

## Some thoughts on heritage

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I have the privilege of being the Artistic Director of a state opera company – a purveyor of elitist, unoriginal and culturally marginal art – according to some recently emerging mumbles in the national conversation which appear to advocate a radical reallocation of government funding to various enterprises seen as exemplifying greater diversity of engagement, relevance (to whom or what is never stated) and, of course, innovation. I suppose I should begin by nailing my colours to the mast through making this confession.

I was a member of the Australia Council in the 1990s, when the New Media fund was set up. I opposed it vehemently – and in vain – as it seemed to me just another example of meretricious, self-serving clap-trap, which confused content with process, masquerading to the weak minded as new, with a healthy sense of entitlement to whatever funds that might happen to drop from the perch of government.

To educate and enlighten my misguided ways, I was taken to an office in Melbourne by an earnest, believing colleague. This office was the hub of revolutionary “new media” enterprise. I was ushered in and shown, in an atmosphere of hushed reverence, some examples of “new media” which, so far as I could tell, consisted of pictures of yellow flowers changing and moving about a bit on a TV screen. ‘Humbug’, I exclaimed, ‘this belongs to the visual arts’ – only to be howled down by the entire clutch of councilors of the day (except, if my memory serves me correctly, Christopher Pearson). Thankfully, this nonsense and other things like it were recognised in their true colours some years later when my esteemed colleague, Jonathan Mills (no relation) encouraged the abolition of the New Media fund with enthusiasm – and final success.

So by nature I am sceptical of the new, because very little in any age of artistic enterprise is genuinely new and that which is and which attains lasting vitality is almost always nourished by tradition and heritage as a basis for departure into previously uncharted waters. Some examples: Opera – that new form invented by Monteverdi in 1607 – was a brilliant synthesis of pre-existing elements; Greek Drama as seen through the perspective of the Florentine Camerata, the extravagant court pageants of the Medici, the “prima and seconda prattica” of the early baroque style and the presence of the sustaining financial milieu of the Italian city-state of the 1600s – especially the Venetian one. Opera, from the beginning, was never a money-making venture.

The musical language of Messiaen was forged from clear antecedents in the forms of plainchant, the French operatic traditions of the nineteenth century, Debussy, the

modes and rhythms of Indian music and – with the unpredictability of genius – birdsong. As Stravinsky said: ‘Nothing is likely about masterpieces, least of all whether there will be any’.

The same transforming power applied to an antecedent can be seen in Beethoven’s appropriation of the topoi of the eighteenth century style, Picasso’s appropriations of primitive artifacts, or James Joyce’s mimesis of time in *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* and its relation to the thought of the Neopolitan thinker Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Any work of art whose perceived “newness” makes or has made it remarkable and of lasting vitality (those words again) has formative elements which are pre-existing and which become the basis for invention through creative transformation by an individual genius. In other words – heritage. Would the Ligeti Etudes exist as they do without the Chopin, Liszt, Brahms and Scriabin essays in the same genre? I think not. Would the landscapes of William Robinson be as they are without Turner and Glover, or Les Murray’s poetry without Elizabethan blank verse? – same answer.

So I am quite happy to be steward of a company which sustains what some would see as “museum culture”. Would that we in the performing arts were funded like museums and art galleries whose collections have the aura of glittering and solid capital assets. I have heard the conversations – ‘how Blue Poles has appreciated over the years – in retrospect how wise a purchase’.

The performing arts, their practice and heritage, are not susceptible to such shop-keeping – they are more radical and evanescent because of their dependence on the interaction of live performers and an audience in the framework of real time. They are not as readily and conveniently quantified as the collections of museums and galleries and libraries because of their fragility and humanity.

Yet it is precisely this essential and existential humanity: the vulnerability of flesh and blood, the discernible nerves of a great singer at the beginning of a great role, the occasional accident in performance, the quality of breath in singing, acting, playing an instrument and even dancing – these create a magic that satisfies that thirst that man has for an experience outside the sometimes grim parameters of daily life. The sound of a real voice or instrument – unamplified, unfettered by technology and apparatus – a voice, instrument or ballet step honed by great skill and great traditions, a perfectly in tune chord – such things provide a glimpse of an eternal beauty for which humanity, often inarticulately, yearns throughout recorded history – a beauty which always engenders the thrill of recognition when it is revealed by those who have the skill to do so – a beauty with the power to transport us and reveal a dimension of magic so potent

that the need and the search for it is fundamental to the state of man as a necessity after eating and procreation.

