

Australian Community & Youth Orchestras – the State of Play

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Introduction

As Marshall McGuire's excellent summary of the current situation of Australian professional orchestras made brief reference to the 'energetic, youth orchestra and amateur sectors' and the fact that 'At present there seems to be no clear connection between these sectors', the following provides a perspective of the youth and community orchestra sectors.

My qualifications in giving this perspective, come from my experience as founding Chair of The Orchestral Association of NSW in 1992, which became The Orchestras of Australia Network (TOAN) in 1998. I remained Chair until 2002, & was editor of the magazine Orchestral Outlook 2004-2006. The vision of TOAN was 'to create an environment in which orchestras throughout Australia flourish artistically and financially' with goal to 'build a sense of community amongst orchestras; cultivate a unified approach to promoting the image, interests and development of orchestras; foster excellence, innovation and creativity and establish a vigorous national organisation.' TOAN was never properly resourced, & whilst the organisation did make some impact, it is now defunct. There was insufficient will, and indeed condescension and barriers, from funding bodies, the professional sector & the better resourced Symphony Services Australia to developing effective networking and programs with the youth & community sectors. Some networking now occurs through the high profile, better financially resourced Australian Youth Orchestra but this is only with a select group of peak youth orchestras and not the youth orchestra sector generally. Symphony Services Australia is the organization that could now take on the role TOAN sought to achieve. Much of the groundwork done through TOAN could feed into making SSA effective in that role if SSA has the mindset to undertake such responsibilities.

I have also been a player and in management roles as President and Vice-President of Ku-ring-gai Philharmonic Orchestras for 20 years.

I come to the Classical Music Summit with the mission of furthering 'community engagement', as I believe that the Australian classical music community needs to engage more actively with the wider community. There are commonly held perceptions that the classical music community is elitist, fuddy duddy, old hat, only for the cognoscenti and not at all connected to grass roots music making. Many may dispute these perceptions, but there is a crying need to be proactive in countering them & re-branding the image of classical music making in Australia.

One of the ways to do this is to utilise the energy & passionate commitment of those who take part actively in community & youth orchestras. These are the 'invisible music makers' because as far as profile, statistics and funding is concerned these orchestras hardly exist. Yet they are vibrant; and a little support & financial boost will go a long way, as these SMEs are very used to existing 'on the smell of an oily rag'. Just as musicians tell a stories in sound, so the world of youth and community orchestras have many stories to tell.

Rather than the term 'amateur' orchestras, I use the term 'community' orchestras as these orchestras contain many players who are music professionals, who donate their services to play in

these orchestras. For many studio teachers, playing in a community orchestra is an important way to keep up their playing standard & demonstrate to their students active participation in classical music making. Additionally community orchestras comprise amateur musicians, students and student musicians. I regard myself as a 'community musician'.

Professional orchestras are the top of the orchestral pyramid, but if the base of the pyramid, the grass roots music makers are not nurtured and fertilised, then who will support this peak in the future? If professional musicians don't care about community & youth musicians why should the community & youth musicians care about the careers of professional musicians? There has to be a two way exchange.

In one afternoon's research, I located 132 orchestras across Australia; 21 professional orchestras (includes chamber & freelance groups), 78 community orchestras and 33 community based youth orchestras. In addition, from previous TOAN documentation, is a list over 70 schools with orchestras.

This research identifies well over 200 orchestras (many youth orchestral organizations comprise multiple orchestras) operating regularly each week. List requires further time trawling websites.

Questions/Statistics to be gathered:

How many performances do these orchestras give annually?

How many players?

How many strings are purchased annually? How many instruments?

How much music is purchased? How much loaned?

What venues do they use?

What is their audience reach?

How can these orchestras extend their audience reach?

How to raise the profile of community & youth orchestras?

How to share the 'best practice experiences'? (Don't reinvent the wheel)

How many of the alumni of youth orchestras become professional musicians, how many members of community orchestras, how many regular concertgoers?

How many youth orchestra players attend concerts of professional orchestras?

How many community orchestra players attend concertos of professional orchestras?

How many professional musicians contribute to youth & community orchestras?

