

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?

A keynote address presented by Salvador Ferreras to the Northwest Chapter of the College Music Society at Boise State University on February 17, 2007

Good morning. I extend sincere greetings to all of you and thank you for inviting me to participate as this year's Northwest Chapter keynote speaker. I am honoured by your gesture and fully realize the privilege of such an opportunity. I bring to this lecture almost 30 years of music teaching experience in the post-secondary environment, a long history of involvement in cultural advocacy work at the organizational, board, assessment and policy consultant level. Most importantly, however, I bring to this gathering, a passion for music making, a love of teaching and a moral responsibility to share that gift of music we are all so fortunate to have received. In the words of 19th century American intellectual Margaret Fuller, "If you have knowledge, let others light their candle to it."

Today's topic "Who are the people in your neighbourhood" uses this catchy title borrowed from a famous Sesame Street song to launch into a multifaceted exploration of:

- An enriched curriculum responsive to the community and the market
- The role a school of music can assume in any complex community
- The genesis of outreach and participation
- The nature of partnerships
- The role of the post-secondary institution in the building of meaningful communities
- The challenges of transformation

I will begin by describing the history and workings of the School of Music at Vancouver Community College where I became Director last August 2006 after having participated as a faculty member for over 10 years. I will follow that with a description of how internal and external pedagogical paradigm shifts over the past ten years created the conditions that enabled the launching of a number of exciting initiatives and collaborations. Later in the lecture I will address some contemporary perceptions of the role of culture in the making of a healthy and creative society and finally I will outline a series of useful steps your own institutions may wish to explore.

In the late 1970s, amidst the exponential growth in university and college programs in Canada's post Centennial prosperity, Vancouver Community College established a Music Diploma program that at the time challenged the local mainstream university music teaching programs. Introducing a formal curriculum that was set up to respond to the market demand for increasingly varied musical skills, VCC's Music Diploma introduced a rigorous classical and contemporary (in this case meaning pop and jazz) program that, over the years, produced a respectable percentage of today's top-notch producers and performers in the Vancouver music scene. This was the work of visionaries such as jazz trombonist Dave Robbins, musicologist David Duke, oboist Jerry Domer and conductor Jon Washburn.

The then "alternative" curriculum expanded the traditional conservatory model (on which most university programs were constructed) and introduced skill training in the areas of sight-singing, rhythm studies, a course about working in the music business and a performance-oriented course for students of all disciplines. In addition, a community choir, the Willan Choir, was formed.

As these progressive programs developed over the next two decades, their innovative edge showed signs of stagnation. Competing colleges and university programs had by now bought in to those innovative ideas and developed parallel, similar and in many cases superior curriculum. Vancouver Community College, in essence, was losing ground. Department heads David Branter and later David Duke recognized the importance of challenging traditional notions of what a department should do and introduced new curriculum ideas propelled by a number of new term instructors who themselves identified the department as a potential lab for new ideas. I was fortunate to be one of these.

Beginning in the early 90's VCC opened up its doors to the teaching of global traditions with which many of its faculty were involved outside the college. Potential partners in the performing community were identified and invited to join us and share their unique musical cultures with the students at large. Immigrant musical artists began were welcomed into our program thereby enriching the student learning environment while upgrading their own "western music" technique and knowledge.

The direct result of this global traditions thrust was the establishment of a Korean Ensemble, a Gamelan Degung ensemble, a Latin Jazz Band and

a Latin Percussion group among others. As a direct complement to that the department introduced innovative courses in World Music and integrated the study of world music techniques as a core element of introductory music history and theory.

New courses in rhythm studies combined traditional Western notation-oriented rhythm studies with West African and South Indian techniques. The traditional areas of classical music expanded to include studies in Early Music, Madrigal singing and refined those skills through courses in Lyric Diction and Opera training. The more contemporary musical stream under the classical umbrella saw an even more remarkable expansion into electronic music, aesthetics and New Music performance and composition. Courses in jazz began to refine the greater concept into areas of very specific interest. Alan Matheson's Early Jazz ensemble was as valuable and intense a performance practice course as any I have ever witnessed. At the other end of the spectrum bassist Laurence Mollerup introduced a current favourite, the VCC Fusion band, exploring a whole range of contemporary jazz usually marginalized in traditional jazz programs. Present Department Head Ken Morrison and composer Giorgio Magnanensi's Liquid Architecture course on contemporary composition re-drew the boundaries of what was possible within our modest little diploma program. Finally, when two particularly driven students produced the first known scholarly oriented paper on the history of the Hockey Organ tradition in North America we knew we had accomplished a great feat.

