

## **Australian Orchestras – The State of Play**

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In symphony orchestras there are few certainties. Each week brings a new conductor, a new work, a new way of relating to old works, new audiences, different venues... Our recent history has required us to evolve quickly in a fluid environment and change how we conceive of ourselves, ensuring that we remain valued within our local and national communities, with an eye and ear always to the rest of the world.

The notion of artistic vibrancy is a useful way of taking the pulse of our artform, seeing how it flows through the veins of our culture and how musicians can keep its heart beating. The Australia Council's paper, *Defining Artistic Vibrancy* offers five elements as indicators of aesthetic vitality:

- artistic quality or excellence
- audience engagement and stimulation
- a fresh approach to the preservation or development of the artform
- artist development
- community relevance

These elements are the basis of this analysis of the Australian orchestras. Though they may be difficult to quantify and apply across several different artforms, they supply solid, basic criteria for our health check and offer insights into the future health of Australian orchestras.

With six state symphony orchestras – the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (ASO), Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO), Queensland Symphony Orchestra (QSO), Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO), Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra (TSO) and West Australian Symphony Orchestra (WASO), as well as the Australian Opera and Ballet Orchestra (AOBO) and Orchestra Victoria (OV) – Australian audiences in our capital cities are well served in this sector. The orchestras in Canberra and Darwin, although essentially pro-am, are developing in profile and in skills. Other companies such as the Australian Chamber Orchestra, Musica Viva, Opera Australia, Victorian Opera, West Australian Opera, Opera Queensland, State Opera of South Australia, and numerous small-to-medium companies also contribute to this musical life. But the future of orchestras lies not just in continuing to play excellent music, but in building audiences while exploring new work and creating development opportunities for our players.

Historically orchestras were a part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), a relationship that served music well for over 60 years, but needed new thought and regeneration. The ABC offered a unique, centralised artist and repertoire department, but it also limited the way state-based orchestras could engage their local communities and create more meaningful programs and projects suited to each city and state.

The watershed moment for Australian orchestras came with the full divestment from the ABC in 2006 when orchestras became fully independent companies. While it was a difficult transition for most orchestras, it ushered in a new era of orchestras becoming private companies responsible for their own sustainability and growth. However, it also posed new challenges in identifying new streams of income, new commercial programs to develop and new ways of thinking about a sustainable future. The change from fully managed, Commonwealth

government infrastructure (which started prior to 2006) to not-for-profit, locally managed arts companies posed significant challenges which are still being dealt with today. Employees are no longer public servants, with the associated benefits and conditions; for some players this has proven to be the most challenging change. Quality of conductors and size of orchestral works is increasingly determined by the income raised through corporate and other support, where government funding is intended to cover the substantial cost of artists' salaries.

### **Artistic quality and excellence**

As a young musician growing up in the 1980s, my goal was to become a member of one of Australia's orchestras. I shared, and share, this view with a large number of my colleagues. An invitation to play with a professional orchestra is a defining moment in a career, and one that gives credibility and acknowledgment to years of study and work. It also offered a very clear validation of the training undertaken to reach a professional level. The reason to be pleased? The orchestras were and still are the pinnacle of musical achievement in their respective cities, offering a wide range of musical experiences, working with leading Australian and international artists of a very high standard, and playing to knowledgeable audiences in fine halls.

Internationally our orchestras remain well regarded, although none has reached the standard where they are acclaimed internationally as ensembles of excellence in the way that London Symphony, Boston Symphony, Berlin Philharmonic or City of Birmingham Symphony are. It seems to me that one of the key things required to reach excellence in any field is to perform in a competitive environment, where other orchestras compete for audiences, talent, attention and money. In Australia our orchestras are, in some cases, the only full-time musical company in their territory, lacking the aforementioned imperative to compete in so many areas. This can possibly lead to a sense of invincibility, or at least comfort, which limits the striving for excellence.

This is not to say that our orchestras aren't good – on the contrary, the quality of the individual players, our guest conductors and soloists is of a high level, comparable to most orchestras worldwide. But our unique environment poses some key challenges for us as we plot the way forward into an increasingly competitive marketplace when it comes to the entertainment dollar, and the engagement of audiences.

All orchestras strive for artistic excellence. This can be measured in many ways – was a performance a faithful account of the score, for instance. But artistic vibrancy obviously needs more than this fundamental level of achievement – it must also contain a level of energy, commitment and "magic" that can only come under circumstances that are fully within the grasp of any orchestra. It requires total commitment to all aspects of performance, beginning with programming, through recruitment, planning, practice, choice of conductor, suitability of performance space, and preparation of audience. Are we doing enough in these areas? Perhaps not.