How many professional musicians (or any of those present) attend performances by youth & community orchestras? (You probably think they are all ghastly!)

How many youth & community orchestras perform contemporary or Australian repertoire?

How are the conductors of youth & community orchestras trained?

As many youth & community orchestras provide formative musical experiences (I was at a country school & sent off to Sydney May music camp & still remember the experience), these orchestras can & do have real impact on the future potential of both audiences & players. The recent Classic FM 'First Music Experiences' listener response is testimony to the importance of these first experiences.

International Comparisons:

UK with a population of 59.8 million has 750 community orchestras, 1800 youth orchestras (supporting 125,000 young musicians) & 65 professional orchestras (no less than 24 performances annually).

Australia with a population of 22.1 million, on the basis of preliminary birdseye research, has 78 community orchestras, 103 youth orchestras & 21 professional orchestras (8 symphony, 13 chamber/freelance).

Finland with a population of 5.3 million has 15 professional symphony orchestras.

Artistic quality and excellence

As Marshall identifies, professional orchestras are in some cases the only full-time musical company in their territory, so it is important that youth & community orchestra colleagues take a role in nurturing the future of the classical orchestral music tradition. Community & youth orchestras continually strive to increase their artistic quality, but the potential to achieve improvement relies on quality training & the input of professional musicians & conductors. Standards of individual players can be variable & is dependent on player availability. The large majority of youth & community orchestras pay their conductors & professional tutors, so these roles are meaningful ways that professional musicians can earn income & contribute to the development of community music making.

Over the 20 years I have played with Ku-ring-gai Philharmonic Orchestra the quality of the playing has improved dramatically; this is largely due to the training of conductor Henryk Pisarek, and that discipline & training continues with current AD Ron Prussing. This rise in quality is evidenced by the participation in projects such as the NSW Secondary Schools Concerto Competition and Emerging Composer Workshop (both highly competitive) and the keenness of professional musicians to perform with KPO. Selected KPO performances will soon be available online through the website & on YouTube.

Other community & youth orchestras benefit from the training of conductors which has occurred through the Symphony Australia Conductor Development Program, so that conductors such as Ben Northey, Mark Shiell, Steven Hillinger, Rowan Harvey-Martin, Sarah-Grace Williams are making an impact, whilst other professional musician/conductors such as Max McBride, Keith Crellin, Ron Prussing, Colin Piper, Brett Kelly, Peter Moore, Nicholas Milton continue to contribute actively and the 'old guard' John Curro, Peter Bandy, John Hopkins, Brian Buggy still actively train the young and not so young musicians. Most full-time conductors in Australia such as Tom Woods, Henryk Pisarek, Mark Summerbell, George Ellis, Carlos Alvarado are challenged making a living through in their field and need to complement Australian work with overseas engagements or work in other fields. There are a number of young Australian conductors now working overseas – Alexander Briger, Oliver Cuneo, Matthew Wood, Tobias Foskett, Carolyn Watson, Luke Dollman amongst them. It would be good to see their experience overseas contributing to the development of the classical music scene here in Australia. However, Australian conductors are given few opportunities with the professional orchestras. These opportunities should be increased.

Programming is a really important component of artistic excellence & this is something which should be shared across the country. I always used the TOAN orchestral concert listings for

reference when programming & also the regular input from the Australian Music Centre – this type of service is really missed, and regular interaction between those responsible for orchestral programming would be advantageous (in person & online).

Audience engagement and stimulation

Audience engagement requires continual renewal and creative flair, plus lateral thinking. Again the orchestral community should share experiences, as what occurs in Perth can be easily be replicated in Brisbane and Sydney. Quality, interesting pre-concert speakers, engaging presenters; new ways of presenting concert material; a variety of concert formats; written & web material to de-mystify the composer, the player, the conductor, the teacher; 'behind the scenes' experiences – these are all valuable tools to develop audience interest. This year I am doing several 'Window to the World of Orchestras' talks to Probus groups – I still meet the Probus groupies in the KPO audience from talks I gave 5 years ago, but I haven't done any in the interim. Probus members are generally retired and have time, and they are very willing to learn. KPO regularly programs Australian repertoire, & most of our audience are receptive; this is part of training and developing the trust of your audience. Around 500 people heard Claire Edwardes' performance of a new percussion concerto by Elena Kats-Chernin in a suburban context earlier this year. We worked hard to develop the story & also did workshops with Claire in a local school. All orchestras should share experiences about audience development, whether professional, community or youth, but need the environment to do this. Generally it is not rocket science but creative thinking.

