



Consultancy for the Music Board's investigation into best practice for  
future support process and mechanisms for contemporary music  
theatre in Australia

## **Executive Summary**

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In 2008 the Music Board of the Australia Council for the Arts had departed from its past practice of funding individual companies, opting instead to create a music theatre initiative for the current triennium. This was aimed at continuing its support for the artform while exploring other mechanisms for its delivery. In the short term, the Board had decided to offer a quick-turnaround grants program to disburse the first year's funding, while engaging this consultancy to design a different model of delivery which would apply from 2009/10 onwards.

For this purpose the Board had committed \$300,000 per annum for the three-year period and that the Theatre Board had committed an additional \$50,000 per annum for the same period.

In this context, the Board retained the Consultant to work with the music theatre sector to design a new method of delivery for the genre, having regard to the funds it had allocated in 2008/10 and the likely funding partnerships it hoped to engender.

This Study took place from January to April 2009. In addition to researching and reviewing extensive documentary material on past and present practice, the Consultant had face-to-face interviews with approximately 100 persons from and in all states and territories and abroad. He also solicited and received written submissions from a variety of concerned sources.

The Study found that the music theatre sector across Australia is complex, fragmented, poorly understood and poorly resourced. The quick-turnaround program revealed something of the breadth of work and plurality of practice in this genre across the country. It showed that it extended well beyond the narrow scope of "European" music theatre traditionally supported by the Board. The fact of its being a joint venture with the Theatre Board was applauded in the field and considered a prime factor in its success. The Study urges that that relationship be maintained.

But the Study also found artists and small artistic enterprises across the country working often in isolation on a self-help basis to make work and get it produced. The process was often grueling and the results were, at best, uneven. Above all, they suffered from the lack of reliable pathways by which they could test their work and imagine a future for it.

The Study found that there were currently no consistent means of support for creative development of new work in any branch of music theatre and that producing and presentation was uneven and unreliable. In the chamber opera sphere, opportunity, activity and the number of producers alike have declined over the past ten years. The major opera companies have little involvement. In the musical theatre area, the major producers had likewise little track record in making new Australian works with original music. None of the non-profit organisations engaged in growing new work in that genre received government subsidy, though some funded theatre companies and arts centres occasionally produced original works. Of course, sometimes music theatre work slips through the net and gets up through other means. Of these, the most supportive has been the Major Festivals Initiative which almost alone has seemed to take an interest in this field.

The Study further found that there was no formal script/score reading or assessment process available at an acceptable level in any of the music theatre forms and that there were virtually no mechanisms on offer to artists seeking to have either their own practice mentored or their work developed by people genuinely expert in the field. Such skills as exist in these areas are poorly deployed and rarely brought together in a coherent way.

Unlike some other artforms with which the Australia Council deals, music theatre takes numerous forms and manifests itself under a number of often confusing terms and in many guises. Moreover, if one takes into account of the entire spectrum, music theatre is a huge topic. It would have been easy for this Study to focus only the kind of work that the Music Board had traditionally supported and design solutions for it. But that would have been a poor outcome.

In any event, demand was widespread across the sector and in all aspects of it, for a genuine change in attitude and that demand could not be ignored. It is no longer good enough to look at the *musical* theatre area and by labeling it “commercial” claim it as no concern of funding agencies. The label is neither accurate nor helpful to the artists who practice in that form. At the other end of the spectrum, it is no longer enough for major opera companies to put the challenge of nurturing and producing new Australian work in the “too hard” basket. But it was equally clear that the small to medium sized niche companies/ensembles such as the Board had funded in the past were not a workable model for the creation and presentation of any of these genres. Finally, it was apparent that no single mechanism could develop or deliver across the artform. New strategies that responded to the range of work being made were clearly needed and there had to be a plurality of responses to such a complex problem.

The question which all this posed was: at what point in the process could the Music Board most usefully intervene? Clearly it could not do everything. Given the limited funds which had been identified under the Music Theatre Initiative, it seemed that it could best respond by concentrating on investment in the early stages of creative development in the genre, broadly defined.

Again, it might have been easy to design a single entity and suggest that all these roads pass through it. Assuming such a body could be funded, no doubt it might have done some good. But it would not have addressed either the complexity of practice which the Study found, the need for radically different skills requiring to be applied from genre to genre or that a single entity inevitably located in one place could adequately respond nationally. Nor was the consultant persuaded that the hubs and producing mechanisms around the country were appropriate for this purpose.

Accordingly, the Study found that the objective which the Board set out for this investigation could best be pursued by three principal means. Not all of them necessarily require the Boards’ financial investment since some of the strategies require advocacy and action more than funding.

The first suggests that profound change could be effected in the destiny of artists practicing in the music theatre area by making those already funded in this genre acknowledge their responsibilities to it and put more of their resources at the disposal of making and presenting new Australian work. The admirable lead given by the festivals network could for instance be emulated by the Opera Conference. For that purpose the

Music and Theatre Boards should undertake a process of advocacy to other areas of public support to urge change and realignment of existing resources in that area.

The second addressed the need to offer real options for music theatre artists in the development of their work. Once-off workshops and occasional showcases have proven inadequate to the task of building a sustainable sector. However, there are organisations across the country that have developed mechanisms and processes for the support of the creative development of new work. Importantly, whether by reason of history, experience, location or access to specialist skills and international models, some have both the organizational base and the critical capacity to make an in depth, medium to long term commitment to projects in the music theatre area. Sustained effort in a multiyear framework will be vital in achieving this goal and only a small number of options have presented themselves in this regard. Nonetheless, with careful negotiation and a strategic allocation of investment, it would be possible by this means to make a substantial long term positive impact on the sector.

For that purpose, the Study has proposed that the Board seek out and enter into partnerships with a small number of select providers across the music theatre spectrum to deliver creative development services to individual artists and creative teams. Analysis undertaken in the Study suggests that this could be achieved within the financial parameters laid down for the Initiative in the current triennium.

Finally, there is a clear need to confront the fragmented nature of the music theatre scene in Australia. Learning and the transmission of knowledge have become more and more a key part of the success of every industry today worldwide. Generally speaking the arts in Australia lag in this, offering few opportunities for artists to meet and learn. Moreover, artists need not only to see their own work validated in front of an audience but also to subject it to the judgment of their peers and to engage in critical discourse about it. That is virtually impossible at a national level in the present circumstances, above all in music theatre.

The Study received a number of excellent proposals about how that challenge might be met and has recommended that as a longer term goal, the Board seek opportunities to invest in the means of national showcasing and bringing together artists and other practitioners from across the field for intensive learning and planning conferences perhaps in association with major festivals or arts centres. For obvious reasons, such an initiative is of a lower priority than the first two and in any event would require a longer lead time. But in the greater scheme of things should not be regarded as of any less importance.

Just as coming to grips with the scope of the music theatre sector is not easy, so the implementation of these recommendations and an assessment of their outcomes will not be simple or immediate. But unless action is taken quickly we may see even further erosion of skill and practice and achievement in this often undervalued artform.