### **Audience engagement and stimulation**

Australian orchestras rely heavily on subscribers to support them financially. With this (often) large subscriber base comes a fairly reactionary stance to programming – this is not an audience that always expects or welcomes risk. Consequently the balance between playing new works and old works is very fragile. Too many old works and everyone starts to get a little jaded. Too many new works and everyone starts to get annoyed. In order to introduce

audiences and orchestral players to new and unfamiliar works, it is vital that this balance is maintained or improved on.

Orchestras act pretty much as art galleries and libraries do nowadays – as preservers of centuries-old works, as well as nurturers of new talent and new works, which, after all, form the next part of the artistic fulcrum. With no new works today, we will have no old works tomorrow. With careful programming, audiences can become accustomed to hearing new works with a sense of adventure and enlightenment. In our visually-saturated century, the challenge of committing time and money to a new work that an audience will only ever hear once is a big one. But if we sit through three hours of *Avatar* and take the good, the bad and the indifferent in that genre, the question must be posed: is listening to a new piece of music for 20 minutes really that onerous? Greater use of websites (sound clips, interviews with players/composers), program notes, pre-concert talks, active and passionate advocacy from conductors, orchestra members and high profile music lovers, should be explored further. We know what to expect with *Avatar* because we are saturated with promotional material about it well before we have a chance to see it.

Musicians in orchestras like to play to full houses. We all do. But how are we to achieve this, when we present over 180 performances of several hundred works a year, without starting to repeat ourselves? I remember an eminent Australian conductor saying to me years ago that we should preface all performances of difficult works with: "Tonight's performance of Berg's *Lulu* is brought to you courtesy of last night's performance of *The Pearl Fishers*." Everything in balance. I'm confident in saying that all orchestral musicians would soon get tired of playing top 100 classics all the time, and feel confident that the audience would soon get tired of paying money to hear them too.

Do we always present an enthusiastic performance to our audiences? Audience members frequently comment on how "serious" or "unhappy" musicians appear on stage. There has been a lot of effort over recent years to remind players that, as well as being expected to perform virtuosic works which require concentration and commitment, so too we have a responsibility to entertain and engage our audiences. Soloists and conductors distinguish themselves by offering a "performance" as well as a concentrated and committed performance – our orchestral players need to add a bit more showbiz to the mix. The Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, an orchestra that has emerged through the enlightened "El sistema" music education program in Venezuela does this with gusto. Yes, they're young, yes, they're the hottest youth orchestra in the world at present, yes, it's their "thing"; but they still play standard orchestral music to audiences of various ages in concert halls. The only difference is that they choose to perform in an energetic and very physical style – and look how it energises and engages the audience.

Performance times and lengths are possibly barriers to new and existing audiences. The established paradigm of Friday and Saturday at 8pm needs to be expanded and challenged. One hour programs @ \$25 have proven very popular at Sydney Festival, and could easily be incorporated into orchestras' existing schedules to complement the subscription concerts. This model works very well for most orchestras in their mid-week matinee series for older audiences, and I can see this easily transferring to programs for younger and family audiences.

Increasingly, the study of classical or instrumental music in schools is diminishing, and we will find ourselves with a new generation of students who will have had little or no music training or exposure. The understanding of the basics of an artform is key to developing a relationship with an audience, just as it is in theatre, or sport, or visual arts. Orchestras will continue to offer programs that complement the work that goes on in schools, However, they

shouldn't be expected to become de facto education providers in music. This is something which national education providers need to be cognisant and active about, if future Australians are to be musically literate.

As orchestras have focussed on building relationships with local audiences, we may have lost a national perspective. It benefits all orchestras and performing bodies to play for new audiences in new venues, and especially to audiences who already have exposure to the artform. Tasmanian Symphony in recent years has been active in developing a Sydney series of performances, and recently gave performances in Adelaide. Sydney Symphony toured with Nigel Kennedy to Brisbane and Canberra. Melbourne Symphony has a regular series in Geelong. Audiences in New York, London and Tokyo are blessed with a rich roster of regular visits from orchestras from all round the world, enabling them to experience a variety of orchestral performances throughout the year, and honing their critical skills. Audience appreciation, experience and expectation are an important ingredient in artistic vibrancy, and can only benefit from a varied musical diet. If we developed a national touring circuit for orchestras, I believe that we would experience a rapid increase in audience expectations, orchestral performance vibrancy, and the national media's interest.