All orchestras should undertake education work, (and could be trained to do so) but this must not seek to replace music education in schools, rather add value and stimulate interest. From my experience at the school end (MLC School), arts organisations need to very carefully plan their organization of education programs.

All musicology students at tertiary institutions, players & audience members themselves should be encouraged to comment on performances. Comments have to be done in a variety of formats, whether Twitter length, on Facebook, letters to the editor of local papers, articles in journals, YouTube videos – we have to generate interest in classical music (arrange offers for comment?). We are too often precious about the type of comments, & need to have a variety of formats, something different from the Peter McCallum type crit (which is very good of course, but predictable). We have to be resilient and enter into the banter of the 'Y' generation to attract their interest.

A fresh approach to the preservation or development of the artform

We all have to become smarter in providing free online tools, particularly as the attention span of online browsers can be very brief. Whilst online resources are freely available, I disagree with Marshall that concert tickets should be without charge. If we undermine the value of what we are presenting we will all do ourselves in - this is not sustainable. It is expensive to put on orchestral concerts & nothing is going to change that. We have to demonstrate the value in other ways.

In terms of developing the artform, I agree that we should look at repeat performances of successful new works, & share experiences. The Kats-Chernin Percussion Concert *Golden Kitsch* (Claire Edwardes, soloist) & Daniel Rojas Piano Concerto *Latinamericismo* (Zubin Kanga, soloist

– gifted up and coming pianist) are two works which engage the audience substantially and take them to new zones.

With co-commissions, there is a community orchestra Nigel Butterley commission which was performed by a number of orchestras – the work would be suited to professional orchestras, is beautifully written, but perhaps more challenging for audiences. KPO will premiere a new saxophone concerto by Jennifer Fowler to be performed by Amy Dickson and the commissioning orchestra is a community orchestra in the UK. A number of the youth orchestras have co-commissioned works. However, commissioning is expensive, so KPO generally looks to give 'repeat' performances of works commissioned by other more financially robust orchestras. As there are so many community and youth orchestras, it makes sense for composers to write works suited to them, even though some composers do not see this as quite as prestigious as writing for professional orchestras. TOAN had a number of commissioning projects. My experience is extensive in this commissioning area (MLC School does a lot of commissioning) and 'the brief stage is the most important part of the process. Expectations need to be very clear. MLC School has generated a lot of Australian works suited to school performers, & also been a forceful advocate for Australian repertoire both here in Australia and on overseas tours.

Marshall's comment about developing repertoire of non-Western music is apt. Julian Yu's piece for the WASO China tour is one work KPO has performed, as well as some beautiful Julian Yu arrangements for soprano & orchestra (Shu-Cheen Yu). We annually do a themed concert, which often incorporates stylistic music – to date Latin American (some interesting Chilean works) & Chinese (Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto for example). These were very popular from an audience perspective. We also had a Vietnamese boat refugee composer taking part in our Emerging Composer Workshop & his work was performed in a symphony program – this generated great interest from the Sydney Vietnamese community, but we were not able to track whether audience were sustained. An orchestral network to share experiences about non-Western music is highly desirable.

Artist development

Youth and community orchestras do play an important role in artist development. Quite a different role to that of the professional training programs (eg Sydney Sinfonia & ACO2), but pertinent. They provide repertoire training for young musicians, (a KPO trumpet recently secured permanent position with TSO, & says he owes much of his experience to performing with KPO) solo opportunities for both young musicians & established musicians (eminent cellist Julian Smiles, told me he is hardly ever asked to do a concerto solo). Moreover, community & youth orchestras provide a rich resource for professional musicians who want to share their experience and make a difference to community music making; this may help vary the diet for those professional musicians with mid-career stasis, if they can overcome the perception that working with youth and community orchestras is somehow dumbing down their status.

