

ARTS PROGRAMMING ON ABC RADIO, TELEVISION AND ONLINE

Introduction

The ABC has a long and proud tradition of arts programming. From its earliest days it has had major responsibility for fostering the musical and performing arts in Australia through its orchestras, through the broadcast of live music, through the performance of various kinds of dramatic work, through commissioning original Australian work and through arts commentary, analysis and criticism. ABC Radio has been at the heart of this commitment to the arts; the far greater cost of television has meant that there have been fewer hours of arts programming on ABC television. However, coverage of the arts has always been central to the way ABC television saw its public service remit. With the development of ABC Online, coverage of the arts has also found its way on to the online platform.

The last few years have seen a number of challenges to the ABC's ability to fulfill its charter responsibilities in the arts. The most obvious is the continual erosion of the resources available, because of the exigencies of government funding and because the development of new communications technologies has placed a large number of new demands on broadcasters generally. But in addition to this, there have been profound changes in the arts themselves. The kinds of activities covered by this word have increased considerably; the distinction between the "high" arts and popular culture is no longer valid; and in these days of mixed media and digitally-based art work, it is not so easy to distinguish clearly between the various arts categories of theatre, music, visual arts and music and literature.

A further factor in an ever-evolving situation are the rapid changes that are occurring in the broadcasting environment generally, and which have led, both in Australia and in

comparable countries, to a re-evaluation of the place and role of public service broadcasting in the mix, a re-evaluation which is far from finalised.

This report surveys the performance of ABC radio and television in the area of the arts in the last five to seven years and attempts to situate them in the wider context described above. It also looks briefly at the much shorter history of arts on ABC Online. Due to the short time available for the compilation of this survey, many of my judgments will lack firm evidence, especially in areas like audience statistics or budgetary matters where I did not have access to the data. As I go, I will signal the places where an assessment is based on my judgment rather than hard evidence but I hope that the general thrust of my argument will suggest the sort of evidence that could settle the question.

Arts programming and the ABC charter

The ABC charter and the current editorial policies outline in only very general terms what the ABC's responsibilities are in the area of the arts. Section (1)(c) of the ABC Act enjoins the ABC to "encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia"; Section 2 (a)(iii) asks it to "provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs", while Section 1(a) tells it to be "innovative". The elaboration of the term "innovative" in the Editorial Policies document encourages the ABC to "take risks", to "experiment", to "push boundaries", to "accept that some programs might not succeed". It also says: "This may result in programming which challenges some community sensibilities but also contributes to the diversity of content in the media".

In spite of these inspiring words, the Editorial Policies document goes on to give somewhat muted encouragement to Arts on the ABC saying weakly, "The ABC Board is strongly committed to fostering the arts through the range of ABC broadcasting and new media services as well as through ABC Enterprises activities and the ABC's orchestral subsidies". It concludes that, since the ABC is itself a cultural organisation its very existence contributes to the creative life of Australia.

However, over many years the ABC has provided a very rich sense of what such vague injunctions might mean in practice. Since its earliest days, it has contributed to the development and definition of the arts and of arts broadcasting. This report will assess the extent to which this tradition of excellence in arts broadcasting continues into the present.

Obviously the question of what now constitutes “the arts” is a highly controversial and contested one. More traditional notions of the arts would define it via the major art forms of literature, theatre, classical music and jazz, dance, film and the visual arts. Historically, this notion has been expanded to include various forms of the “popular arts”, such as rock music (in all its many forms) and television. An even wider notion would include various “new arts” and ‘hybrid arts”, including acoustic art, installation art, digital arts and performance art (itself a very broad category which includes circus and acrobatics). In this report it is not possible to explore this definitional issue, but it would be taken for granted that the notion of “the arts” within the ABC would be as wide and dynamic as the activities themselves.

What then constitutes “arts programming”? Again, this is a shifting and dynamic notion and it is one, of course, of which the ABC has been the definer. Most importantly, perhaps, it needs to include arts creation and production, because the ABC Act explicitly enjoins the organisation to “encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia”. In the past, this was fulfilled partly by the Symphony Orchestras which were then part of the ABC; associated with this, the ABC had a robust program of live and recorded music broadcasts of Australian performers. Arts programming also included the commissioning and production of original dramatic works for broadcast, the broadcast of literary works, and the establishment of the acoustic arts unit dedicated to the production of innovative cross-over sound art and features which has brought the ABC an international reputation. A commitment to the arts should also include the deployment of innovative aesthetic strategies in making programs of whatever kind, especially in the area of the arts, but in all areas of feature-making. The

ABC has a responsibility, as the Editorial Policies document makes clear, to push the boundaries of the medium.

But arts programming also means commentary on the arts, including reviews of individual works or exhibitions, commentary on and critique of arts and culture policies and issues, highly produced programs which explicate particular artists, art forms or movements, interviews with artists, art administrators, educators etc. And it should include the reporting of arts and culture activities as a normal part of new and current affairs coverage. Often repeated statistics quoted by bodies like the Australia Council indicate that a very large number of the Australian population participate in or consume the arts and it should thus be seen as equally newsworthy as other areas regularly covered in news bulletins.

I will now deal with arts programming on each of three media platforms in turn. I will then provide some general observations about issues facing the whole organization in relation to arts coverage and make some recommendations.

RADIO

The recent history of arts programming on ABC Radio.

This report will examine trends in ABC Radio arts programming in the last five to seven years using the above understandings of the arts and of arts broadcasting¹. Much of this report necessarily focuses on Radio National (henceforth RN), since by far the majority of dedicated arts programming exists on that network. Classic-FM's arts role in all but the playing of recorded classical music has diminished greatly in the period I am covering, as has that of Triple J. I will examine the record of these networks later in the report as well as looking briefly at the role of Local Radio and NewsRadio.

What some people might consider the “glory days” of ABC Radio's arts coverage began in 1991 when there was a daily morning arts program on RN from 10am to 11 am. Each

day covered a different art-form, and the week was comprised of sessions covering each of performance, visual arts, screen, literature and popular culture. The producers and presenters of these programs were specialists in the particular art form and had deep connections to relevant constituencies (or stake-holders). The programs offered in-depth critical commentary, including notably, effective coverage of the visual arts, often considered difficult to cover in an aural medium. The content was repackaged for the 90 minute Saturday afternoon program, *Arts National*.

In 1993 the program began to be “stripped” under a unifying title, *Arts Today*, but the basic structure remained the same and the specialist producer/presenters were retained. The main difference was that, besides the unifying title, the whole program was anchored by a “personality” presenter. While, during the tenure of *Arts Today*, these presenters were themselves highly literate across a range of art forms and experts in at least one, this was seen as the beginning of a trend towards the kind of personality-driven radio more common in the commercial sector. I will return to this point.

The first major change to this style of arts programming occurred at the end of 2001 when it was decided that *Arts Today* was not performing well enough in ratings terms and was failing to deliver an audience into the following time-slot. In 2002 *Arts Today* was replaced by a new program, *Night Club*, compered by personalities Libby Gore and Bill Leak, and programmed on weekdays from 8.30 pm to 10 pm. This was a very different program from its predecessor; it was more of a magazine-style program based around its presenters but with some recorded segments such as film reviews. With a jokey and irreverent style it was clearly intended to reach younger audiences than those for *Art Today* or others of RN’s arts programs. It was also an attempt, it must be concluded, to “sex up” the arts, the removal of the word “arts” from any program titles indicating the ABC’s growing nervousness with that term.

In 2003 *Night Club* was replaced in the same time-slot by *The Deep End*, compered by a younger presenter from JJJ. While not self-consciously “whacky” like *Night Club*, it shares with that program a magazine and chat format, with some recorded reviews and

interviews and is clearly still aiming for a younger audience. Like its predecessor, it does not give expertise and specialization a central role in the shaping of program content, although some specialists arts commentators continue to be used, for example, Julie Rigg's film segments.

Up until 2002 there was a half-hour Wednesday afternoon program produced in Melbourne which was called *Arts Talk* and it was repeated on Sunday afternoon at 3.30. This has been replaced by a single Sunday morning program of one and half hours, called *Sunday Morning*. Its character is more like the older *Arts Today* and the quite reasonable programming logic seems to be that arts programs for the more traditional (and older) ABC arts listener will work best when they are available to listen to them, i.e. not in prime television time or during week days.

