

## ARTS BY STEALTH?

### THE ABC AND THE ARTS

Seminar at Currency House, Sydney, April 4, 2004

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I was very pleased to be invited to join the speakers for this afternoon's discussion of such an extremely important issue. Unfortunately, the invitation came only a week ago, in a time of multiple deadlines. The subject deserves much more preparation than I've had time to give it. I hope these observations nevertheless are helpful.

Something over twenty years ago, I returned to Australia from living in the United States. I recall that there was concern then about the ABC's coverage of the arts. The issue seems to have been around periodically, if not continuously, ever since and probably before.

I have never understood quite what was in question. Is there a consensus in this room about a definition of "the arts" to which the ABC has a special responsibility? Actually, I suspect not.

It would be helpful if we had some agreement on what we are talking about. I would like to begin by covering some old ground.

My training as a young adult some decades ago was in classical music. Back then, classical music people would discuss whether a musical work is truly a work of art. Art was not a genre. It was not an attempt. It was a rare achievement. They discussed whether a composer or a performer was truly an artist, or even tougher, truly a *great* artist. Few would qualify, the rest would be dismissed. There was a lot of naked judgement around. In many ways, it was pretty obnoxious.

But setting aside the pretentiousness, these people were seeking in the music something important – which I take to be an entry into the most profound experience of understanding, or love, or the spirit. And it should be said that some of the music was, and is, capable of delivering such an experience.

I'm sure that other forms of music also can lead the listener into a profound experience, or into elation. But frankly, I don't quite know which music. What does a Slim Dusty aficionado like Brendan Nelson feel when he hears Slim sing? Is it possible for Brendan to have a similar experience listening to Slim, to mine when I hear Beethoven's Ninth Symphony? If it's not, is the Slim Dusty song "art"?

It may be that the earth moves for some people when they hear Slim Dusty or silverchair or Fat Boy Slim. Clearly the connection depends on familiarity with the genre, personal history and so on. But I reveal my own prejudice by observing that *Hamlet* would not deliver quite so powerfully if it were written in pidgin English.

I used to listen frequently to the arts talk show in the mornings on Radio National.

You'll remember it gave pretty serious journalistic sort of discussion to a wide range of current artistic endeavours -- focusing especially on literature, theatre, and curiously for radio, the visual arts. But a succession of hosts on this program almost never entertained a discussion about music. Music figured only as the fill between segments. The music was almost always easy-schmeasy pop of some sort. Well, how come? Were these virtuosi of the word and the image tone-deaf? Or did they believe that the pop music was a serious participant in the world they had been discussing?

If that's the case, isn't Sea Change art? Is Fireflies art? If not, why not? Where's your line of demarcation?

So, to try to get down to cases, my question is, for our purpose today, what do we mean by "the arts"?

Do we mean only artistic practice with the most serious and profound purpose?

Do we mean any sort of production with some sort of expressive content – both pop and high art, sitcoms, films, filmed stage performances, documentaries etc, and arts commentary?

Do we mean, especially, risk-taking art, or what used to be called the avant-garde?

Do we mean only art by Australians?

Do we mean only arts commentary?

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This session is also charged with dealing with the **current context** for public broadcasting in Australia. I would like to make some observations about circumstances that might not be known to other speakers.

Firstly, a couple of observations about the international context.

At some international conferences in recent years, I have heard speakers from some of the national broadcasting systems in Europe express deep concern about their situation. I am not at all on top of the details. We all know that in some countries there are government spending cutbacks that affect broadcasting among other things. I raise this simply to make the point, if it matters, that whereas in the past we have been able to flog the government (ineffectually) with invidious comparisons between the situation of the ABC and national broadcasters in Europe, that is now becoming treacherous ground.

The other brief international comparison I offer is about production of television programs on "culture, the performing arts, music and dance". This is the territory of concern to an organisation called the International Music Centre in Vienna. Each year it holds a world showcase of such productions for potential purchasers. Lately, the

showcase has been held as part of MIDEM in Cannes in January.

In 2003, 299 programs by 52 producers were presented to some 200 potential purchasers from 25 countries. Do you know how many of these productions were Australian? Zero. That might be fitted into the mosaic that appears this afternoon.

Secondly, I would like to talk about the national context for music on radio, partly because here at least, I can bring a modicum of specialist knowledge.

There is much to be said about new technologies that are bound to change the situation in radio. I will speak now only of free-to-air radio and especially about the broadcast of *Australian* music.

As everyone here knows, there are three sectors of the radio broadcast industry: the commercial stations, the community stations, and the public stations of the ABC and SBS. What is the nature of the ecological niche occupied by the public broadcasters?

I will work from the outside, as it were, in.

In 1942, legislation was passed requiring *commercial* radio broadcasters to give 2.5% of their music broadcast time to Australian composers. You can imagine how little was being broadcast if 2.5% was an improvement. Even such a tiny quota caused a surprising response in the recording industry. Columbia, the largest record company at the time, significantly increased its production of local titles from an average of 20 per year between 1927 and 1941, to 80 in 1942 and 85 in 1943.

The quota applies now to Australian musical performances, not musical works, and is “self-regulated” by the broadcasters. It has increased to a top level of 25% for the most popular styles, then down in 5% decrements to a minimum of 5% for jazz and a couple of other styles that no station broadcasts.

The government’s purpose for the Australian music quotas is to have the broadcasting industry *contribute to the reflection and development of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity*. This purpose is aligned with similar statements about the roles of the ABC, the Australia Council, the Broadcasting Authority.