The rapid development of the curriculum sought to retain the teaching of essential musicianship skills, theory and history while developing an enriched global outlook and an expanded performance range. The priority was to create a unique musical training program driven by and responsive to its outside environment. The curriculum reflected an approach that acknowledged and recognized the value of alternative musical and even social thought. The study of music, though well rooted in history and tradition must, we feel, address a more comprehensive worldview and reflect a broader frame of reference.

We have come to embrace the belief that any music is important enough to study and that contemporary trends must be acknowledged and examined in their formative development stages rather than simply in retrospect.

The priorities of our emerging comprehensive program include a compelling need to:

- Engage our students in the day to day workings of a dynamic society
- Foster an understanding of the complex and multi-layered nature of our social and cultural community
- Provide direct communications and community interactive experience for our student body
- Share the gift of musical arts with the greater community
- Provide a possible destination for aspiring artists in the local schools and neighbourhood
- Access professional and amateur adult learners seeking career upgrades, credentials and professional development
- Generate a diverse curriculum in line with our College-wide Strategic Plan

As our new-found focus on the enrichment of the student learning environment took on a wider dimension, we realized our need to not only reflect musical diversity and alternative thought but also the urgent need to project these inclusive practices on our immediate cultural and social environment. In essence we undertook our own brand of “cultural guerilla activity”. By this I refer to a number of initiatives that sought to address the obvious gap between conventional concepts of outreach and that of a more substantive and meaningful community engagement. We began to link our goals with those of similarly minded cultural groups, organizations and institutions. We sought to address common goals and create a network of collaborative musical adventures whose musical activities would feed into one another’s curriculum or programs over many years.

Recognizing that we are in the business of teaching an alternative musical curriculum we are currently collaborating with six different partnerships that we feel will ensure we:

- Share the wealth of knowledge that we (students and faculty) possess
- Provide mentorship to aspiring musicians
- Provide inspiring musical experiences for music lovers of all kinds
- Exhibit a pluralistic approach to learning and to performance
- Reflect the community ideals set out in the VCC college mandate and strategic priorities

- Develop joint ventures that offer learning and teaching experiences to students
- Develop joint ventures that place our student work in professional public venues
- Create an awareness that VCC's School of Music is committed to the exploration of a wide range of musical genres
- Recognize the importance and relevance of interdisciplinary work in music, theatre, spoken word, media and dance.
- Focus on initiatives that address the rapid change and categorization of musical genres.

We acknowledge the importance of contributing to our community, that of our students and that of our local residents. By building bridges to these partner institutions we hope to be building a long term awareness of our presence, our engagement, our role and our civic responsibility to contribute to the well being of our collective environment.

Let us turn our attention now to the six inaugural partnerships that are helping to shape our new relationship with the outside community.

They are:

- Coastal Jazz and Blues, the producers of the hugely successful Vancouver International Jazz Festival.
- Britannia Secondary School, pioneers in the integration of world music studies into the school curriculum
- The Turning Point Contemporary Music Ensemble
- The Vancouver East Cultural Centre
- Main Dance
- The Sarah McLachlan Music Outreach

VCC hosts an annual 10 day intensive summer course titled The Vancouver Creative Music Institute in a specialized area of Jazz/New Music improvisation generally known as Creative Music. This successful brainchild of Department Head Ken Morrison and the Coastal Jazz and Blues Society Executive Director Julie Smith has quickly become an important outlet for the followers of this music. The collaboration with the Jazz Festival producers ensures that by sharing costs of hiring and housing the artist teachers we enable the Festival to bring these same artists to also perform at the large scale Vancouver festival. Students not only have the

opportunity to work in a close environment with some of the leaders of the field but also are able to enjoy their performances at the Festival.

Important features of this collaboration are:

- A proven successful partnership with the equally successful Coastal Jazz and Blues Society
- A nationally recognized summer institute for Creative Music
- An international faculty led by our own clarinet and improvisation instructor François Houle.
- An example of the synergy between outreach and education
- A high level, credit-granting inspiring workshop in improvisation

Britannia Secondary School is a large high school located fairly close to the college on Vancouver's East Side. Over the past 15 years they have pioneered world music programs in the school curriculum (including exporting some of their curriculum to neighbouring elementary schools) and have sponsored artist-in-residence programs with selected musicians from Cuba, The Ivory Coast and Zimbabwe. The result is that they have galvanized the high school music scene while providing a positive training ground for young talent interested in a wider musical range. A number of VCC instructors were peripherally involved in Britannia's World Music projects from the very beginning. Students who have grown up with these programs are now poised to become the new generation of professional world music players in the Vancouver scene. One such group of students assembled a more formal ensemble that is now appearing regularly at festivals and other public events. Some of these students are now enrolled at our college.