Other arts traditions on RN include the various book programs, drama, music and cultural features and the indigenous arts and culture program, *Awaye!*. The book programs have been remarkably stable with book readings, *Books and Writing* and *Book Talk*, even though the time-slots have been changed at various points. *Awaye* also seems to be reasonably secure and to be reaching its target audience. However, the drama programs on RN have been quite dramatically reduced in the last 10 years. In 1995, for example, there was a half hour slot each week-night for performance pieces of various kinds called *The Box Seat*, of which two night a week were plays, including commissioned work. As well there was an hour long drama program on Sunday afternoon called *Fictions*, which was often also commissioned Australian work. Since its inception in 1976, there had been a tradition of regular stereo drama programming on ABC-FM. The most recent manifestation of this tradition was a one-hour Wednesday night stereo drama slot on Classic-FM, *SoundStage*, which lasted from mid-1999 to mid- 2001 and which showcased original Australian drama. Among other benefits, this program gave an opportunity for writers to try out new drama ideas, which then often led to further development and eventual production in the theatre. By 2003 this was down to one half hour drama slot on Sundays, *Airplay*, which is new Australian drama and *Radio Flix* on Saturday night 8 pm which consisted largely of imported material. This has been replaced

in 2004 by the repeat of an imported program, *The Story of Pop*. The reasons for and implications of this reduction in drama on RN are not clear; clearly budgetary constraints are part of it, since in times of stringency, pressure is put on artists' fees, a pressure that has also resulted in a sharp reduction (to virtually zero) of ABC TV's coverage of Australian musical and theatrical performance.

Music on RN has also been reduced; John Cargher's long-running *Music for Pleasure* has gone; so have innovative programs, which played music unlikely to be heard elsewhere, like *Melisma*, *Other Worlds*, *My World*, *Country Club*. In 2004 the music line-up consists of *The Music Show*, one of RN's most respected programs amongst music buffs, *Singers of Renown*, *Music Deli*, *Nocturne*, *Live on Stage*, *The Planet*. Recognising that ABC Radio has made the decision to conceptualise RN as a "talk station" and Classic-FM as the music station, this line-up of music on RN in 2003, is reasonable, although outside *The Music Show*, it is not so clear how good music criticism on RN is. However, given the ABC's own choices, we must judge ABC Radio's performance in music by what happens on Classic-FM, and, of course, in a different way on Triple J.

Interviews with representatives of one of the "stakeholder communities" for Classic-FM, viz., composers, performers and music critics, indicate a highly critical attitude to this network. "Dumbing down", "pop classics", "condescending", "middle of the road", "too chatty" are some of the labels they attach to it. The repertoire is perceived as having always been narrow, but getting narrower, with not enough works performed from centuries other than the 18th and 19th in Europe (though in 2004 this is being addressed to some extent by the 10.30pm week-day slot compered by Julian Day), not enough Australian compositions, not enough Australian performance (in 2004 this is being addressed by the introduction of the 8pm concert slot), not enough recordings of major concerts, too personality-driven, not enough discussion about music policies and music issues. The axing of *New Music Australia* was seen as very serious as it was the one place anywhere on radio in Australia that there is serious examination of new Australian composers and where such new work can get its first exposure. Australia has a remarkably vigorous classical music culture for a country of its size and there are many

young composers and innovative performance groups who are willing and eager to perform the work and a keen live audience for such work. With the demise of *New Music Australia* the connection between this vigour and Classic-FM is lost. The rationale for this is unclear. In the area of jazz, Classic-FM has decreased its coverage of contemporary Australian and overseas jazz. In the early 1990s, there was a 10-12 midnight contemporary jazz program, as well as the weekend programs. Now the only jazz slots are Jim McLeod's *Jazz Track*, which is on Saturdays and Sundays from 5pm to 7pm.

Like other ABC networks, Classic-FM has targets for Australian content in music. The latest Annual Report states that it achieved an Australian performance level of 33.5%, and 12% for composition (it is not clear whether these overlap). These levels will be difficult to maintain with the axing of *New Music Australia*, and they measure items not duration. Even a cursory examination of the program guide reveals that Australian compositions occupy a very small proportion of the schedule when measured in hours.

This perhaps predictable response from the music community raises a vexed question for the ABC and for this report, which is, should ABC arts coverage be serving those stakeholder communities (artists and arts professionals) or should it be serving the 'general public' or the "educated public"? And this nowhere more sharply crystallised than in the case of *The Listening Room*. An examination of the content of Classic-FM (and I have not had the benefit of examining any audience research other than raw ratings figures) suggests strongly that, whatever the target audience is, the actual audience must be that rather large but restricted segment of the population who attend classical music concerts and the opera or would like to, that is a generally middle-class, middle-aged or older, AB demographic and of European origin. Just as symphony orchestras have trouble persuading such audiences to accept 20th, let alone 21st century music, so does Classic-FM.

So much more difficult then to get them to accept experimental acoustic art. *The Listening Room* constituted a real challenge. On the one hand, it was a program with a

long and distinguished history which had won many prestigious international prizes and which had a group of highly skilled and internationally known producers attached to it; it had also commissioned a considerable amount of new Australian composition by composers such as Jonathan Mills, Moya Henderson, Colin Bright, Ross Bolleter, and many others. On the other it had a small audience even by Classic-FM's standards and it was very expensive compared with spinning the latest releases from Naxos or EMI, even if we take into account the salaries of the personality presenters. The management of Classic-FM has said it will not advocate the closure of the Acoustic Art unit; such programs will continue to be made and to be spread across the schedule so more people get to hear them by serendipity. But this is both misguided and implausible, misguided because that specialist audience who loves acoustic art won't be able to find it, and implausible because the core Classic-FM audience is unlikely to accept their conventional classical music diet being interrupted by acoustic art. The decision has apparently been made to include some *The Listening Room* type material in Sunday Night on RN, compered by former *The Listening Room* Executive Producer, Robyn Ravlich, but obviously the full effect of acoustic art will be lost if it is not broadcast in stereo FM.

Especially since the renewed focus on local and regional services of the last couple of years, the coverage of arts and culture on local radio has expanded. All local stations, both metropolitan and regional, include a significant amount of material on arts and culture, especially when it is of special interest to the relevant community. There are book and film reviews, commentary on local performances, interviews with artists, performers and entertainment personalities. There are also dedicated arts programs such as *Lights, Camera, Action* on Saturday evenings at 6.30 pm in the non-football season. *Sunday Night* with Jon Cleary, which is broadcast from 10pm to 2am, also includes extensive interviews with artists, for example a recent interview with Paul Dyer, the Director of the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra. NewsRadio has also recently increased its arts coverage and has frequent arts items in its regular news programs as well as an arts slot (of only ten minutes) on Sundays at 1.30 and 3.30 compered by Phil Kafcaloudes.

One of the ABC's current concerns is to attract a younger audience. While the merits of trying to do this via networks with the profile of RN are unclear, it is clear that Triple J is the prime vehicle for communicating with young audiences about arts and culture. It is thus, on the face of it, difficult to understand the recent decision to drop *Artery*, an innovative arts program being run at a time when young people are likely to be able to listen, viz., 11pm on weekdays (and which is a descendant of a program which in its time, had a high profile among young people, *Creatures of the Spotlight*). However, the intention is to continue to cover arts and culture at the same level but to spread it across the whole schedule, as well as to introduce a new daily current affairs program at 5.30pm which will be all talk and, it is promised, will include some arts and culture coverage.

Spreading arts and culture or hitherto specialist programming across the whole schedule is seen to be a very unsound programming strategy in the context of RN or Classic-FM, but more plausible in the case of Triple J. The danger in the case of Triple J is that the gradual erosion of such coverage is not marked or noticed when it is not identified with a specific time-slot; but the countervailing position argues that the "arts" should not be ghetto-ised, that an artificial barrier between "arts" and the rest of life should not be entrenched. For the kind of "arts and culture" of interest to the Triple J audience, it is said, there is no firm dividing line between it and their overall lifestyles. Therefore separate "arts" slots make no sense. However, this can be over-stated. Even among the Triple J audience, interested (we hope) in newer art forms, like various of the more "way-out" or specialist genres of rock music, installation art, performance art, ficto-criticism, digital art, web-based forms etc., a case can surely be made very easily that specialist staff, with particular knowledge in one of these areas and identified time-slots would also be appreciated.

