

From Festival to Framework

Strengthening Ensemble Teaching and Developing Student Musicians Through MEFA Professional Development

Supported by MENZA from the concept's earliest development and brought to the education community with its backing, the first MusicWorks Ensembles Festival Aotearoa (MEFA) Professional Development session was held in Cambridge on 9 March.

The day brought teachers and ensemble directors together around a practical question: how do we build stronger ensemble programmes in schools, and through that work, develop stronger young musicians?

The programme sits alongside the MEFA festival in Wellington, but it has been shaped by a broader need within school music education. Across New Zealand, teachers are often trying to grow ensemble music in challenging conditions. Some are leading established groups and looking to strengthen rehearsal process and student outcomes. Others are at an earlier stage — starting a jazz band, building a wind programme, establishing a string ensemble, or trying to create the conditions for group music-making where no lasting structure yet exists.

That is a key part of what MEFA Professional Development is designed to support. It is not only for schools with existing programmes seeking refinement. It is also for schools trying to get ensemble music off the ground, build sustainable culture, and create foundations that will last.

What emerged in Cambridge was a day grounded in the realities of school music-making. It was not centred on performance preparation alone, but on teaching, learning, and programme-building. It gave teachers space to engage with practical ideas, compare approaches, and reflect on what actually helps ensembles begin well, grow steadily, and become sustainable.

At the core of the MEFA Professional Development approach is a belief that ensemble rehearsal should do more than prepare students for the next concert, competition, or festival. Performances matter. They provide motivation, purpose, and a sense of achievement. However, if rehearsal becomes only about polishing repertoire for a date on the calendar, the deeper educational value of ensemble music can easily narrow.

The stronger goal is to develop more independent student musicians.

That means helping students build the internal skills that allow them to succeed in any musical setting: listening actively, feeling pulse, understanding rhythm, responding musically, and contributing with confidence inside an ensemble. It means moving beyond rehearsal models based mainly on repetition, correction, and short-term preparation,



BIO: A passionate jazz pianist and former piano teacher, Darren has worked alongside and supported many education programs for the last 40 plus years. He is a strong advocate for music education, with a particular focus on creating better support networks for both students and teachers. He recently led the launch of a new professional development framework for ensemble teaching in schools as part of the wider MEFA initiative.



DARREN SMITH

and instead creating a culture in which students are learning how to think, hear, and function as musicians.

This matters just as much for schools starting programmes as it does for schools refining established ones. When a new ensemble is being built, culture matters from the beginning. If students learn early to listen, count, watch, respond, and take ownership, the programme develops on much stronger foundations. If rehearsal becomes only about getting through pieces, those habits can be much harder to establish later.

That is one of the most useful aspects of the programme. It is concerned not only with performance outcomes, but with sustainable development. For newer or developing programmes, that means helping teachers think about the structures and habits that make growth possible: how to rehearse productively, how to build student confidence, how to create an ensemble identity, and how to establish musical expectations that can carry forward from year to year.

For more established programmes, the same philosophy applies. Strong ensembles are not sustained by tradition alone. They rely on rehearsal cultures that continue to develop student capability, independence, and understanding. In both cases, the aim is the same: students leaving rehearsals better prepared for performance and better equipped as musicians.

The Cambridge session reflected that philosophy clearly. There was strong emphasis on the habits and understandings that strengthen students over time: listening within the ensemble, internal pulse, rhythmic confidence, balance and blend, stylistic awareness, musical decision-making, and ownership of sound. These are the kinds of skills that travel. They support students across repertoire, across ensembles, and across future learning.

The programme is organised around four strands — Jazz, Wind, Orchestral, and General Ensemble Practice — recognising that ensemble teaching is not a single discipline. A jazz director, a wind band conductor, and a string teacher may each face different repertoire, traditions, and technical demands, but all are working toward the same broader goal: thoughtful rehearsal, meaningful student development, and healthy ensemble culture. The strand structure allows teachers to engage with material relevant to their own context while still contributing to a wider conversation about ensemble education.

It also allows the programme to speak to teachers at different stages. Some are establishing ensembles or rebuilding them. Some are developing programmes that already show promise but need more shape or depth. Others are refining strong groups and looking for better ways to develop musicianship. That flexibility is one of the programme's strengths. It makes the learning relevant not only for schools with mature traditions, but also for schools still trying to build momentum and create something sustainable.