The value of this relationship can be measured by:

- The expanded performance opportunities for advanced high school students available at the college
- The high level instructors we can provide for selected ensembles
- Access to our venue as a community partner
- The further association that also exists between Britannia and the SMMO

In the summer of 2006 we were approached by the Main Dance School of Contemporary Dance. They proposed a collaboration with the VCC School of Music whereby they could develop individual projects between emerging choreographers and our performance and composition

students. The works that would emerge from these collaborations would them be programmed into Main Dance's yearly festival presentation held in a well known Vancouver modern dance and music venue.

The featured advantages of this type of collaboration are:

- Collaboration with student composers and performers
- It provides public/professional festival performance experience in a recognized venue
- It expands the range of performance practices
- It prepares many for the demands of an increasingly complex and dynamic market
- It allows our School of Music to expand its artistic offerings

VCC has nurtured a close relationship with the city's most accomplished contemporary ensemble, Turning Point. This past January we held a week-long ensemble in residence program as part of an international theatre, visual arts and music festival titled PuSh. The value of this particular collaboration lay not only in the exposure to high level music making but also in the fact that Turning Point was involved in an important video/music presentation that gave our students a close look at the workings of multi-media ventures. Students were able to interact with the musicians, watch rehearsals and generally have the luxury of seeing the creation of two new works. Other student activities included:

- Access to important mentorship opportunities with the ensemble in residence
- Attending open rehearsals
- Getting a close look at the audio-visual extravaganza
- Special impromptu class visits by some of the ensemble members
- Observing the logistical production of a multi-media work

In 2002, Pop superstar Sarah McLachlan opened a free school of music for children and teenagers in the Vancouver East side as a means to offer music training to carefully selected interested and committed students. While mostly targeted at students whose families cannot really afford to pay for music lessons, Sarah remains adamant that we not marginalize the students and that there should be a mix of economic means. I have been associated with this outfit as an advisor and program consultant since its formation. Over the past five year of operation the school has provided employment to a number of our college students who are busy teaching guitar, choral technique, percussion and piano. Consultations are taking

place at the present time to expand the relationship to further integrate our operations. Examples of collaborative projects include establishing a unit of study for our composition students to provide published instructional and performance material for elementary and secondary music classes. Although much of this type of material exists for individual students, the unique pop/traditional curriculum of the school presents an excellent opportunity to develop new materials aimed at the piano or percussion class market. In addition, the school gives our students a chance to test their teaching skills in a real-life scenario. This offers a challenging project with very immediate outcomes for our students. Students from the SMMO will also regularly attend selected classes and workshops at the college where appropriate or logistically possible. To the Sarah McLachlan Music Outreach it allows them to create a one-of-a-kind repertoire geared to their specific needs. Finally, the fact that the McLachlan school is a short distance from our college is a further compelling reason to be working together.

Obviously, from a recruiting point of view, high school students enrolled at the school will get an inside look at the workings of a college level music training program. Because we are a natural next step for those aspiring to continue in music we hope the familiarity with our institution will help guide their post secondary destination choices.

Coordinating these various collaborations is a task that requires considerable buy-in from various members of faculty, the Department Head and the Director. To date the following ensembles and study areas are actively participating in the aforementioned partnerships and in some of our long-standing community ensembles.

- Willan Choir
- The VCC Jazz Orchestra
- The Early Jazz Ensemble
- The Latin Percussion Ensemble
- The Javanese Gamelan Degung
- The Korean Ensemble
- Electronic Studio Arts
- Aboriginal Services
- Creative Music Studies
- Selected Composition Faculty

Author Max Wyman, in his book “The Defiant Imagination” speaks about the role of the arts in the community stating “Where once we might have seen community involvement as a principle argument for community cultural activity, we see now that the arts can play a useful role in broader issues such as social justice, public safety and community revitalization.”

Although this might seem far beyond the responsibility of a music school, contemporary analyses of the role of arts in society suggest otherwise. As a society, we have only begun to tap into the real value of arts training and its place in the greater community. In our specific case, we seek to nurture an artistic reciprocity that is amenable to all.