### **A fresh approach to the preservation or development of the artform**

This requires more than just programming, It covers the whole engagement of our audience from the time they receive a brochure or see an ad in the paper or hear about a concert on Facebook – and again, art galleries might provide a good example of how the future might look. Previously dusty, old academic institutions are now vibrant arts and cultural centres, with talks, music, events, glamorous openings, new works, old works, and education programs. Importantly, entry is free, all the time, except for special events. The main product, "The Collection", is available to all at no cost. This means that, as an audience member, I can go and see a new piece which I might or might not like, with the only cost being my time and my commitment. If I like it I can visit it again, and again, and again, and hopefully be enticed back to see another and another. All the while I would be comparing and contrasting with the old masters, some of which I might love, while others might leave me cold. The parallels between orchestras and galleries seem apposite. Look at the example of how Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art's audience exploded when it provided free entrance (courtesy of Telstra's enlightened support). Is there a lesson to be learned here? Could more concerts be free if the costs are recovered via enlightened support in other areas?

New work requires new styles of presentation, new styles of information sharing, and new styles of performance. MSO's Metropolis Series perhaps come closest to this, featuring two weeks of intensive concert giving of new scores by established and emerging composers, presented at the Malthouse, more usually a theatre space, seating about 400, and with a roster of artists who don't generally appear in the mainstage season. Let's also look at the importance of repeat performances of successful new works, so we can really start building up a repertoire of Australian classics.

Australian orchestras have not really developed a strong repertoire of non-Western music. We don't have a strong engagement with indigenous musicians, and we haven't explored the music of our nearest neighbours, either traditional music, or western-style music, in a sustained or planned way. Composers such as Isang Yun, Unsuk Chin, Liza Lim, Toshio Hosokawa, etc are rarely performed in this country. Co-commissions with orchestras in our region are rare. We still look to Europe and the USA for our new music, whereas our colleagues

in the USA and Europe are now developing strong programs with communities outside the traditional audience base. Los Angeles Philharmonic is performing with Hispanic youth, and London Symphony Orchestra is engaging with young Asian musicians. Australian orchestras need to find the time and the space to develop truly creative, musical opportunities that expand not just the audience reach, but provide a relevant cultural experience for additional audiences and refresh the artform.

Likewise, there hasn't been a sustained effort to develop and encourage an "Australian repertoire". We love the world premiere here, but where are the repeat performances of the works that were enthusiastically received at their first hearing? Less than a handful of works could be considered as "repertoire" – works such as Peter Sculthorpe's *Kakadu*, Richard Meale's *Very High Kings*, and Ross Edwards's *Violin Concerto*.

Lacking at the moment is a roundtable conference bringing together all stakeholders to discuss contemporary issues and future trends in orchestral management, which includes artistic decision making. A conference along the lines of the League of American Orchestras, or Association of British Orchestras conference, where players, management, unions, artist managers, broadcasters and audience share ideas would be a most welcome addition to the Australian orchestral sector. This is a project that could be planned and managed by Symphony Services Australia, and be a truly national event, held in different cities throughout Australia.

### **Artist development**

Key to the excellence of any orchestra is the continued, active and passionate performance from our musicians. Orchestras in Australia still operate overwhelmingly on a pattern of tenure – once a job is gained through audition, the player effectively has a position for life. Professional development and performance assessments are now standard in all orchestras, but a focus needs to be placed on better engagement of players' skills and passions to ensure maximum commitment from all players, at all times. Generally, players fall into three categories:

- new recruits – often recent graduates embarking on their first professional gig
- mid-career musicians, who have spent 5-10 years in an orchestra and begin to face a decision about how to manage another 10-20 years in the same workplace or whether to make a transition to another job
- late career musicians – those who have spent often 20-30 years in the same orchestra and face the difficult decision about whether and when to retire.

Burnout and ennui are common in orchestras – anecdotal evidence often suggests the attitude: "I've been in the orchestra for 20 years, I have no control over my musical future, but what else can I do now?" The late career musician can often find him/herself facing a possible waning of skills, and the prospect of an early retirement with little else to back it up. In this case, professional development or transition programs are even more important. Programs such as SCOPE (Securing Career Opportunities and Professional Employment) have much potential to be enacted in the orchestral sector. It is hoped that orchestras monitor each musician for signs of mid-career stasis, and offer opportunities for creative growth either within the orchestra, or outside the company.