The reduction in arts programming on JJJ, as in other parts of ABC radio, may be related simply to cost considerations. It is known that the ABC is employing a methodology of calculating dollars per audience member when it is drawing up its priorities. Obviously these factors need to be weighed, but such a methodology can make specialist areas such as, but not only, arts programs look vulnerable.

I would argue that, whether it is Triple J, Classic-FM or RN, there does not need to be an opposition between specialist versus generalist, or elitist versus mass, or time-slots versus across the schedule. Both are needed. Of course it is recognized that funds limit the ability of the various networks to deliver all that might be desirable in an ideal world. But more clarity about the overall aims of arts coverage across ABC radio and a more coordinated approach to optimize resources should make it possible to deliver both of the above-described programming strategies of “flow programming” and specialization with specific time-slots.

The new strategy

Let us accept that ABC radio has two problems. One is a squeeze on funds; the other is the skewed age demographic of the ABC audiences. Even for a public service broadcaster, for which there is no immediate relationship between audience size and income, the audience bias is a problem. For even if it is the case that the young audience is not permanently lost to the ABC because when it “grows up” it stops listening to 2 Day-FM or 3RRR and starts listening to the ABC (and I don’t know that this has been rigorously researched), it is hard to justify public funding to a national public broadcasting organization that serves only a segment of the Australian population (and don’t even go to the issue of the ethnic composition of ABC audiences).

Further contextual factors are the challenge presented to old media by new media, and even within old media, the multiplication of channels that has resulted from the deregulation of the Australian radio industry. In such a situation the ABC appears to feel it has no alternative but to begin to adopt commercial industry strategies. The features of such strategies include the well-known ice-cream seller effect, viz., the tendency in a situation of increased competition for all to chase the same demographic. Another feature of the commercial approach, which has always been present, is to chase ratings points regardless of the kind of rating point being chased. Of course commercial radio have “target audiences” or “target demographics”, but in a situation where there is a direct relationship between ratings points and revenue, very small increases in ratings can

have major effects on revenue, and the only imperative in a commercial context is to add eyeballs (or in the case of radio, ears); there are no other content or audience imperatives.

In a situation where ratings are all, the concept of flow is paramount. Every trick must be employed to ensure that no-one turns off even for a minute, and each timeslot must flow seamlessly into the next. Station loyalty is secured by attaching the audience to personalities. Personalities anchor and interpret everything that happens. All content is mediated through the sensibility of the radio star; the lure of the personality is so strong that it can compensate for the fact that the content is only spun discs, chat and advertisements. Apart from the advertisements, there is evidence that the same strategies are beginning to be applied at ABC Radio. Very far from being a way of assuring audiences, this is, on the contrary, highly risky because it actually removes the very thing that makes public broadcasting (and indeed, Community Broadcasting) distinctive - namely its ability to address a multiplicity of minority audiences at different times.

The ABC is enjoined by the Act to be both “comprehensive” and “specialist”; it fulfills the former by covering all genres of programs across the whole set of offerings on all the platforms, and the ABC does this. But this is compatible with quite consciously seeking a range of specialist or minority audiences at different times. We already know this via the difference between the ratings and reach figures for the ABC versus those of the commercial stations where ratings and reach are virtually the same thing.

ABC radio is in the enviable position (unlike ABC TV) of having six networks to work with; this gives it the scope to address a wide range of geographic, age, ethnic and taste communities. With NewsRadio and Local Radio the ABC can appropriately employ a flow strategy and in the case of Local Radio a personality-based one. In the case of these two networks arts can be covered as news, as chat, as interviews and as “what’s on?” very effectively, and I believe that is happening quite well. RN and Classic-FM are different; they have no obvious competitors in the radio market (except for the MBS stations for Classic-FM) and therefore there is no imperative to use the flow-personality strategy in every time-slot to secure audiences. It is possible, and I would argue,

necessary to have different kinds of specialist programs for different kinds of audiences in identifiable time-slots so that audiences can find them.

What do audiences want?

Audiences who are committed to arts in the broad sense (and of course there are many sub-audiences in this category) want identifiable programs where they can follow their art forms in-depth. They are highly educated generally and in the art form(s) of their choice. They want in-depth coverage; they want expertise. They do not want someone with good radio skills but only a general knowledge across all the areas of art and culture chatting about the wide range of matters but only superficially.

In the short time I have had to produce this report I have not been able to do any rigorous research into audience preferences nor have I been able to ascertain what audience research the ABC itself has done in this area. However I have undertaken informal interviews with a reasonably large number of people from two important ABC constituencies. The first are middle-class, middle-aged people who attend arts events at least twice a week, subscribe to opera, ballet, orchestra and theatre events, attend exhibitions and follow arts and culture policy issues closely. In this group not one person uses RN arts programs. The reason given is that they no longer know where to find them and if they occasionally find them, they do not find them compelling because of loss of expertise and falling production values. When asked to recall arts programs they have enjoyed they talk about *Arts Today* and Mary Lou Jelbart without recognising that they are identifying a time long past.

The other constituency I have had the opportunity to talk to are humanities students who are highly media literate, especially new media literate, and involved in new writing, digital arts, performance art, etc. They do not listen to ABC Radio arts programs either, including Triple J. When asked where they get their arts information they talk about alternative media like Community Radio and street newspapers. My survey is highly restricted and anecdotal, but to me it indicates a problem.

My perception of dedicated arts consumers is that “grazing” arts coverage will not satisfy their needs. You cannot expect such audiences, for example those interested in new music or acoustic arts, or opera for that matter, to have to listen continually to a station in the hope of hearing something – inevitably brief – that they are interested in. It should also be remembered that audiences outside the metropolitan centres, who do not have daily access to arts events, need in-depth coverage of arts at identifiable times. And thanks to the magic of the Internet, time-slots and available audiences are less of a problem than they were. If I miss my weekly one-hour in-depth film program which is on say, 3pm Sunday, because I am bush-walking, I can listen to it in all its glorious detail on my computer at work the next day. What I really want is my big dose of concentrated arts coverage from people who know more than I do.

The high level of perceived instability in the ABC in recent years and the apparently constant changing of formats, timeslots and names of programs has, I believe been damaging. With six radio networks, as mentioned above, the ABC can cover arts both in a way that attracts and recruits new arts consumers (via NewsRadio and Local Radio, and also at times, JJJ, Classic-FM and RN) and caters to the more informed and dedicated arts aficionados.

How the internal structure of ABC radio works against effective arts coverage

This report will not canvas management or industrial issues. However, there are some aspects of the way the ABC is currently organized that are less than optimal for the coverage of the arts (or indeed other broadcasting activities), and these must be mentioned.

The most significant organizational change in the ABC in the last few years is the move from an organization based on network management rather than on content production. This has its immediate origin in the One ABC vision of the Brian Johns era, and, although that was dismantled under Jonathan Shier and the separation between media platforms reinstated, the network focus remains. This focus is consistent with the contemporary management wisdom, which was pioneered at the BBC with “Producer

Choice”, that seeks to create a separation between purchasers and providers, or transmission and production. This creates internal competition (or even, in the case of television, competition between internal and external providers) which supposedly increases efficiency and enhances quality, because it makes it impossible for content providers to “rest on their laurels”, but forces them to keep innovating.

This new basis for the organisation of the ABC moves control from content producers (EPs, producers, editors and content units) to network managers, who are perceived not to have the content expertise of the content units. Most significantly, budget control is held at the network level, not the content production unit level. This change leads to constant struggles for control and a highly unproductive atmosphere of mutual suspicion. The problem for ABC audiences is that the notion of “control” gets confused with “expertise”; that is, as management attempts to master the desire of production units to *control* decision-making and budget allocation, the effect is to by-pass the experts and their expertise. This is understandable from management’s point of view because they perceive the experts as not wanting to give up the control they’ve always had. But this tussle for control is very bad for audiences, and in the long run, the ABC itself, because the very reason why the ABC is valuable – for its expertise and ability to offer in-depth coverage, the very reason why it is *different* - risks being lost.

