**Year 11 Presentation Evening 2004 – an orchestra theme**

**Terry O’Brien**

It is traditional for principals to present an annual report at Presentation Evening and then have a guest speaker. At Oatley this is not necessary. We are so proud of our students that we choose instead to celebrate student achievement and to award our star academic performers, for at this school our students are not ashamed to show their abilities. Tonight you will meet and see our brightest and our best from Year 11 2004.

Mine is the only speech you will hear tonight and it will be short. The students are on display tonight – not the principal.

To my right is the Georges River College Stage Band under the talented baton of [Name of teacher]. You will hear them perform during the evening. So tonight, it is on this theme that I would like to liken our school to an orchestra. As Dale Carnegie said, *“For better or worse, you must play your own little instrument in the orchestra of life.”* I would like to describe to you how I liken our school to an orchestra, and outline some of the tunes our orchestra has played this year.

Our 930 students are the musicians – and a very mixed group at that. This is an advantage to an orchestra, as it brings a richness and a brilliance that one cannot gain when all the instruments are the same, such as a string quartet or a wind ensemble. At the start of Year 11 we have the violins and flutes and cellos coming from Penshurst Girls, the clarinets and oboes and French horns from Peakhurst Campus, the bassoons and trumpets and drums from Hurstville and the trombones, tubas and triangles from a variety of other schools, with 40% government and 60% private school applications. Put them all together and you have the magnificent, the wonderful, the exciting Oatley Orchestra.

This orchestra never stops – the music plays on even though in October every year one half of the musicians perform their final crescendo (known as the HSC) and leave, while another 500 musicians arrive at the start of every year to replace them. Places in this orchestra are in high demand. Once again for 2005 we cannot offer places to everyone who would like to join our orchestra and we have had to decline places to quite a number. Thus, those who get into this orchestra are very privileged. All our musicians are older adolescents, and so we are able to focus on their needs and what is best for them as Learners – from the organisation of the school day and 75 minute lessons to the student welfare and careers counselling that we provide.

Sometimes one of our musician students will start to play out of tune, but we identify a wrong note very quickly and take steps to help the student get back on key. I thank our arrangers for their perfect pitch – or should I say Head Teachers Welfare and the Student Advisers. Each student here is important as a member of the group, but also important as an individual. To quote conductor Sir Thomas Beecham, *“Every person is important. It doesn't matter whether you play the violin, the flute, the cello or the drums, you're still part of the orchestra.”*

When the students/musicians arrive in the Oatley Orchestra they are like an orchestra warming up – all sounds but no texture or harmony. The responsibility to take these individual players and turn the noise into music rests with the section leaders of the orchestra and music tutors – that is our Head Teachers and teachers. Pablo Casals, who is a world famous cello player, said of teaching, *“To be a teacher is to have a great responsibility. The teacher helps to shape and give direction to the lives of other human beings. What is more important, graver, than that? Children and young people are our greatest treasures, when we think of them we think of the future of the world. Consider the significance of nurturing their minds, of helping form their outlook on the world, of training and preparing them for the work that they will do. I can think of no profession more important than teaching.”*

And we are very fortunate in the Oatley Orchestra to have teachers and head teachers with such virtuoso skill and expertise because they must each work with 5-6 separate bands or classes, each containing up to 24 musicians simultaneously, and this happens four times a day! And still they manage to plan and monitor support for individual solo items as well as prepare for the grand gala performance – the HSC. Next Tuesday we farewell one of our outstanding composers of scientific music, Science teacher [Name of teacher], as he moves to retirement after a wonderful career. I know you all join me in wishing him well.

At Oatley we play a whole range of music – from an English rock to a History rap, a Chemistry Hip Hop and jam band Maths, a University of Sydney symphony and a TAFE tango – a choice of 53 subjects means we have the widest repertoire or subject choice in NSW and in fact in 2004, the largest HSC candidature.

Conducting the whole thing and buying the music are the conductors, the Deputy Principals [Names of Deputies] and myself. We practise our scales to maintain the school at this excellent level, but we also investigate new initiatives and discoveries in music to keep Oatley at the forefront of orchestration (education). As a government school we have a huge network of composers to help us through the tricky bits of music. Sometimes the politicians give us very complicated bits of music to play, but one of the strengths of being a government orchestra and being part of the Department of Education and Training orchestral group is a combined vision, power and knowledge and access to expertise for all to use for the benefit of Oatley students.

I wish to comment on our local community. At Oatley they are not just the appreciative audience. They grab their musical instruments and jam along with us bringing expertise and skill as P&C members, School Councillors and just by being supportive if we phone or write to discuss issues such as whether their particular student is practising their scales at home or not.

Lastly the musicians themselves. Zubin Mehta the Indian conductor, pianist and violinist described his orchestra thus, “*The New York Philharmonic Orchestra is just like any other orchestra – they all have the spirit of kids, and when we sit down to perform, out comes a 17 year-old music student again, full of wonder, exuberance and a tremendous harmony.”* This describes the Oatley orchestra to me. Our students care so much for each other and support each other. They also care for others in areas of world crises and care for the issues that affect them and their futures – the environment, racism, world peace. A symphony represents harmony and cooperation and inspiration and this is what we have here. They are wonderful young people and make me proud to be a public school principal

There are many different parts to our Oatley orchestra and each one alone is excellent but incomplete. It is only when all the parts play together that a wondrous, wonderful beautiful and powerful symphony emerges – and this is what occurs at Oatley.

This is why this school is one of the best in the state, if not Australia. In fact this year, we were very proud to be recognised in *The Australian* newspaper’s Best Schools in Australia series, where we were one of 36 schools featured.

To once more quote Thomas Beecham, *“There are two golden rules for an orchestra: start together and finish together. The public doesn't give a damn what goes on in between.”* Not true in our orchestra. Tonight marks the halfway point through the very complicated HSC symphony. Our students’ skills are developing well and the music is starting to come together. The students you see tonight have performed well in their Year 11 academic studies, in student leadership, in creative and performing arts and are our star performers. All is on track for the HSC performance which takes place in 10 months’ time.

So let the music begin. Our final performance for 2004 – the Year 11 Presentation Evening.

**Contributor details**

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Terry was Principal at Penshurst Girls High School then Oatley Senior Campus of Georges River College, as well as Policy Leader for the Digital Education Revolution one-to-one laptop program. ​ Since retiring, she and two other colleagues formed SPICE Educational Evaluations working directly with principals. She also volunteers teaching English as a second language in her local community.