The people involved are another important reason the initiative has been so well received. MEFA Professional Development brings together some of the leading ensemble educators in Australasia alongside local teachers with hands-on experience in New Zealand schools. That combination matters. It means the work is informed by high-level expertise, but remains grounded in the realities of local classrooms, rehearsal rooms, and school music departments.

For those attending the Cambridge session, that balance was clearly felt. One teacher wrote:

“Thank you for this professional development opportunity — this is the best music-specific PD I’ve experienced in my 15-year career.” — *Secondary Music Teacher*



That response is significant because it suggests the programme is addressing a genuine gap. Another teacher highlighted its practical educational value:

“The MEFA Professional Development Day provided meaningful learning in ensemble and group music teaching that will have a direct and positive impact on both extracurricular programmes and classroom practice.”
— *Secondary Music Teacher*

This points to one of the programme’s strongest outcomes: the learning is not confined to a single workshop setting. It feeds directly into wider teaching practice and into the day-to-day work of building musical capability in students.

The programme’s accessibility also stood out, particularly for teachers developing newer areas in their schools:

“As someone new to jazz, wind, and orchestral ensembles, I found the content highly accessible and directly applicable to starting programmes at my school.”
— *Secondary Music Teacher*

That is especially important. It reinforces that this programme is not only for directors fine-tuning established ensembles. It is also for teachers taking first steps, building confidence, and looking for guidance that helps them start well.

An important part of the MEFA model is that it is a two-day affair. The first day focuses on professional learning, shared discussion, and the exchange of practical ideas. The second day takes that learning into schools, with mentors going out to work directly with local teachers and ensembles in the area.

This gives the programme real substance. It moves beyond discussion and places the work back into real rehearsal settings, where mentors can engage directly with students and teachers and help translate ideas into practice. For schools beginning or developing programmes, this kind of direct engagement can be particularly valuable. It provides encouragement, practical modelling, and a sense that growth is possible from wherever a school is starting.

That practical connection came through strongly in the feedback:

“I applied new rehearsal strategies the same day and saw a noticeable improvement in the band.”
— *Secondary Music Teacher*

That kind of outcome is exactly what meaningful professional development should produce. It should sharpen practice, clarify priorities, and improve student learning in ways that are tangible straight away.

For teachers working without easy access to specialist support or a large professional network, the sense of connection was equally important:

“Working in an isolated environment, this gave me access to knowledge and strategies I wouldn’t otherwise have — immediately useful in my teaching.” — *Secondary Music Teacher*

This speaks to another important outcome of the programme: building connection around ensemble teaching. For many music educators, especially outside larger centres, the work can be isolating. Opportunities to compare approaches, share challenges, and learn from others in similar roles are not always easy to find. MEFA Professional Development is beginning to address that by creating a network of teachers, mentors, and practitioners connected by a shared interest in strengthening ensemble music in schools.

That wider sense of connection aligns with the long-term vision for the initiative. The goal is to expand MEFA Professional Development into a national framework that supports educators across the country throughout the year as part of the overall MEFA project. The Wellington festival remains an important anchor point, but the broader aspiration is to create ongoing support, mentoring, collaboration, and regional engagement that helps schools not only improve existing ensembles but start and sustain new ones.

The first Cambridge session offered a strong example of that thinking in practice. It brought together expertise, practical discussion, direct school engagement, and a clear focus on student development. Just as importantly, it showed that there is a real appetite for professional learning that supports schools at all stages, from those refining established programmes to those building ensemble culture from the ground up.

Most importantly, it reinforced an idea worth holding onto: ensemble rehearsal is not simply a path to performance, but a powerful place of learning in its own right. When that learning is well supported, the outcomes reach well beyond one event. Teachers are better equipped, programmes are more sustainable, and students grow into more capable and independent musicians.

That is the long-term value of this work.

MEFA is fundamentally the MusicWorks Ensemble Festival Aotearoa. I call it the project now as my concept has always been to grow the framework beyond providing the festival in Wellington which is heavily education based (90 workshops last year for the students), and into PD for educators, regional support. The goal is a more wrap around philosophy that ends each year in Wellington with the festival.