Once the ABC is organized along network and not content-provision lines, it begins to act less like a unified organization with a particular mission and more like a set of separate units that happen accidentally to be lodged in the same building. So networks start competing with one another; but they also start looking to their counterparts outside. Local Radio (at least its metropolitan version) competes (rather well) with commercial radio; Triple J looks over its shoulder at Nova-FM and I guess Classic-FM looks at the MBS stations. Even worse, ABC network managers and their superiors look nervously at their government masters, no matter how ignorant or incoherent are the pronouncements that fall from time to time from the lips of politicians like Richard Alston, who is famous for having said of Classic-FM, “how can it cost more than a million dollars to just spin a few CDS?”

There is no doubt that the ABC works under extraordinary pressure, given the constant attacks and scrutiny from government and the constant erosion of its funding base. The predations of the Johns era and the Shier era have left an impression to the outside observer of “fortress ABC”, an ABC which is quite defensive and inward-looking and has lost its ability to look outwards and to welcome new ideas. This affects its ability to connect with its arts and culture audiences. In spite of the existence of an Arts Advisory Group, it does not seem to have very effective relationships with outside arts bodies, big and small, mainstream and minority. This partly stems from the reduction in specific expertise and specialisation within the staff covering arts and culture, and even when this is present, lack of resources to maintain and foster robust relationships with external organisations. These sorts of mobile and responsive connections cannot be maintained solely at management or board level; they must exist at the operational level.

I do not get a sense of the ABC having an overall policy in regards to arts and culture in the broadest sense. The network focus works against such a thing. I perceive all areas of the ABC – radio, TV and Online - to be floundering when it comes to arts and culture, but the response seems to be for each network to scramble as best it can to solve the problem within its walls. How much better to have an overall strategy and to concentrate on rebuilding specific expertise in various areas of arts and culture and to be able to deploy that expertise to maximum effect across all platforms and all networks. This may be naïve of me, or it might be telling my grandmother how to suck eggs, but I believe this approach is not working effectively at the moment, and with goodwill and a dose of pragmatism, can be made to work.

The ABC also needs to improve its connection and intelligence-sharing with other expert bodies, such as The Australia Council, the Australian Music Centre etc, but more broadly with the arts practitioners and arts consumers from all aspects of arts practice. I am aware that the Council is well represented on the Arts Advisory Group but perhaps the membership needs to be widened so that it is not dominated by large Federal Government funding agencies.

Recommendations for ABC Radio

- Devise strategies that do not treat “specialist” and “generalist” programming styles as opposed.
- Place a higher priority on specialist knowledge, in-depth research, high production values and formal innovation in the production of arts programs.
- Ensure that the newer arts forms are adequately covered in the mix.
- Explore way of increasing the coverage of arts issues and policy questions.
- Devise ways of increasing the amount of commissioning of original works for broadcast.
- Review the ABC’s music policy, paying particular attention to its responsibilities in the area of new music and Australian music.
- Review the place of acoustic arts in the ABC’s repertoire and find ways of ensuring an appropriate and creative way of ensuring that the ABC’s excellence in the form is not lost.

ARTS ON ABC TELEVISION

Introduction

ABC television has had a commitment to arts programming since its inception. However because of its apparently specialist nature and consequently lower ratings it has always had something of a struggle to retain its place in the schedule. The arts community – meaning by this here, those directly involved in arts practice or arts administration - have been critical at various points in the ABC’s recent history of the way in which arts has been handled by television.

The level of disquiet has increased in the recent period as the ABC, under Jonathan Shier, and his successors, appears to be moving in a more populist direction. This section of the report aims to trace the history of ABC Television’s coverage of the arts in the last decade and to make an assessment of whether or not it is fulfilling its charter obligations in relation to the arts. It then makes some recommendations about some measures that could be taken to improve the coverage of the arts and to better serve audiences and the arts communities.

ABC TV and the arts in the last decade

For the purposes of the discussion in this section I will divide arts programming on ABC Television into two categories: (i) programs about the arts and (ii) performance programs. Below I talk more about the variety of programs that fall into these two categories, but generally, programs in the first category usually have a magazine or “omnibus” format and include reviews of art works and events, discussion of current or upcoming art events, interviews with arts practitioners, commentary about arts policies and issues, and documentaries about art and arts practitioners. These elements can be either originated by the ABC, produced by Australian independent producers, ABC-independent co-productions or purchased overseas.

Programs in the second category include (i) broadcasts of live performances by outside companies and recorded by the ABC, e.g. opera, ballet concerts, theatre; (ii) imported programs of the same kind; (iii) original programs in any art form produced especially for television by the ABC, possibly in cooperation with independent producers.

The ABC has had a prime-time arts magazine program at least since the eighties. However, such programs have had a bewildering variety of formats, name and time-slots. In the late eighties it was called *State of the Arts* and broadcast on Thursdays from 8 pm to 8.30 pm. This was incorporated into the *Sunday Afternoon* program, hosted by Peter Ross, which began in 1986/7. That program began much as it has continued and is comprised of a mixture of local and imported arts documentaries and performances, reviews and interviews.

ABC magazine arts programming 1992-2004

1992	<i>Review</i> 10 pm Mondays (30 Minutes) repeated 1 pm as part of <i>Sunday Afternoon</i> with Peter Ross host 3 1/2 hours)
1993	same
1994	same
1995	same except Mary Delahunty replaces Peter Ross
1996	same
1997	<i>Express</i> 10 pm (30 minutes) Mondays repeated 3.30pm Sunday; Suzy Baldwin anchor
1998	<i>Express</i> 10pm Wednesdays repeated 1pm Sundays; <i>Sunday Afternoon</i> has no anchor
1999	prime-time program <i>Express</i> replaced by <i>The Arts Show</i> (one hour) fronted by Andrea Stretton, Mondays at 10pm; Stretton anchors <i>Sunday Afternoon</i> and conducts interview at 3.30pm as part of that.

- 2000 *Message Stick* commences at 1pm Sundays; *The Arts Show* fronted by Andrea Stretton, Mondays at 10pm; *Sunday Afternoon* hosted by Stretton but no interview segment
- 2001 *Message Stick* continues at 1pm Sunday; prime time arts program *The Arts Show* (half hour), moved to Thursday 9pm; *Sunday Afternoon* with Andrea Stretton as host – no interview.
- 2002 *Message Stick* on Fridays at 6pm repeated Sunday at 1pm; *Sunday Afternoon* is replaced by *Coast to Coast*, two hours on Sunday morning from 9.30am.
- 2003 Late night arts panel program, *Critical Mass* introduced, time varies between 10.30 and 11pm on Sundays, repeated 4 pm as part of a returned *Sunday Afternoon* program (no anchor, 3 hours); *Message Stick* 6pm Fridays, repeated at 1.30pm Sunday.
- 2004 *Critical Mass* and *Sunday Afternoon* continue; new popular culture program, *Mondo Thingo*, begins 9.30pm Wednesdays.

When various arts communities and constituencies criticize ABC TV for its poor performance in relation to arts programming, the principle complaint is the absence of a prime-time program that includes reviews, commentary, interviews with artists and serious arts documentary segments. The high point of such programming in recent years is generally reckoned to be *Express* (1997-9), followed by the revamped *The Arts Show* (1999-2001), which in 1999 and 2000 was one hour long in contrast to *Express* which was 30 minutes. *Express* came out of Melbourne and was produced and fronted by a team of specialist arts reporters some of whom had previous experience in news and current affairs. *Express* included sometimes hard-hitting critique and commentary as well as in-depth coverage of arts events and artists. Some indication of its coverage can be seen at its residual web-site which lists some of the people profiled during 1998 – Albert Tucker, Meryl Tankard, Hal Prince, Rachel Griffiths, Rosalie Gascoigne and William Yang.