No-one buys a ticket to the theatre or concert hall to witness something ordinary, something that can be done by any reasonably intelligent person with a modicum of application and training – like making a computer game or designing an ear-ring. Our theatres and halls deal in the currency of the extraordinary – anybody who stands and delivers professionally on those stages has a remarkable talent, nurtured by years of training (by the passing on of traditions from the last generation of masters) and also nurtured and sustained by the great literature of the artform in question. A fine string player in one of our professional orchestras is a profound repository of knowledge and cultural practice extending back to the 1600s in the very process of bowing and fingering the that are part of the daily task; similarly a ballet dancer, an actor or an opera singer embodies complex traditions, extending back through time but engaging the present because of their innate and enduring vitality – a vitality which each day demonstrates their capacity to captivate and delight a paying audience.

The canon of the major performing arts is a necessary heritage for a civil society. Communities that achieve and have achieved through history are characterized by a respect for the continuum of the imagination in all areas of human endeavour. The performing arts are part of the continuum that enrich national and civic life and help to define communities by being loci of civic pride as well as offering the possibilities of engagement not only for audiences of all ages, but also for those – especially the young – who wish to learn. The secure establishment of major companies provides employment for artists to play, dance, sing or act and also – as an ancillary activity – to teach expertly. Remove, say, a symphony orchestra from a city and you will kill concert life but also youth orchestras, school music programs, tertiary training and fine teaching for the general community – in effect the capacity to enrich lives with real music.

The canon of the major performing arts is a treasure of civilization: things like the music of Bach, the plays of Shakespeare, the choreography of Petipa, are part of a tradition of practice defined by the greatest creative spirits of each generation. The great works of art extend a hand of friendship through time; they show us the fullness of our humanity in its glorious richness and complexity, they show us the eternal questions confronting the state of humanity, console us with their wisdom and confront us sometimes with the tragic dimensions of our nature – with an enduring strength that is rediscovered by each succeeding generation in turn. The great works form texts which enable the performers who bring them to life to open a window on the marvelous for each generation of audiences; to delight them, to impose an order on the chaos of existence which

engenders hope and wholeness of being, to nourish their spirits with a spark of what we may well call the divine that all great work manifests.

The canon also enables the genuinely - achieving new, because the skill base maintained by a major company has the best, the most developed resources to nurture the creation of new work of real substance. For what is vitally new will take its life from tradition, as it always has, and in that taking of life and form, measure itself against what has gone before and be guided by those who can see potential through the prism of great experience and knowledge – by those who can recognize real talent, because they are really talented themselves. As Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger* expresses it so beautifully when speaking of a new song:

*Ich fühl's, und kann's nicht verstehn  
Kann's nicht behalten, doch auch nicht vergessen  
Und faß ich es ganz, kann ich's nicht messen.  
Doch wie wollt ich auch messen,  
Was unermesslich mir schein  
Kein Regel wollte da passen  
Und war doch kein Fehler drin  
Es klang so alt, und war doch so neu.*

*I felt it and cannot understand it  
I can't hold it, yet it persists in my memory  
And were I able to contain it, I could not measure it.  
But how can I grasp  
What seemed immeasurable  
No rule seemed to fit it  
But there was no mistake in it  
It sounded so old but was really so new.*

The value of heritage is that it lets the richness of the past inform the present for the future and in the future. And its works bring joy to people – a joy created by the frisson of recognition of archetypal truths in the sacred space of theatre; by the magical utterance of great art which holds us in an embrace and reaffirms our sense of being; our sense of membership of the human community. A joy attained through both encounter and participation which manifests moments of revelation which change our perceptions of ourselves and the experience of being alive. Joy – Schiller's "Zauber" celebrated by Beethoven in the 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony – brings mankind together through the languages which transcend language, music and dance. This joy is fundamental to the canon and should, in a democracy, be the birthright of every citizen. The great works

contain and bear witness to what is best in us. They nourish us and make us better people. Look at how “El Sistema” has changed the delinquent youth of Venezuela, this program has given so many young people hope and purpose in life through classical music.