Young and emerging artist programs are now a key feature of all orchestras' work. Covering areas such as composition, orchestral training programs, conducting, arts management and mentoring, these programs serve two key purposes: to focus attention on

areas of need in training; and to identify potential, future employees and artistic collaborators. ACO2 and Sydney Sinfonia are two strong examples of new initiatives in this area.

Further engagement with the energetic, youth orchestra and amateur sectors should be encouraged to ensure that as many young people as possible have an active engagement with instrumental music. At present there seems to be no clear connection between these sectors, although professional orchestras offer discounts to students and youth music organisations. Something more formal needs to be established to encourage and cajole young musicians to attend concerts. Time, cost and length of concerts may all be barriers to success here. Of course, this is not limited to music students – anecdotally at least, actors and opera singers rarely venture into the theatre, whereas ballet students are almost always at other dance events.

### **Community relevance**

Since the orchestras were divested from the ABC, an increased focus on local engagement has been identified as key to ongoing success. But what exactly does this mean? Certainly it identifies the need for better and more sophisticated customer relationship management programs to track and monitor audience trends in ticket buying and attendance. It also means an increased focus on audience diversification, through touring, pops and other commercial activities, new venues, more sophisticated and targeted marketing campaigns, online and other digital portals, and hire engagements. As discussed above, subscription audiences form the core of our audience base, although the percentage of this audience segment is slowly being overtaken by the single ticket buyer or Create-Your-Own subscriber, outside the mould of the Masters/Classics buyer. Programs that focus on more commercial product, such as *Bugs Bunny at the Symphony*, pops concerts, “heritage” acts (Burt Bacharach/Air Supply/Beach Boys and so on) also broaden the audience base and the reach of the orchestras in their communities.

Performing in different venues, taking music to where people live, and making the orchestra easy to access by more of the population is essential to engage more and more new audiences. The old days of coming “into town” for a big cultural night out are becoming things of the past. Players and orchestras may need to modify their expectations of performing in halls and venues with world-class acoustics and amenities – although we should continue to lobby for excellence in this area.

Classical music doesn’t feature in the national discourse about arts and culture. The media regularly prints reviews of concerts, but there’s no greater discussion about the ideas or the skills behind the performances. There may occasionally be a feature on a soloist or composer, but this is generally personality-based and not really about the work. A greater focus of classical musicians being involved in important discussions about Australia in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be encouraged. Richard Tognetti and Richard Gill are often quoted in discussions about music education, but not so much in discussions about music performance. An articulation from the sector to itself about why classical music is important might be the first step to establishing a wider discussion about what we do and why we do it.

Perhaps the most important access programs we run are our education and outreach programs, which involve incursions and excursions, touring, online and realtime access for students in each state. These programs complement the ongoing arts/music programs in state education programs, although are increasingly under pressure to replace certain areas of music education that aren’t being covered by state systems. More could be done to facilitate a more active program of events for students – at the moment, most of our education programs involve

passive engagement – sitting in a hall listening to a performance. More hands-on activities with professional players could see a greater engagement with young audiences, and this sector as a whole. Programs such as AusKick, an AFL program designed to get kids involved from an early age, could serve as apposite models. Getting on stage (on the field) with your favourite orchestral player and playing (kicking) with them could stimulate an interest in classical music much better than just sitting and watching.

We should investigate meaningful ways in which to engage with Australia's rich, culturally diverse communities - this could be possible by programming more culturally diverse work from the region in imaginative, creative and thoughtful projects, driven as much by other communities as by the orchestras themselves.

### **In conclusion**

Australian orchestras are travelling well at the moment. Over 100 years of existence, we have slowly established ensembles of excellence, and, principally due to the "ownership" of the ABC, stability. Australian orchestras have shown the capacity to add new product, new marketing skills, new market share and new programming ideas that keep them relevant to their local and national audiences. The transition to not-for-profit companies is still evolving, and the culture shift needs to be embraced better by musicians and other stakeholders.

I have made a number of recommendations, including:

- Classical music needs to increase its profile in the national discussion about arts and culture. This should start with a discussion within the sector, and an annual roundtable conference of all interested stakeholders should be a priority.
- New music and new performance platforms for presenting concerts should be a priority for orchestras.
- Active engagement of new and young audiences must be prioritised.
- Career development for musicians needs greater attention and engagement.
- New engagement with non-Western regions should be explored, to refresh the artform and connect with Australia's diverse community.

It's imperative for the orchestras' future relevance and vitality that we, as a sector, talk about these issues and opportunities. We can lay the foundation now for a classical music sector that has a vital, respected and exciting role in Australia's future artistic and community life.

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