

## FOR AUSTRALIAN CONDUCTORS - REAL OPPORTUNITIES - OR NOT?

Patrick Thomas

Are we as a Nation are supporting talented Australian conductors to the fullest extent, enabling them to make *their* fullest contribution to our national music scene? Alternately, whether from the giant loaf of opportunities, we are offering them but a handful of 'crumbs'. One thing is axiomatic: One or two performances a year do not a conductor make! Nor, on their own, do 'passive' training programs. No! Talented, developing conductors need *continuous* practical experience as an essential determinant of whether they will develop to high levels and with a capacity that ultimately enables them to produce the goods under professional, or those less-than-perfect conditions that exist in Music's real world. Granted, selecting someone who should be given such opportunities requires real courage and imagination on the part of orchestra managements and concert organisers. Indeed, they may need at times to be no less than gamblers – albeit astute ones! Sad to say, in Australia, there has not been sufficient courage demonstrated in recent years by our leading entrepreneurs; and detrimentally also, in terms of financial and artistic cost. Significantly also, players in the orchestras have seemed curiously reluctant to see the situation clearly. Yet, just imagine if *they* were denied opportunities to pursue their chosen careers as professional instrumentalists in their own country!

Developing conducting skills at the practical level is, and has always been, dependent on the 'doing factor'. Training courses, however excellent, are all very well; but on their own, they will not make up for the experience of having to produce the goods under operational conditions. A case in point is in the USA, where there are hundreds of advanced programs and PHD courses for would-be conductors. Yet comparatively few post graduates survive as Music Directors at the professional level, without real and continuing opportunities to put their training into practice. Leaving modesty aside, my own conducting career began when I was 'catapulted to the tigers' and required to prove myself professionally from the very first performance (without rehearsal.) I can now say that, although frighteningly formidable at the time, this, and a continuing 'hands-on' background, ensured that few future things fazed me. Another point is that this happened right here in Australia in 1964! So, someone, somewhere, was a gambler!

Certainly you and your colleagues are far closer than I am to the status quo, the realities of the market, and other latent problems. However, Australia has long 'come of age' internationally in the performing arts, in terms of actors, choreographers, film directors, composers, et al. Even more relevant, is that various Australians hold prestigious conducting posts abroad, so it seems a great shame that managements here at home appear to be dragging their feet. My feeling is that our best local conductors deserve increased and continuing opportunities for input, and if your Summit brings this possibility nearer, it will be to its great credit.

Patrick Thomas,  
18.6.2010