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How the Australian Landscape and the Stories Embedded Within it Influence the Performance Outcomes of Moorambilla Voices

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Background

Moorambilla Voices (Moorambilla) is more than a choir, it is an Australian organisation that seeks to empower children and youth to think big, dream widely and connect to Country⁸ 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' <https://moorambilla.com/moorambilla-online/>



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⁸ 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 - landforms, 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 a 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.

Moorambilla fosters team cooperation through group performance: in choirs, 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 cultures of regional Australia through consultation and collaboration.
- develops social capital through teamwork, community inclusion and group capacity building.

Moorambilla's commitment and connection with the cultural traditions and stories of the region is an important part of raising cultural awareness, recognition and reconciliation. The use of local languages in the songs that are performed and the telling of the stories through dance, singing and drumming facilitate this cultural communication and link to the broader government and community agendas of promoting knowledge and learnings of our cultural history. Our Indigenous stakeholders are vital to the success of the program and the Elders and leaders from the regional communities share their themes and stories that the artists then weave through the program. Advisors include Elders from the Gamilaraay, Yuwaalaraay, Yuwaalayaay, Wiradjuri, Wailwan, Ngyampaa, and Ngemba nations.

Moorambilla prides itself on engaging children from the remote regional area we operate in regardless of background or financial circumstances. Many children on remote properties and from small towns are disadvantaged and lack opportunity 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.

Moorambilla has worked in north-western New South Wales (NSW), in Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the bottom half of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) national Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) and many fall in the bottom 10% of Australian LGAs. These ABS figures do not take into account the additional major impact of the recent droughts, floods, mouse plagues and Covid 19. Teacher and executive 'churn' in schools in north-western NSW is another significant contribution to disadvantage for students. Teachers move on quickly and are replaced with new teachers who in many cases lack experience and expertise in a rural setting or specialist subject areas. Therefore, students often do not have continuity of learning and instruction, particularly in specialty subjects such as Creative Arts.

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 school's

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. Approximately 40% of our participants individually identify as Indigenous. Whilst recognising that Indigenous identification is done through community and elder recognition, many outside of this community still only utilise a visual framework (skin tone). Therefore, micro aggression is embedded in many perceptions and conversations about what the participants of the program 'should look like' in photos. The Australian continent has held over 600 Language groups, each with a rich individual cultural framework. The ability to 'identify' as Indigenous and feel comfortable doing so, both through Moorambilla and nationally, speaks volumes about the ongoing conversation that Moorambilla is proud to be a part of in a multicultural society where inclusion, respect and self-determination are paramount. All children in the Moorambilla program are selected on merit alone. This core value tackles racism and inequality at its heart and is a founding pillar of the program.

Moorambilla strongly believes that no one, particularly in a regional or remote part of Australia, should 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 that Moorambilla continues to contribute to a brighter and more inclusive future for our regional communities and the wider Australian arts ecology.

'Moorambilla Voices is a vital and specific program which nurtures the preservation of a culture while encouraging the birth of new work. I am honoured to be its musical patron. In undertaking this work, Michelle Leonard, the inspirational leader of this project, has made a profound commitment to work at the highest level with all participants. This level of commitment ensures a strong sense of cultural preservation with links to the past as well as the encouragement of new work forging links to the future. I support this project wholeheartedly and unconditionally'. **Richard Gill AO.**

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 student 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.

Connection with the Australian Landscape and Culture

The Moorambilla Compact

The people, creatures, land, water and surroundings of the communities we operate in are precious to us all.

We all share this land.

We all care deeply about this country.

It is our collective responsibility to respect and care for all of those associated with Moorambilla.

We commit to working with each other and walking forward together in a spirit of openness and generosity - and this will guide all of our interactions artistically, culturally and socially and in every business interaction we make that represents Moorambilla.

We create art, memories and a sense of ourselves and place from our stories and the land. We always learn from the past to shape the present and work towards a better future for our country.

In partnership, and with mutual respect and understanding, we put the wellbeing of our Moorambilla family first, its people, its communities and its country.

We do this by respecting ourselves, each other and our shared culture.

Moorambilla in Gamilaroi language means 'place of deep fresh water'. This image of ancient rock art represents the physical manifestation of the Brewarrina Fish Traps⁹. 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 Australians. Within this analogy, we have interconnecting slip streams in the Moorambilla Voices flow, which lead either a fish or fingerling to leadership opportunities.

The core program of Moorambilla was established in the state of NSW, Australia. Our fish fingerlings¹⁰ 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. Our national 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.

⁹ 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

¹⁰ Fingerling - A young fish, especially one less than a year old and about the size of a human finger

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.

How does the landscape and culture influence what we do in Moorambilla Voices?

The Moorambilla program embeds a cultural connection to landscape, language and lifelines in various ways and distils the energy of Country into multi-artform performances. One of the first components of the annual performance program is through our Cultural Immersion. Between May and July, Michelle Leonard, the Artistic Director, invites the collaborating artists (including composers, photographers, choreographers, Taiko drummers, lantern makers and other associated artists) to attend a cultural immersion tour. The aim of this week-long activity is for the artists to meet on Country and to experience the culturally significant sites, the towns and the environment that have been identified as the key location for the annual program reference. This inspires and informs their artistic responses and their interaction with the participants at the residency camps. It is integral to the aims of the program to increase cultural competency of **all** those involved in Moorambilla Voices – including staff, volunteers, artists and the community.