So where the major companies really need to extend their influence is in the area of education, because many of those purporting to educate have neglected to teach our children to read, to listen, to sing and to dance, thus depriving them of access to the richness of a heritage that can engage them, transform their lives, extend and complete them as human beings. If the major performing arts were to be given a policy imperative, then a worthy directive would be to contribute to the formation of a vibrant national curriculum for the arts that will bring value to our young people, based on real knowledge and expertise.

This knowledge and expertise will always, of necessity, find its highest expression through an elite skill base. Yes – opera, ballet, symphony and theatre are sustained by elite performers of extraordinary talent, but it is disingenuous and mischievous to suggest that these artforms do not achieve ‘relevance’ (whatever that might be made to mean) and do not take seriously the notion of an implicit social contract with the Australian people. The inspection of the annual report of any of our major companies will reveal a raft of education, training, touring and access initiatives – as well as the core business activity- that more than benchmark worldwide on considerably less subsidy than their European and some American counterparts.

And why is there such a problem for some with an elite group of performers – who perform for what some would see as an elite audience – by virtue of the price of tickets for some performances? Is the javelin or discus any less specialized or elite, and who imagines that premium tickets for sport are any cheaper overall than tickets for opera, ballet, concerts or major theatre? Perhaps, in the interests of access and equity, the government should put a stop to all funding of elite sport and encourage the populace to play marbles; everyone can participate, no extraordinary skills are required other than a functioning thumb and normal eyesight. Perhaps grants can be developed for marbles festivals in remote areas to “give everybody a go” and abolish the notions of excellence and competition altogether in our sporting landscape. To hell with the Attic grace of the pentathlon – what about the common man? Clearly absurd – but no more so than the suggestion, made by a certain MP at a policy breakfast some years ago in Perth, that the ‘salaried principals of Opera Australia who were [sic] “very highly paid” should, between performances, be sent to regional areas to assist at amateur G&S nights’. That particular occasion was the last time I used bad language in public.

The trouble is that some areas of Labor have a penchant for confusing arts funding with social justice programs – and this confusion begets a kind of puritan fundamentalism in the dialectic surrounding worthy-sounding ‘initiatives’ which emerge, with absolutely predictable recurrence, in each succeeding generation attaining the treasury benches. It is almost as if someone is saying, ‘You come from Broadmeadows, Rooty Hill or Moe – Puccini, Chopin, Shakespeare and Swan Lake are not for you – you won’t connect with them – we’ll give you glove puppets, fence painting, macramé and a heavy metal “demons of dirt bobcat ballet”’ (I have to confess I’d like the last one!). Yes, I exaggerate a little for rhetorical purposes but I know from my years of experience as a gnarled old cultural warrior that there is an uncomfortable essence of truth in what I am saying. I can back this up with some spectacular anecdotal examples – particularly from Queensland – but decency forbids on this occasion.

Of course, there are many on both sides of both State and Federal houses who love, support and participate in the arts and who are champions and advocates – God bless them. But from where I sit these don’t seem to be friendly times for the major performing arts sector and there is, in the industry, a perception of subliminal disapproval of our work emanating from Canberra that is puzzling and frustrating. We cannot change our intrinsic nature and we have been, by and large, good stewards of our funding, as our reporting will reveal.

This is not to say that the sector cannot respond to a government policy directive – quite the contrary – but this should not necessitate having to apologise for what we do and who we are and should not involve cutting funding and reallocating it to competitive bidding for projects that the companies, in essence, are already doing.

The record of the major performing arts companies is one of great achievement; contributing to the national narrative, enriching our citizens and improving the quality of our civic life. Government should share the same pride the Australian community demonstrates, on a continuing basis, in the work of this nation’s great arts companies; they should be central to an enlightened arts policy, not an impediment or nuisance to some specious ideas of ‘reform’.

Those who do not have imagination cannot imagine possibility. Artistic directors inhabit the province of the imagination every day – we are vocationally committed to the nurture and development of Australian performing arts. Our companies are a huge national resource and daily demonstrate power to work for the common good. We are receptive to new ideas and new challenges and our doors are always open to discuss intelligent new initiatives to bring the life-changing experience of artistic greatness to all Australians.

Finally, the major companies deal in the currency of delight, of joy (in the sense that Schiller uses the word), of sharing – what is marvelous, what engenders wonder, and what is enduringly enriching – with our national community. Let us not with Sir Toby have to say to government, as to some sour Malvolio,

‘Art any more than a steward? Dost thou think because thou art virtuous there shall be no more cakes and ale.’ *Twelfth Night, II(iii)*