What exactly is musical art at the social-local level? During last year’s World Urban Forum, Dance Arts Vancouver, a well known activist-dance company mounted a significant festival dedicated to the display of music and art that addressed social change. Performers presented concerts, spoken word collaborations, empowering vocal workshops and healing arts, all under the aegis of interactive art production within a broadly defined concept of popular culture. College and university students were among the most motivated participants. They were able to make direct connections between their growing craft and the type of social messaging and shared responsibility that is the hallmark of their future. Sitting just two blocks away in my office at the college I pondered whether we should take a more active role and nurture a whole network of community partners that would replicate this high level interaction with the institutions, schools and producing bodies that are the ultimate destination of our students. Social theorist Ron Burnett speaks of how “popular culture plays an important role in the reproduction of dominant values and social relationships in society. Popular culture has, in fact, an ideological function to fill.” I generally agree with this stand and hold that by extending our educational reach and re-examining our relation to our body of knowledge and by making the study of music a more relational study of rituals, representations, tradition and creativity our role as an arts training institution can aspire and achieve that ideological role.

During the past two decades, cultural institutions across the continent have been forced to justify their existence through the often absurd measurement practices best suited to assess business administration, or say, resource management. We have been cornered into quantifying tangible outcomes in exchange for continued funding. Because merit, innovation and the intrinsic alternative view of artistic conceptions lack the necessary

measurable outcomes to ensure on-going funding we have turned our attention to other means to justify the making of art.

Enter the term “cultural industries”. For many of us involved in the continual struggle to ensure sustainable government allocations to the arts this term denotes more a strategy than a definition. This loaded term is the unfortunate outcome of a need to expand the conception of art-making to encompass the collective series of art-related activities that generate a tangible economic impact. This was our new tool to convince the post-secondary funding bodies that arts training institutions were not just graduating artists but instead “cultural workers” whose eventual employment would contribute to our GDP and whose taxable benefits would turn around and fund government programs.

Burnett’s alternative view of cultural industries yields a sharply different portrayal to the one just described. His “broader definition of culture industries, then, is those that produce goods or services which are somehow expressive of the ways of life of a society such as film, television and music, or which somehow occupy a special position within its system of social communication such as advertising or the press...they increasingly offer the terms and symbols by which we live our lives by.”

This last statement brings me back to the role of the arts training institution in broader issues such as social justice and community revitalization. If we can develop programs that address internal academic needs for renewal and innovation; that reflect a wider worldview and that seek to illustrate the role of art as an expression of humanism we also have the capacity to widen our reach. We should enrich the internal and external landscapes of our arts training environments. In the words of HRH, the Dalai Lama “without a sense of caring, there can be no community.”

Urban renewal guru Richard Florida reminds us that universities play a multifaceted role in today’s cities. “To be an effective contributor to regional growth, the university must play three interrelated roles that reflect the 3Ts of creative places—technology, talent and tolerance.” I believe the experimental outreach programs underway at VCC will ensure we provide at least two of Florida’s 3Ts of creative places. We’re working to build a healthy and creative community, to provide a living for the artists we presently have and to make room for the emerging ones. We do outreach to

expand our scope, we expand our scope to capture a larger public which in turns helps generate the artistic activity and art consumption.

So how do you begin? What steps are crucial to starting the outreach process? It is important to understand that many of these strategies are entirely realizable within the basic framework of standard private or public post-secondary institutions.

Stage One: Identify the principal components of your community such as:

- Artistic community
- Cultural institutions
- Schools
- Post Secondary institutions
- Non-affiliated training institutions
- Federal, provincial and municipal funding bodies

Stage Two:

- Identify those groups, institutions and schools whose goals and values are compatible with those of your home institution
- Identify outside activities that may be of value to your home institution
- Assess the range of artistic talent in the home institution
- Establish personal contacts with outside artists, administrators and teachers
- Devise projects and propose collaborations
- Consult internal and external stakeholders
- Articulate plans and launch initiatives
- Regularly assess compatibility of projects and fine tune collaborations

Experience has taught us that even the best intentions may often present unforeseen challenges. In spite of the loftiest goals you must be prepared to address often delicate issues with utmost creativity and sensitivity.

Our principal challenges:

- Proposing new approaches to older faculty
- Overcoming long-held musical prejudices

- Implementing foreign music theory as alternative systems
- Feeling like we're trying to do too much
- Concentrating initiatives in the hands of too few stakeholders
- Convincing the Executive and Board of Governors of the sometimes intangible benefits of investing in this type of community engagement
- Motivating faculty to accept change
- The limitations of collective agreements
- Facility and space constraints
- Renewing outside partnerships that were previously severed
- Security issues
- Who are we not reaching?

Our task is beyond post-modern, beyond post-industrial, this is a type of post-multiculturalism engagement I refer to as dynamic pluralism.

To conclude I would like to state that rather than refer to these activities and initiatives as “Best Practices” we at VCC can only claim to demonstrate “What’s working thus far” and leave the other term to a more informed historian or consultant at some future time. When we become indispensable to the well being of the community, only then we will have really succeeded.

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Dr. Sal Ferreras
Director, School of Music
Vancouver Community College