

Australian Contemporary Opera Company

PO Box 529
East Melbourne
VIC 8002

Monday August 22, 2022

NATIONAL ARTS POLICY REVIEW SUBMISSION

Email: culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au

Dear Cultural Policy Review Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

I am writing as the Founder/Artistic Director of the **Australian Contemporary Opera Company** - a not-for-profit arts organisation established in 2009 as a repertory company for developing artists, and now the leading producer of contemporary opera in Australia - based in Victoria. I am responding as both the artistic leader of the company, and as an Australian professional practicing artist of 30 years standing.

Since 2009, Australian Contemporary Opera Company has:

- Presented 53 new opera productions, including 19 Australian premieres
- Provided professional development to 150+ young Australian artists, including directors, pianists, conductors and designers
- Platformed 50+ established professional artists
- Employed more than 400 Australian orchestral musicians
- Established the only opera festival in the Southern Hemisphere
- Enabled work and experience for 16+ creative administrators and marketers
- Collaborated with the creative and business sector (100+ partnerships)
- Contributed to the reputation of excellence in Australian contemporary opera - new music theatre internationally
- Championed new Australian works
- Forged a formidable international network amongst top-tier contemporary opera producers, creators and practicing artists.

Australian Contemporary Opera Company is guided by a Board of distinguished advisors across sectors of law, business, education, governance and opera, and leading consultants with expertise in strategy, tourism, hospitality and branding.

From the Policy Review, we would like to see the following actions:

Review and restructure of government support for opera companies, resulting in a more equitable funding model

Expansion of support for contemporary opera / new theatrical music nationally.

Produce a roadmap to address employment inequality (horrific inequity), in particular with regard to artistic leadership, gender and remuneration.

Hold multi-million dollar funded companies to account in terms of representative output, artistic leadership and the number and make-up of singers/practitioners in secure employment.

Instigate measures to support companies (like Australian Contemporary Opera Company) who have supported themselves for 13 years, contributed to the national and international pipeline of audiences and talent and need secure, multi-year organisational funding to take advantage of national/international opportunities, forward-plan (employ Australians), build capacity, bring Australian opera production/principles into the 21st century - in line with international best practice.

Regarding our practice and why:

1. Recognise, respect, and celebrate the centrality of First Nations cultures to the unique Australian identity [FIRST NATIONS]

As a contemporary Australian arts company, we want our work to be representative of the Australia we live in. We want to celebrate our First Nations people and their connection to Country and stories and help to create a blended future for our artform.

Challenge 1 - Funding projects that advance the Australian identity of the future.

We have commissioned an opera designed to put a cast and creative team of 50% First Nations and 50% White Australians together in telling a story of a divided Australia, with a message of hope and a shared future. To our surprise, given government and corporate policy (RAPs), this project has received shocking feedback (re: too political and racist opinions) in our broader philanthropic community – including high profile individual philanthropists and esteemed foundations. There is a clear disconnect between what government policy and private philanthropy see for the future of the [performing] arts in Australia.

Opportunity 1 – Persist, persevere and platform

Let our stories be a record of an Australia we are and wish to be, despite obstacles. Let white Australians stand with our First Nations artists and musicians and share in their culture of rich, imaginative storytelling - in the creation of our shared future. We need the stories of our time to be told – enduring stories will point the future to our history and an understanding of our times in a way history alone won't.

2. Ensure that government support reflects the diversity of Australia [A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY]

Every person has a story, and artists bring their stories and experiences to the telling of those of others. The threads are woven through creators (music, drama, emotion, design, movement) and crystallise in the telling. Opportunity to create, practice and present quality art is central to Australia's creative identity – it must be broad, inclusive, diverse and representative.

First Peoples are the best storytellers in the world – history, culture and understanding of our 'country' comes to us all through a verbal and sung tradition.

The way opera funding currently stands, it does not meet this goal. Artistic leadership determines the stories that are told, who tells them, and who is on stage. At this point in time, all government funded opera companies (multi-year) are led by white male artistic directors aged over 55.

Challenge 2 – Skewed artistic leadership preventing stories being given their place.