Working with youth orchestras may be more satisfying for some as community musicians' technical potential can be limited. However, with emphasis on 'lifelong learning' the benefits of learning an instrument is a healthy living message which can usefully be promoted as a positive measure. If taking up an instrument reduces the likelihood of succumbing to Alzheimers, there may be many more U3A orchestras (currently one on list!) The growth of Doctors Orchestras and Medicus Musicus across the country & globe (thanks to Miki Pohl) is striking.

A number of community and youth orchestras provide opportunities and performance experiences for up and coming young Australian musicians, and many of these go on to do well in the Symphony Australia Young Performers Program. I often wonder where these gifted young musicians are going to get work. One of the aims of this Forum, should be to develop strategies to increase the working opportunities for professional musicians. I was pleased to find today that Katie Betts, a past winner of the KPO Concerto Competition, has taken on the role of Concertmaster of the Darwin Symphony Orchestra, and conductor of the Darwin Youth Orchestra.

Another KPO initiative which could be replicated is a 2010 commission for a work for Kids Proms (target audience 3 – 8 year olds) which takes a well know song/nursery rhyme as a point of departure (& included in the work must be an opportunity for the young audience to sing) for a 3 minute orchestral work which explores the sound textures or the orchestra. The theme of this year's Kids Proms is 'Monsters & Wild Things' so Damian Barbeler has taken 'Three Blind Mice' as his tune & text. The work will be premiered at two Kids Proms performances on Sunday 19 September. KPO hopes to commission one such work in the coming three years.

Marshall comments about students not attending professional performances. There are ways to overcome these barriers, if well thought through, although time is an issue as so many students have to work to supplement their income at university. Perhaps encouraging tertiary institutions to include attendance and writing about a set number of performances as core work content may be one way to overcome this issue.

Community relevance

Community relevance should not be directed solely to audience development objectives. If players of professional orchestras were shown to be making a contribution to their local youth & community orchestras, that may be an additional level of relevance & one which pays different types of dividends, in addition to audience development.

Classical music is disappearing from the discourse about arts and culture. I am dismayed at how irrelevant classical music has become & how absent it is from the arts, lifestyle sections of even the weekend paper. I am always interested to talk with non-musicians about their perspective on concerts, and was interested to hear this week that one was 'so over' hearing about Richard Tognetti. We need to find some new feature personalities. This person suggested that the arts should work more in tandem with sport..... & gave the example of a group who are trying to encourage indigenous communities to ride bikes; they had asked a number of indigenous artists to paint bikes to be auctioned to raise money for this project.

Education and outreach work is very important, & I am dismayed to learn of the Australia Council response to funding cuts. However, the reality may be that funding is not going to increase, so the classical community has to be very smart about reinventing itself without calling for additional sources of funding.

In terms of community relevance, community and youth orchestras have a natural synergy with their local audience and a connection to local events and celebrations. These synergies have to be nurtured, and the reality is that audiences may be attracted to attending local performances in preference to tackling traffic and parking challenges in city locations. However, these local performances can also stimulate the desire to attend the highest quality performances, and

consequently cross promotion between the professional, community and youth orchestra sectors is highly desirable. Youth and community orchestral activities can be seen as a pathway to professional orchestral performances, if there is a two way communication.

In conclusion

There is huge potential for greater community engagement between the professional and youth and community orchestra sectors, and the impact of this could reap substantial dividends for all parties and contribute to a higher and more relevant classical music profile in the national discussion about arts and culture.

Recommendations articulated previously include:

- Statistical profiling of the youth and community orchestral sectors
- Sharing & networking programming ideas, particularly about new repertoire which is effective with audiences or which engages non-western music styles & content
- Sharing & networking audience development programs
- Professional development for youth and community orchestras in respect to developing education programs
- Professional orchestras to explore community engagement strategies
- Symphony Services Australia to expand role
- Tertiary music institutions to train musicians for community engagement work with placements & incorporate attendance & comment on performances into core course content

As a priority, orchestral sectors must acknowledge the contribution that each provides to cultural vibrancy. Trust, recognition and respect must first be firmly established to ensure that meaningful community engagement can be established.