An examination of the rather better archive of *The Arts Show* reveals the breadth and depth of coverage in that program. In two examples taken at random – November 1 and

November 8 of 2001- we find the following rundown (there were four items in each half hour program):

November 1 2001

- a profile of the work of dance photographer, Lois Greenfield
- the design segment was on Alessi
- a profile of the work of Patricia Piccinini, installation artist
- a profile of the work of composer, James McMillan

November 8 2001

- Elwyn Lynn- painter and critic
- the weekly design segment on street signage
- a profile of painter, Rick Amor
- a survey of commercial photography

This brief glimpse of the content of both *Express* and *The Arts Show* gives some hint of the nature of the assumed audience for these programs. One would have to conclude that it was aimed at a segment of the population who take their arts seriously and who are regular and well-informed consumers of one or more art forms. It may be that those whose main interest is, say, music, would also appreciate the visual arts segments even though that was not their preferred art form; we can only conjecture whether other segments of the ABC TV general audience who are not regular consumers of the arts also stayed to enjoy and be informed by these programs or whether they deserted to another channel. We know the ratings for these programs were not high by commercial standards, ranging between 3 and 6 (although one program which featured Peter Carey rated 9). However, the higher range here is not much different from the ratings obtained by specialist programs on ABC TV such as science and religion, and, given that the ABC's job is a different one from maximizing ratings in every time-slot, may be considered satisfactory, if other aspects of the ABC's special role are being fulfilled.

The conception of the audience for arts and the role of ratings in ABC TV scheduling is at the heart of the current tensions between the ABC and arts communities, and will be explored in more detail below. At present there is no prime-time arts program; *Critical Mass* is scheduled at 10.30 on Sunday nights, with a repeat in the middle of *Sunday Afternoon*. *Critical Mass* is a copy of a BBC program called *Newsnight Review*. The format is that there is an anchor (Jonathan Biggens) and three guests who are usually well-known artists or critics. They have each been exposed in the previous week to a book, a film and a performance, and they have a panel discussion about those three works. It is mostly entertaining and informative, but its panel format ensures the coverage of any particular topic remains relatively superficial. Its format also precludes any issues-oriented discussion so that the kind of analysis and criticism of arts industry issues, festivals, policies etc. that was found on programs like *Express* is not longer present on ABC television.

Having examined the recent history of prime-time arts programming I now turn my attention to the weekend arts program, *Sunday Afternoon*. Looking at roughly the last decade, we find that it has continued right through to the present day with various changes of anchor (presently it doesn't have an anchor). Over most of its life *Sunday Afternoon* had a duration of three and a half hours and included a half hour book program conducted by a specialist such as Michael Wilding (1995) and Caroline Baum (*Between the Lines* 1997). Below I give an analysis of the content of *Sunday Afternoon* from 2001-3 to give a sense of the balance in it of imported and local programming. It has been largely uncontroversial except during the period 1998-9 when the new management team of Brian Johns and Andy Lloyd James made the decision to replace the program, *Express*, with a new arts line-up, consisting of a revamped *Sunday Afternoon* and a prime-time program, *The Arts Show* (one hour Mondays 10pm) to be fronted by the "face of the arts", Andrea Stretton, who had been poached from SBS TV. This episode has been well documented in newspaper reports and I will not go into it further here. For various reasons Stretton's role was reduced over the period 1999-2000 and her contract was not renewed. In 2002 a new arts line-up was introduced by the new Head of Television under Jonathan Shier, Gail Jarvis.

Part of the difficulty associated with the Andrea Stretton saga was the perception by Melbourne staff that there was about to be a shift of power over arts programming from Melbourne to Sydney. *Review* had been produced mainly in Sydney, but the magazine programs, *Sunday Afternoon* and *Express*, had been produced out of Melbourne and there were highly experienced producers and reporters in Melbourne who would be side-lined by a move to Sydney. In fact the threat to cut *Express* and to move control of arts to Sydney was one of the triggers for the 1998 Victorian government inquiry into the centralization of ABC production resources in Sydney, which was instigated by Premier, Jeff Kennett, who had other reasons for hostility to the ABC.

Following Stretton's departure in 2000 and through the early period of the Shier incumbency, Melbourne once again played a major role in arts programming with a re-vamped *The Arts Show* doing comparatively well in the Thursday 9am time-slot. However, it was axed in favour of the new Sunday morning arts program, *Coast to Coast*, which was the brain-child of Gail Jarvis and her programming staff, who envisaged a Sunday morning line-up of *The Insiders* at 9am and *Coast to Coast* from 9.30 to 11 am, mounting a serious challenge to Network Nine's *Sunday* program. *Coast to Coast* was produced out of Melbourne and by all accounts had an adequate budget. It was also quite well-conceived, with its web-page describing it as featuring "studio interviews and live performance as well as feature stories, documentaries and event snap-shots from the far reaches of the country".

In the event it only lasted a year from July 2001 to June 2002. Its ratings were woeful (around 2); clearly the choice of time-slot was a mistake. It was one of the casualties of the crumbling of the Shier vision, with Gail Jarvis resigning in mid-2001. But it also illustrates the folly of the commercial strategy of head to head competition with the commercial broadcasters while at the same time trying to appear to adhere to the charter. In a ratings war, you do whatever it takes, but the ABC cannot and should not do that. It seems obvious in retrospect that *Coast to Coast* was scheduled in the time-slot when the

available audience for serious arts programming were busy doing something else, namely watching *Sunday*.

The fact that *Sunday Afternoon* occupies three hours a week helps the ABC to keep its arts hours up, and this fact alone would probably ensure its continuation. However, an analysis of the content of the program reveals that the majority of its content is overseas originated and that there is very little commentary or critique included in it. I have conducted an analysis of Australian originated programming within the three and a half hour *Sunday Afternoon* for the years 2001-3 and the results are as follows (see Appendix 1 for details of the programs):

AUSTRALIAN CONTENT IN SUNDAY AFTERNOON 2001-3

YEAR	MONTH	HOURS (Non-performance)	HOURS (Performance)
2001	March	1 hr 15mins	1 hr 20 mins
	April	20 mins	30 mins
	May	1hr 35 mins	0
	June	1hr	1 hr 30min
	July	55 mins	4hrs 5 mins
	August	40 mins	0
	September	1 hr 10 mins	0
	October	1hr	0
	November	40 mins	3hrs 30 min
2002	March	30mins	0
	April	30min	0
	May	30min	0
	June	45mins	0
	July	50mins	1 hr 25mins
	August	1 hr 20 mins	55mins
	September	1hr 35 mins	1hr

	October	1hr 45 mins	0
	November	1hr 20mins	1hr
2003	March	1 hr 35 min	0
	April	2 hrs 5 mins	0
	May	2hrs 15 mins	0
	June	1 hr 30mins	
	July	1 hr 30 mins	1 hr
	August	?	?
	September	2 hrs 45 mins	0
	October	1 hr 30 mins	0
	November	2 hrs 15 mins	0

Source: program guides

Much of the non-performance content consists of *Message Stick*², which also counts as indigenous content (the only regular content of that kind). There is an increase in the hours of Australian non-performance content evident in the second half of 2003. However, the table reveals how poorly *Sunday Afternoon* performs in relation to Australian performance content and in the next section I will turn my attention to that issue.

Performance

There has been a severe falling off of Australian performance on ABC TV in the last 10 years. In 1992 and up to around 1998 there were regular collaborations between the ABC and the Australian opera, the Australian ballet and the Symphony Orchestras to record notable performances, especially where there was new Australian work. These were often simulcast with ABC-FM and shown in the Sunday Stereo slot at 8.30 pm on Sundays during the summer. Many of the Sunday Stereo specials also featured landmark overseas production, e.g. Peter Sellars' notorious modern-dress version production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, set in the Trump Tower. Giving Australian audiences an opportunity

to see such work seems a worthwhile activity, but it could be argued that the advent of easily available DVDs of international performances makes this less a task for the ABC now. However the obligation to play a role in recording and broadcasting important Australian works remains. I will return to this below.