The artistic leadership of arts organisations, especially government multi-year funded organisations that decide what stories are told, and who tells them – has an unacknowledged flow on effect in the inequitable employment figures of Australian artists and musicians. Until there is - at very least – gender equity in these crucial story-telling, leadership roles, the stories that are funded to be told will not be representative of the Australia we live in, or wish to be.

Our stories will not find their place until companies receiving government funding are forced to be transparent about who is employed and the % of government funding that is providing employment. We do not see government-funded organisations being held accountable for equity, diversity - and equal remuneration. Although women make up 30% of CEO roles in the major opera organisations funded by government, it is the artistic director who chooses the stories and controls the artistic / creative elements - and they are all white men.

Opportunity 2 – Fund female-led independent companies of standing to allow diverse stories and opportunity for growth of smaller, dynamic, and nimble organisation telling a broader story.

3. Support excellence and the special role of artist and their creative collaborators. [THE CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST]

Artists are at the centre of our company. We create, curate and provide a platform for their artistic expression, as part of a global pipeline of talent and skill.

Secure work for artists (in opera) has all but disappeared over the past fifteen years.

Challenge 3: '[Opera] Artist is a dirty word'

There is a prevalent attitude in society that artists have 'chosen' to do a job that is not economically rational. The move away from the terms 'arts 'and 'artists 'into 'creative industries / creative workers 'has had a negative effect on the esteem artists – particularly performers – are held in broader society. Each work of art (performance) is tied to an outcome – and the expectation is that

a creative industry or endeavour has an economic rationale. Artists are by nature able to tell and interpret stories of not just their lived experience, but others 'perceived experiences.

Opportunity 3 – Delineate creative work (usually economic outcome) from artistic work (rarely economic outcome).

Bring performing arts back into discourse as a social good, vital to well-being and civilised society, and worthy of investment (support). Secure work - particularly capacity for companies to employ artists full-time - can increase community access and strengthen wellbeing through exposure to art, ideas, inspirational talent and diversity.

4. Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector to contribute to the national life, community wellbeing and the economy. [STRONG INSTITUTIONS]

We have performed on main stage theatres, in cellars and barns, recital centres and concert halls, built an opera theatre in a tent in a paddock – a strong institution is one that is welcoming, inspiring, accessible, affordable and always there for us.

Challenge 4: Unequal access to playing fields

It is the range, appeal and diversity of stories that make for a strong institution. Government – funded institutions (recital centres, theatres) are out of reach for companies like Australian Contemporary Opera Company - primarily, due to venue hire and staffing costs, but also a lack of capacity to plan. Consequently, most of the stories we see on stage are those by [the male-led] government-funded companies. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] If companies receive 75+% of their funding from government, year after year, and other companies are surviving (and growing) with 75% philanthropic funding but without the means for a platform in our institutions, then it would appear the government funding system is set up to keep new(er) players out, and the stories and institutions cannot change their reputation as places for the elite and old-fashioned without regular policy review. Not only are our stories not being told, but they are not being heard.

Opportunity 4:

Help institutions be vital, dynamic places by putting in place a funding structure that allows broader use of the best facilities, for unfunded companies - and consequently audiences. That is, subsidise venue hire/staffing costs to increase the variety of stories and performers.

5. Ensure Australian creativity thrives here and abroad in the digitally enabled 21st century [REACHING THE AUDIENCE]

We have seen leading Australian opera/music/theatre talent disappear to work overseas now since the 1990s. We need the capacity to both provide secure employment for Australian artists who want to make their career in Australia, bring established artists home to work. Digitally enabled means that every production can be global. Digital techniques and innovation can only go so far - it is the talent that needs to be prioritised over the techniques.

CHALLENGE 5 – Like anything of quality, both international engagement and digital technology require financial investment.

Organisational financial security leads to more national and international engagement.

OPPORTUNITY 5 – Digital platforms can be cost effective in reaching international audiences.

Telling compelling contemporary Australian stories this way can travel across borders quickly and meaningfully. We can tell our stories nationally and locally without the weight of using traditional theatre and touring. We can bring a sung story to a city wall, laneway, train station or bus stop. Funding capacity frees imagination and opens doors for the artist in new and unexpected ways.

Thank you for your consideration of our circumstances, and our vision for contributing to the shaping of artistic identity in Australia.



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