voices <https://www.wideopenskymovie.com/trailer>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Michelle Leonard, OAM** Michelle Leonard is the Founder, Artistic Director and Conductor of Moorambilla Voices. Michelle is widely sought after as a choral clinician on Australian repertoire and appears regularly as a guest speaker, adjudicator and workshop facilitator. Michelle was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for Services to the Community and Performing Arts in 2017, 2018 the Sydney University Alumni of the year award for services to the Arts and in 2019 was named in the Financial Review's top 100 most influential women. In 2021 Michelle led the rehearsal nationally for the ABC Classic choir.



**Margie Moore, OAM, Arts and Education consultant** Margie has extensive experience as an arts, education and music educator and administrator. She has had successful careers as a teacher, music consultant, lecturer in arts education and managing the highly regarded Sydney Symphony Education Program. She offers consultancy to a range of arts organisations in Australia and the UK. Margie has been on the board of Moorambilla Voices since 2010 and has held executive positions in both the NSW and National Orff Schulwerk Associations.





## APPENDIX 1: MODULE DETAILS

### Module specific links:

Primary class learning from Hannah Fraser <https://vimeo.com/526787115>

Lexi singing along with Hannah Fraser Module 1 <https://vimeo.com/623171922>

2020 Moorambilla Magic Module highlights:

<https://vimeo.com/429132951>

Performance outcomes: 2013 Coonamble Showground

<https://vimeo.com/100070589>

### Content:

Subjects of the modules, all of which have been mapped to the Creative Arts syllabus, are:

\* Indicates a First Nations artist/presenter

- Literacy Modules with Michelle Leonard OAM (AD Moorambilla Voices), Andrew Howes (established Australian composer), Cathy Colless (regional author) and Billie the Bird – 3 modules Stage 2/3.
- Music Literacy with Michelle Leonard OAM – 10 modules, Stage 2/3
- Music Literacy with Michelle Leonard OAM – 10 modules, Stage 4
- Dance Fundamentals with Jacob Williams (Sydney Dance Company) in Dubbo – 6 modules, Stage 2/3/4.
- Retrospective repertoire modules – with Michelle Leonard OAM, pianist Ben Burton and composer and performer Josie Gibson – 4 modules, Stage 2/3.
- Phone Photography with Noni Carroll – Moorambilla’s resident photographer from Wagga Wagga – 6 modules, Stage 2/3/4.
- Connection to Country – Dance with NAISDA graduate Amy Flannery\* from Forbes – 6 modules, Stage 2/3/4
- Emu connection – with NAISDA graduate Neville Williams-Boney\* in Sydney – 6 modules, Stage 2/3/4
- Torres Strait music, dance and weaving with Tainga Savage\* (Currently part of the Australian ‘Hamilton’ cast) from Cobar – 3 modules, Stage 2/3/4
- Torres Strait weaving with Tainga Savage\* (Currently part of the ‘Hamilton’ cast) from Cobar – 3 modules, Stage 4
- How to Draw X-ray style animals with Frank Wright\* – Aboriginal artist in Walgett – 12 modules, Stage 2/3/4
- Lost Allsorts Dance Collective\* (independent dance artists, NAISDA graduates) modules on dance and weaving – 6 modules, Stages 2/3/4.
- Vocal Bootcamp for Primary with Hannah Fraser previously from Song Company – 6 modules, Stage 3/4
- Yoga Flow – with Courtney Scheu (Plastic Belly) from the hinterland of Brisbane – 6 modules, Stage 3/4.
- Djembe modules with Elliott Orr (Talkin’ the drum) from Byron Bay – 6 modules, Stage 3/4
- Vocal Bootcamp for Secondary with Anna Fraser, previously from Song Company – 8 modules, Stage 4.
- Vocal Bootcamp for Secondary with Andrew O’Connor, previously from Song Company – 6 modules, plus warm up module Stage 4.
- Body Percussion, beat boxing and more with Anton Lock (Cirque du Soleil/Taikoz/independent DJ video artist) – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Taiko Fundamentals with Sophie Unsen from Taikoz – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Taiko Fundamentals with Kerry Joy from Taikoz – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Stagecraft with Tom Royce-Hampton (actor, musician, director) from Melbourne – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Comedy and Public Speaking with Dane Simpson\* from Wagga Wagga – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Fan Dance with Kerry Joy from Taikoz – 6 modules, Stage 4.
- Composition with Elizabeth Jigalin (established composer and co-founder of the award winning ‘Music Box Project’) from Sydney – 6 modules, Stage 4