In the early nineties there were also notable collaborations with dance companies to present original works conceived and produced for television, for example, in 1992 there was *Seven Deadly Sins*, which was a seven part series in which seven different dance companies were invited to compose a work around one of the sins. A number of other dance collaborations occurred up to 1997-8. At that time an initiative, apparently inspired by a Channel 4 idea, was introduced under the leadership of Paul Grabowsky, the then Commissioning Editor, Arts and Entertainment. This was to be a series of four original “television operas” or “music drama television”, which would put together Australian composers, writers and performers. These were to be funded with European pre-sales and FFC assistance as well as an investment from the ABC. In the event only one of them was funded and produced, *One Night the Moon*, which was a collaboration between composers, Mairead Hannan, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody and theatre writer, John Romeril. It was directed by Rachel Perkins. It had a cinema release and received very enthusiastic critical approval. There was one other program from the series completed, a work called *The Widower*, which is a collaboration between Lyndon Terracini and Elena Kats-Chernin, based on poems by Les Murray, but it has not yet been broadcast. Since then there has been no attempt to create original works for television of that kind, although arguably productions of original works for the theatre such as the Meryl Tankard-Elena Kats-Chernin ballet, *Wild Swans*, which was first created for live performance but then produced for ABC TV fulfils the same function. However such programs are few and far between.

Other genres of music performance have been covered over the period I am examining. For example, the late weeknight program, *Studio 22*, which was in the schedule in 2001 and 2002, consisted of live performances in the ABC studios of jazz, blues, country and

other popular genres. However, the timeslot probably meant it didn't have the opportunity to find its potential audience.

Arts documentaries

Arts documentaries have been a staple part of the ABC's arts coverage for a long time. The documentaries broadcast vary in length from 15 or so minutes (intended to be used as part of a magazine program) to about 50 minutes (intended to be stand-alone in a time-slot, either an arts slot or a documentary slot). They are a mixture of Australian and imported. Space does not permit an exhaustive coverage of arts documentaries on the ABC in this report. However, a few examples should be mentioned.

A good example of high quality ABC Australian arts documentaries in recent times was the series made by Don Featherstone (some in co-production with Film Australia). In 1997 the ABC broadcast *An Imaginary Life*, a 57 minute profile of the work of David Malouf, which is described as follows on the Film Australia website: "this film uses a combination of interviews, dramatizations, archival footage and cinema verite sequences to explore the work of this complex man". This documentary won a large number of international awards, including the top award for television arts at the San Francisco International Film Festival. It was shown in prime time at 8.30 on a Wednesday night and did not pretend to be anything other than an arts program. Depending on the prominence of the artist covered, ratings were very respectable. Don Featherstone made a number of other similar documentaries for the ABC.

Such prime time documentaries seem to have disappeared from the ABC's production slate. There is a nervousness about the commitment to an hour of arts documentaries and perhaps funding constraints militate against the high production values exhibited by the Featherstone programs. The ABC has continued to produce good quality arts documentaries since this time, but most are 30 minutes long and are included as part of arts magazines programs, and not given prime time prominence, at least not under the label "arts".

Rather than clearly identifying a program slot as “arts”, the ABC is now more concerned to pass arts off as something else via its “arts by stealth” strategy. I discuss this in more detail below. How the “arts by stealth” strategy works in television is well illustrated by a recent four part series of half hour arts documentaries, under the title, *Obsessions*, intended not for an arts slot, but a documentary slot, *Reality Bites*. An analysis of one of these – the program on Elena Kats-Chernin, sub-titled “Worries on a String” – shows the effects on the style and pitch of the program. The description on the ABC website gives us the hook: “This highly strung, funny and always frantically busy composer’s music reflects her unique personal history ... she must compose to feed, house and educate her sons, which she does on her own ... How she manages this dilemma, the costs and sacrifices she and the boys must make, are the subject of this charming, inspiring and musically rich documentary”. The style of this documentary richly demonstrates the distance the ABC has traveled since 1998. An unkind characterization of it would be “arts programming meets *Big Brother*”. There is much reality-TV shooting of Elena and the boys at home with a particularly obsessive (inspiring the series title perhaps) concentration of her doing the family washing with such a lingering and intrusive close-up of clothes being tipped into the washing machine that you can actually identify individual socks and underpants. There is also awkward coverage of her eldest son’s schizophrenia, which presumably she agreed to have included, but the son does not look comfortable. There is not a lot of discussion of the music, although snatches of the composer’s works are used as background to the images. There are lots of shots of Kats-Chernin improvising at the piano, with brief coverage of a some rehearsals with *Wild Swans* choreographer, Meryl Tankard, but a viewer would come away with absolutely no understanding of Kats-Chernin’s work. Below I speculate about the rationale of this kind of programming strategy.

The other area of arts documentaries in which the ABC made a considerable investment in recent years are the two pop music histories, *Long Way to the Top* (2001) and *Love is in the Air* (2003). These were both ambitious multi-platform undertakings, the first being associated with a live touring show and the second had a major presence on web radio,

the internet and in books and CDs as well as on TV. While undoubtedly successful both as popular culture events and as arts programming, they undoubtedly absorbed a great deal of arts energy within the ABC and as commercial ventures begin to test the limits of what can be counted as legitimate commercial activity by the ABC and what begins to trespass on the territory of commercial television while still using tax-payer funds to support it. This has increasingly been a problem for the BBC whose licence-fee subsidized market dominance has constantly opened it to challenge from private media companies before the competition regulator. So far this has not been a problem for the ABC which is less dominant in the Australian media landscape, but it remains a theoretical issue on which the ABC needs some clarity.

Issues and dilemmas

In the last five years ABC TV has undergone a definite change of direction in relation to arts programming. The explicit strategy espoused by the Director of Television, Sandra Levy, is “arts by stealth”, seemingly sharing the view of ABC radio that the word “arts” scares people, although the words, “science”, “law”, “media”, “religion” and “health” do not. So arts will be smuggled in via other timeslots, especially the documentary slots like *Australian Story*, *Reality Bites*, and *True Stories*, but it won’t be there in prime time in an identified arts slot. As an indication of this was that for a time arts came under the “Factual” umbrella, although at the present time it is under an area called “Arts and Entertainment”.

The “arts by stealth” strategy may have been influenced by the 2000 Australia Council/Saatchi and Saatchi report, *Australians and the Arts*, which reported, among many other things, that “66% of people would feel more positive about the arts if arts and arts people were less elitist”. And 84% believed that “the arts should be more accessible and available to average Australians” (p. 13 of the Overview). I will return to this point in the next section.

Under Jonathan Shier, the ABC began to focus more than before on ratings in every time-slot, and this emphasis has continued since his departure. It is reported that Heads of Departments and Directors have performance pay linked to ratings; however, this is not necessarily a bad thing, for one can assume that the ratings targets that managers are given are relative to the type of programs they are responsible for, and their likely audience. At the ABC, having performance pay related to ratings would not mean “rate you socks off if you can”, as it would in commercial media. One can assume that it recognizes that certain kinds of specialist programs that fall within the charter will inevitably have low ratings but fulfill other purposes that are part of a public broadcasting philosophy. However, we do know that the ABC is making scheduling and commissioning decisions on the basis of the methodology of dollars per audience member, which encourages a medium by medium and slot by slot approach rather than a strategic approach which considers the role of the ABC in arts programming overall. It is also the case that ABC television has considerably improved its ratings in the last year; but this seems to be mainly due to the success of British crime drama and the news as well as programs like *Australian Story*.

A different approach to the problem would be to consider the purposes that an ABC TV arts strategy should fulfill. This means having a sense of the arts communities and the arts audiences and what it is that they need from the national broadcaster. There is evidence that this is beginning to happen. The new Director of Arts and Entertainment, Courtney Gibson, has been making appearances at various forums and talking and listening to what the independent producers have to offer in the area of the arts. But this should be accompanied by a sense of an ABC-wide strategy in relation to arts programming, so that the expertise available inside and outside the organisation is brought together in an optimal way.

Arts communities and audiences

The arts communities consist first of all of those who are arts practitioners or who are otherwise actively engaged in the arts, including as arts administrators. This community

lives and breathes the arts and, one assumes, expects to see their enthusiasm reflected in their national broadcaster. The ABC has traditionally catered for these audiences in identified arts programs, but one source of tension for this audience would be the range of activities included in arts. Does it mean just “high culture” - opera, ballet, theatre, concerts, literature, visual arts, film, or does it include “newer” art forms like digital arts, installation arts, circus arts, sound art, design arts, new writing etc., What about “popular arts” – all the genres of rock and pop music, jazz, blues, country, television itself, community art events?