The artists that have experienced this cultural opportunity possess the distilled artistic language that, in co-creation with participants of Moorambilla, frames and creates new works that embed the unique energy from these various environments. By the time we share our performance, we can 'suspend disbelief' where both audience and ensemble meet in the liminal space between landscape and imagination. This is what we call 'Moorambilla Magic'. It is transcendent, it is powerful and subsequently life-changing.

How has the Orff-Schulwerk approach/process influenced the Moorambilla program over many years?

The Orff approach, in its world view, methodology and significance, has had profound and lasting impacts on the Moorambilla Voices program and its Artistic Director. Embodied learning is a keystone in many First Nations' world view and the Orff approach. This strong pedagogical scaffold allows us to seamlessly transition between dance, voice and visual art in performances inspired by landscape.

Over our seventeen years of continuous work in the same rural and remote region, the program has grown from a fledgling idea into a full-bodied movement that has become an integral part of regional life and education in Western NSW. Schools have embraced the change, and moved from reluctant participants to eager advocates, with the opportunities to provide creative arts and the observable and acknowledged benefits to many children who do not fit with the usual classroom structure (Pitts, 2012).

There are only four dedicated, tertiary qualified music teachers in the entire remote and rural region served by Moorambilla. The annual Moorambilla workshops are, for some, the only music lesson they have access to each year from someone who has the skills to unlock their vocal and artistic potential. It is through these workshops, offered to the 76 schools in the 2,500-kilometre north west region of the state of NSW, that creative and talented children are identified and offered a place in one of four Moorambilla Voices ensembles.

Michelle uses a hybrid process, including the Orff approach. This gives the most sustained and memorable learning experience that she draws on when participants attend the residency camps in August. Interestingly, the students with less experience in more fractured learning environments respond best to physicalizing the learning process. These students may have limited literacy and home support. They learn best as their body becomes their textbook (Becker, 2013, p. 6), specifically through the use of drama, word association and most importantly humour to encourage them to remember conceptual information. This gives them a skill set that they can then transfer into other musical experiences throughout the year.

During the residential camps in August and September, this knowledge forms a platform for learning and self-esteem. Each ensemble works closely with composers, dancers and artists to develop repertoire for performance that integrates singing, movement and visual art. This creative process, inspired by the Orff approach, is a vital part of Moorambilla. The collaborative aesthetic response to a new theme each year, explores the rich traditions and stories of the candidates and connects with the Indigenous heritage and heart of the region.



For example, the rock shapes in a landscape will influence the composers' harmonic structure, perhaps a very 'static' harmonic language to reflect ancient basalt rocks. This influences the visual impetus for movement, in this case potentially the 'heaviness' of the dance language. The melodic lines may well inspire the dance lines, or vice versa, and the form of the fire sculptures, lanterns and lighting for the final performances.

'Never music alone, but music connected with movement, dance and speech - not to be listened to, meaningful only in active participation' (Orff, 1963, p. 72).

This Moorambilla creative process is deeply rooted in the Orff tradition and its deep respect and understanding of the benefit of an interdisciplinary approach for embodied learning (Staveley, 2018). The Moorambilla framework, because of the geographic distances between participants, is exceptionally focussed and intense; under pressure it 'creates diamonds'. The music, choreography and visual art composed and created in situ, resonates with the energy and worldview of the participants. The pedagogical process draws on ancient stories, modern experiences in small towns and music that they have collectively contributed to as text, melodic ideas and, of course, as performers.

This integrated multi-art form approach encourages the candidates to develop themselves as a whole musician and to see how the choirs relate to other artforms:

- By starting this process at a young age, we give them an insight into how each art form informs the other (Bloomfield and Childs, 2013, p.1).
- Each art form gives a layer of meaning and understanding to the other and makes each one stronger.
- Moving to music clarifies their rhythmic understanding; playing Taiko drums enhances their ensemble playing and performance.
- Working on the stories of the region through visual arts gives more meaning to the process of composition when they are writing text.
- This integrated process gives an opportunity for critical creative thinking that is vital to developing the culture of positive risk taking and exploration that Moorambilla has nurtured from its inception (Pavlou, 2013, p.73).

Introduction of dance and movement to the program, in addition to singing, was a natural growth for the project. Many children in this country region of NSW connect very strongly with sport and physicality and it brings that learning into a choral setting. For example, using the scarves with younger children frees up their upper torso and unlocks their legs while singing and uses their breath more naturally. This creates a choral sound that is clear and free with a similarity of sounds all the way through their registers. The Artistic Director was directly influenced in this by participating in the Orff Summer Course in Salzburg.

This creative process meaningfully engages both artists and performers and demonstrates mutual respect. This shows our singers, musicians and audience how the collective pursuit of a common artistic ground is possible between all cultures, not just regionally, but nationally.

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. We have thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated this opportunity to share our passion and journey with you.

For more information on the choirs, the candidates and our program please go to www.moorambilla.com and view the following attachments:

2019 Introductory Video produced and performed by the older students on country: <https://vimeo.com/365173516>

Highlights from the 2019 Gala concert
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/pidefnor2jgpn7k/2019%20highlight-encoded.mp4?dl=0>

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Michelle Leonard, OAM Michelle Leonard is the Founder, Artistic Director & Conductor of Moorambilla Voices. Michelle is widely sought after as a choral clinician on Australian repertoire & appears regularly as a guest speaker, adjudicator & workshop facilitator. Michelle was awarded the Order of Australia Medal for Services to the Community & Performing Arts in 2017, in 2018 the Sydney University Alumni of the Year award for services to the Arts, and in 2019 was named in the Financial Reviews 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.