Ironically, the Australian music broadcast by the commercial stations fits, and is intended to fit, the stylistic requirements of the international hit parade. Music Council research shows that the correlation between airplay and record sales continues. So 80% of recordings purchased by Australians are of music in this international style. This is the music most of the population appears to prefer. So you could say that this music does reflect Australian identity and character, although not the *distinctively* Australian identity that no doubt was the intention of the legislators. And the music certainly does not reflect Australian cultural diversity.

Most of the discs sold here are released by the Australian offices of the five foreign

transnational record companies that promote and depend upon global sales in international pop. The record companies and broadcasters vigorously promote this international-style music. So the audience for it probably gets ever larger. This means that the music contributes to the *development* of Australian identity and character – a negative contribution, you might say.

The smaller independent Australian record companies are said to be a source of recordings of music that breaks away from the constraints of the international top 40 and may show a bit of local character. But they are closed out from the commercial broadcasting stations, basically because they cannot match the promotional resources that the transnational companies put behind their recordings. There is currently a review of the local content requirement for commercial radio. I've been told by a representative of the independent labels that they did not even bother to make a submission because the commercial broadcasters have become so irrelevant to them.

Where do they go? To the ABC's Triple J. Triple J is an option, not only for music in the narrow band of styles broadcast by the commercial sector, but also a somewhat broader range that the commercials would never touch.

The other possibility for the independent labels is the community radio sector. We love the sector and by and large it is very committed to Australian artists. But its audience is small. And according to my independent label informant, there is a commercial problem inasmuch as community stations don't have playlists where discs are selected for repeated broadcast. And without repeated broadcasts they won't catch on and sales are only very modestly supported.

Nevertheless, the community radio sector as a whole does deliver a cultural diversity that is totally absent from the commercial sector. There are stations committed to jazz, to classical music, to the musical interests of youth in some ways that the commercial stations are not, and to much more.

In each of the main capitals, there is a community station committed to "art music" or "fine music". They perform a valuable service. We might hope that they are so unfettered by commerce or bureaucracy that they could risk programming a lot of adventurous contemporary music. But overall their efforts are modest.

Because, paradoxically, the community sector is the most commercially driven of all. If someone doesn't like what they hear on a commercial station, they turn it off. If enough people do that, it will affect ratings and after a time work itself through to a loss of advertising revenue. But if someone doesn't like what they hear on a community station, they stop subscribing, stop paying the station. Indeed, they have to like very much what they hear to subscribe in the first place because the service itself comes free of charge. Commercial stations sell to advertisers. Community stations sell to listeners.

So if we want daring on the radio, that leaves the ABC. It doesn't have to sell advertising, or subscriptions.

It just has to sell the government. And as we all know, that means showing simultaneously that it has high ratings and isn't doing what the commercial stations are doing. And never, ever giving offence. About *anything*.

This is not particularly conducive to musical risk-taking. I haven't talked with Triple J to discover where it thinks it takes risks. I'm more familiar with Classic FM.

Under Gwen Bennett, the station moved strongly into contemporary classical music. I think it lost ratings. A successor, Englishman Peter James was appointed and brought a style of programming borrowed from a commercial classical radio station in England. The rationale was that this public network needed to build the audience for classical music. So we got lots of very familiar and tuneful works, often only single movements so as not to stress the attention span. Difficult music was to be heard on special programs late at night.

John Crawford, the current program manager, has long had a personal commitment to new music. He is attempting to bring new music out of the late night ghetto and into programming through the day -- though a trawl through Limelight magazine seems to me to show that this new music is pretty much what we used to call 'user-friendly'. The hard stuff still comes in a special program late at night. But I'm not sure that's a bad thing. It's easy to reach for the off switch if you hear something you don't like. Some canny stretching of the limits in regular streaming hours combined with scheduled specialist programs seems like a good way to go.

A brief comment on the Listening Room. It is extremely regrettable that this program was terminated. The Listening Room was our only program broadcasting the sound-art or radiophonic art whose natural home is radio. It distinguished itself internationally. It has no replacement. The decision must have been taken by people who had little idea what they were doing. John Crawford told me that there was no necessity for a rescue because in his new scheme of things, pieces of sound art would be integrated into regular programming. It might be there. So far, I haven't heard it. And in any case, presumably the costs of creating these new works would no longer be supported by the aBC.

A small note on the context for television. Plainly, we can expect no arts programming except in the very broadest definition from the commercial stations. I note one piece of context for the public stations. We have expensively maintained performing companies such as the opera companies, the dance companies, the theatre companies, indeed the galleries. They are effectively inaccessible to many citizens -- the city institutions to regional residents, the national companies to residents of states to which they are unable to tour. The public stations seem to have a diminishing role in providing at least media access. I'm sure there are funding issues, but there also are issues about priorities.

There are plenty of other issues for television, but I move on to my final piece of context. One of the issues we are supposed to consider is the role of the ABC overall in

producing and fostering original arts. I just quickly observe that to the extent that the ABC is involved in causing the production of new work, it seems to be the view of many staff that it is better if it happens in-house.

The radio people have said to me that it is they who have the national repository of skills. This may be true. But if the ABC commissions programs from outsiders, the skills will be found or will develop outside.

The advantage is to draw on a larger, more diverse and continually refreshed pool of talent and ideas. The ABC ultimately was not a good manager of orchestras. Some certainly are doing better as independent entities – but they are still available for broadcast. The national context in which the ABC works is rich in art. Perhaps its role is better primarily as a chooser or commissioner and broadcaster of art than as a creator.

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