Another highly motivated segment of the arts community are “culture vultures”, those who may not be practitioners or administrators but who are highly sophisticated and informed consumers of the arts. Much has been written about the class characteristics of such arts consumers - the reflection of this is in the Saatchi and Saatchi report was hardly surprising.

These two audience segments constitute, it can be assumed, a minority of the potential ABC audience, but it is of course the most vocal in its call for serious arts programming and in its criticisms of the ABC’s current performance. As a group it has access to multiple avenues of both arts events and arts reportage, through specialist magazines, websites, pay TV, DVDs etc. It could be argued, as perhaps ABC management now does, that this group can look after itself.

There is another layer of arts consumer, those who are not such frequent attenders of arts events and who are not so highly educated in the understanding of various arts forms, but who are occasional attenders and who have a general interest in all forms of arts, culture and popular entertainment. These may include audiences in regional, rural and remote Australia for whom geography presents a barrier to frequent arts attendance. I do not, however, assume a lower level of arts consciousness in such audiences; obviously such audiences may have a very high level of knowledge and appreciation of many forms of art, including those not dependent on living in capital cities, such as music and literature.

The ABC's current strategy seems to be to have primary focus on both the occasional arts consumer and on the next layer of arts community – the potential arts consumers - and to educate them to realize that the arts are not scary or esoteric. The documentary *Outback Opera*, illustrates this perfectly. This is a film follows Opera Australia on its regional tour of South Australia. The web site description goes as follows: “The company is excited – the performers infected with a spirit of adventure as they make the transition from the glitz of the city to the Australian bush... We also meet many of the members of the communities the tour passes through. Some have been brought up on a diet of classical music, while for others, this performance of *La Boheme* will be their first taste of opera. *Outback Opera* follows the drama of *La Boheme* ... exploring the parallels between the lives of the bohemian opera characters, the touring company and the country audiences.” As in the case of the Elena Kats-Chernin program, we see the influence of reality television at work.

Leaving aside the ethical and aesthetic issues involved in reality TV, this could be seen as a laudable democratic impulse and one that no-one would argue should not be pursued. The question however, is whether such a programming strategy should be at the expense of other approaches to arts programming on television.

There are currently other signs of this more populist and covert approach to arts programming. *Mondo Thingy* is a program devoted to pop culture, hosted by Amanda Keller, late of Triple M, but who has hosted programs on the ABC in the past. Other new programs test the boundaries between arts and entertainment, for example, *The New Inventors*, to be hosted by James O’Loughlin, which will “take up where *The Inventors* left off in 1981” (ABC website). *The Big Read* (another BBC copy) will have the public involved (via ABC Online) in nominating their favourite book, leading to the announcement of “Australia’s most popular book”. *Strictly Dancing* is a ballroom dance competition hosted by Paul McDermott. Many of these programs, as well as others in the 2004 line-up, contain either “reality TV” or quiz and game show components.

Critics of ABC TV's arts programming refer to this as "dumbing down". This response obviously contains a reflex aversion to popular genres of television, an aversion which has a long history and has been well debunked by academic discussions over the last twenty years. But, less negatively, it also refers to the fact that this kind of so-called arts programming (arts by stealth) does not fulfill the needs of the core arts communities identified above, because it does not assume any prior or expert knowledge of various art forms, and therefore cannot provide the level of information or critique which highly arts literate audiences crave. The trick then for the ABC is to determine whether it can satisfy multiple and differentiated audiences at the same time.

So, what should the ABC be doing?

Possible solutions

As outlined at the beginning of my report, the ABC has a charter obligation to "encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia" (Section 6 (1)(c)). This is interpreted in rather strong terms in Appendix 2 of the current Editorial Policies 2002 (p. 80). It says: "The ABC strongly committed to fostering the arts in Australia. The ABC considers that it is uniquely placed to present Australian musical, dramatic, written and acoustic works, performance, representation of Australia's cultural life and analysis of the arts to the Australian public." It goes on: "ABC Television documents, reviews and reports events, concerts and productions by Australian music, theatre, dance and other arts organizations. ABC Television encourages collaboration with artists, performers, composers and film makers to develop works designed for presentation on television."

Interpreted strictly, it would have to be said that a very minimal amount of this is being done in 2004 on television. There is no presentation of Australian works in the 2004 schedule, unless you mean by that talking about them on *Critical Mass*. There is no place where the arts are analysed, unless again you mean discussion of individual works on either the book segment of *Sunday Afternoon* or *Critical Mass*, but I read the Editorial

Policy as meaning analysis of arts issues and policies. At this point ABC TV may be reviewing (again *Critical Mass*), but it is not “documenting and reporting events, concerts and productions by Australian music, theatre, dance and other arts organizations”, as it says it will. Nor is it “collaborating with artists, performers, composers and film makers to develop works designed for presentation of television”, unless you count working with free-lance crew to make *Mondo Thingy* or any of the other programs in the 2004 slate.

The ABC can go one of two ways on the yawning gap between its own editorial policies and reality. It can change the policies to fit the present reality (but could it make them consistent with the charter which is part of the ABC Act?) or it could devise new ways of both developing new audiences for the arts and playing its legitimate role as part of the arts community and as commentator and critic of arts practice. My remarks and recommendations are made in the absence of any close acquaintance with current funding issues. However, I observe a number of relevant facts. The ABC’s operational funds have increased from \$525 million in 1997-8 to \$613 Million in 2001-2 (2001-2002 Annual Report p. 86), and after a jump in 2002-3 is back down to a similar level in 2003-4. The increases following 1997-8 include special amounts for regional programming and for digital convergence. In view of the fact that the ABC has ceased transmitting its digital multi-channel services, one is forced to conclude that while funding is very tight, the capacity to pursue both a “populist” and a “specialist” strategy in the arts is possible.

ABC TV should do the following as a matter of urgency:

- it should develop a strategy for increasing its recording of new Australian work or notable Australian productions in the performing arts field, but taking into account where new technologies and platforms have made such things available to audiences by other means and not duplicating that;
- it should develop a prime-time arts program which includes serious reviews, criticism and analysis of artists, arts works and arts policies; it should have a

stability of name and time-slot so specialist audiences know where to find it; it should not be afraid to call it “arts”

- it should continue its diversified strategies for developing new audiences for the arts by including arts as part of documentary and other genres and using cross-genre techniques for making such program appealing
- it should develop creative works designed especially for television in collaboration with Australia’s best artists and with overseas artists where appropriate with the aims of (i) advancing television itself as an art form and (ii) showcasing the creative work of Australian artists. These will probably be co-productions.

ABC Arts Online

The recent history of ABC Arts Online has not been a particularly happy one. ABC management appears to have had only an intermittent commitment to arts online, and constant management changes and changes of direction have been most damaging. The vehicle of arts online is the gateway *The Space*, which sits alongside the other principal content gateways, including public affairs, Asia-Pacific, health, sports, science etc. *The Space* was begun with special funding and has continued to exist through accessing such funding from the ABC's own development division or bodies like Film Victoria. It has not had adequate or stable staffing and has apparently suffered from a lack of firm direction or philosophy.

In December 2003 the decision was taken to not to continue to support the maintenance of *The Space*, so in effect it has closed. This was not announced publicly and it continues to appear on the ABC web-site as if it was live and is updated automatically (without human intervention) from other parts of the ABC like news. There are rumours that new gateways will be opened, including a Business gateway and Comedy. It is fair to assume that the closure of *The Space* is related to the need to provide resources for these new gateways.

As in radio and TV, ratings also rule in ABC Online, and compared with other gateways like public affairs or science, the arts gateway has fewer users. However, internet ratings are highly dependent on whether a site offers special features like free E-mail or forums, and in the case of arts online, there were never the resources to moderate forums, so that compared with other gateways where forums were supported, the ratings were lower.

When we think about what the philosophy or strategy of the ABC's online presence in arts should be, we are faced with a number of possibilities. Should it be simply an online adjunct to radio and TV content? It seems as if this might be the main aim of it as far as ABC management is concerned. This conclusion is supported by the fact that ABC

Online is expected to design its pages on the assumption of the lowest bandwidth because of a need to reach all Australians. However, the online statistics indicate that 60% of the users of ABC Online are broadband users, which suggests that a more elaborate level of design and interactivity might be appropriate. If arts online is simply an adjunct to radio and TV, then that might also limit the appeal and mode of address of the site because of the skewed demographics of that core audience.

Another way of thinking about arts online would be to use the online capability to cover those areas of the arts less covered by the existing media, and to consciously recruit new (and younger) audiences to the ABC. Online lends itself magnificently to catering for extremely narrow niches of taste and interest, and so can target various communities of interest very precisely. While ABC arts online does appear to have reached a younger audience (its users are in the 15 to 35 age group), because of its tie to radio and TV its ability to range outside the ambit of arts on those media is limited.

A third way of thinking about arts online is that it should be the site of original creative production in the digital medium. This third purpose has been extremely muted with creative research in the new medium being quite limited. There have been a few initiatives in collaboration with Film Victoria's Digital Media Fund, such as *Winged Sandals* and the *Strange Attractors* initiative, but they have not been able to make a big impact. The ability of ABC Online to make a cutting edge contribution to new media research and creation has been severely circumscribed by the closure of the digital channels. There was a high level of co-operation between Online and digital television in the design of interactive technologies but this presumably has ceased. In comparison with other public broadcasters, for example the BBC, the ABC is very far from the forefront in new technologies. Ironically at one point of the Shier reign there seemed to be about to be a huge commitment. However, this was tied more to e-commerce, and thankfully, the idea died before it could soak up too many precious resources.

So what should arts online be doing? In the absence of a clear way forward for digital TV at the ABC perhaps the third purpose outlined above is not the highest priority.

However, the first and second are of the utmost importance. Compared with radio, and even more so, television, online is very cheap. It is extremely short-sighted not to exploit the capacity of online to reach specialised communities of interest, and to bring young people into the ABC. I would recommend a thorough-going commitment to arts online and to commit adequate staff to maintain and expand the gateway. On-line forums about various arts events and art works would seem obviously attractive, so resources ought to be devoted to providing adequate moderation of such forums. Furthermore, staff should be provided to source new items for inclusion in the site, items which may not be covered by the other media. In the long run, the ABC ought to have a more robust and ambitious strategy in relation to creative research in the digital medium, but this might depend on the next stage in the digital roll-out.

Recommendations for ABC Online

- The ABC should reconsider its decision to close down The Space, and it should urgently develop a set of strategies for exploiting the full potential of the web for attracting new and younger audiences.
- It should consider how the ABC might take its rightful place in the Australian creative community as an innovator and leader in digital media.

General recommendations

1. Review provision of arts expertise across whole of the ABC to be shared by all platforms.
2. Develop an arts policy for the ABC, using all relevant internal and external expertise.
3. Liaise more actively with arts stakeholders.
4. Share intelligence and strategies with other arts organizations especially the Australia Council for ideas for audience development.
5. Revisit the wisdom of moving from designated specialist time slots to “across the whole schedule” programming strategies.
6. Ensure the area of the “arts’ is construed as broadly as possible, and in particular, that it includes newer art forms such as digital arts, and new forms of writing and performance.
7. Pay particular attention to the coverage of visual arts which has suffered in recent years.

Footnotes

1. Time did not permit me to do a full audit of numbers of first-run hours of arts broadcast each week or year on the two main arts networks Radio National and Classic FM. A full study would need to do this quantitative work.
2. Is arguable whether *Message Stick* should be considered as arts; it is classified by the ABC as indigenous programming. However, it does contain a high level of coverage of arts and cultural matters.

APPENDIX 1 Sunday Arts Programming (excluding summer months)

	Australian talk	Aust. performance	Imported talk	Imported perf.
2003				
<i>Nov</i>	2 hrs, 15 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (40 mins) - The Passionate Pursuit: NIDA (35 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins) - Garbutt's Way (rpt) (10 mins)	-	1 hr, 50 mins - Changing Stages (60 mins) - Hollywood: A Celebration of the American Silent Film (50 mins)	-
<i>Oct</i>	1 hr, 30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (25 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins) - Garbutt (15 mins)	-	3 hrs - Jimmy Stuart, His Wonderful Life (1 hr) - Making The Misfits (1 hr) - Jazz: Risk (rpt, series) (1 hr)	-
<i>Sept</i>	2 hrs, 45 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (30 mins) - Inside the Aust. Ballet (rpt) (1 hr, 10 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins) - Garbutt (15 mins)	-	1 hr, 55 mins - Rodulf Nureyev, Dancing through the darkness (55 mins) - Jazz (rpt, series) (1 hr)	-
<i>Aug</i>	-	-	-	-

<i>July</i>	1 hr, 30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (30 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins) - Garbutt (10 mins)	1 hr - Sydney Symphony Orchestra with Lorin Maazel (1 hr)	1 hr - Amato – A Love Affair with Opera	-
<i>June</i>	1 hr, 30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (40 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	3 hrs - Sister Wendy’s American Collection (1 hr) - Made in Manhattan (1 hr) - Finest Hour (rpt, series) (1 hr)	-
<i>May</i>	2 hrs, 15 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (30 mins) - Hey Rain (55 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	1 hr, 15 mins - David Hockney – Secret Knowledge (1 hr, 15 mins)	-
<i>April</i>	2 hrs, 5 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (30 mins) - Proud Possessors (10 mins) - Peter Carey and the Kelly Gang (rpt) (35 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	1 hr, 25 mins - F. Scott Fitzgerald – Winter Dreams (1 hr, 25 mins)	-
<i>March</i>	1 hr, 35 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Critical Mass (30 mins) - Proud Possessors (10 mins) - The Dreaming (rpt) (5 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	1 hr - The Jazzman from the Gulag (1 hr)	1 hr - Muddy Waters Live at the Chicago Blues Festival (1 hr)

2002				
<i>Nov</i>	1 hr, 20 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - The Show (30 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	1 hr - The Huntington Music Festival (1 hr)	55 mins - Music Behind the Scenes (55 mins)	-
<i>Oct</i>	1 hr, 45 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - The Show (30 mins) - Gija (25 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	1 hr, 45 mins - Music Behind the Scenes (55 mins) - Directed by Alan Smithee (50 mins)	-
<i>Sept</i>	1 hr, 35 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Gascoigne Country (rpt) (45 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	1 hr - Queensland Symphony Orchestra: A Right Royal Performance (1 hr)	1 hr - Renzo Piano (1 hr)	-
<i>Aug</i>	1 hr, 20 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - The Composer at Work (30 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	55 mins - Inside this Room: Hirschfelder and Hobson (55 mins)	1 hr, 20 mins - Bravo Profile, Sarah Brightman	-
<i>July</i>	50 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - James Griffin (20 mins)	-	1 hr, 25 mins - A Musical Romp with Mel Brookes (1 hr, 25 mins)	1 hr, 20 mins - The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber, Live in Beijing (1 hr, 20 mins)

<i>June</i>	45 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - James Griffin (15 mins)	-	1 hr - Picasso: Magic, Sex and Death (1 hr)	-
<i>May</i>	30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins)	-	50 mins - South Bank Show (rpt) (50 mins)	40 mins - Karajan: The Beethoven Symphonies, Recorded at the Berlin Philharmonie (rpt) (40mins)
<i>April</i>	30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins)	-	-	1 hr, 30 mins - Karajan: The Beethoven Symphonies, (rpt) (35 mins) - The Trout: Concert at London's Queen Eliz. Hall of Shubert's <i>Trout Quintet</i> (55 mins)
<i>March</i>	30 mins - Message Stick (30 mins)	-	2 hrs - In Rehearsal: Mariss Jansons (1 hr) - Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work (rpt) (1 hr)	-

2001				
<i>Nov</i>	40 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Eye to Eye with Betty Churcher (rpt) (10 mins)	3 hrs, 30 mins - The Marriage of Figaro (rpt) (3 hrs) - Top of the Pops (30 mins)	30 mins - Top of the Pops 2001 (30 mins)	-
<i>Oct</i>	1 hr - Message Stick (30 mins) - Radio Pictures (rpt) (30 mins)	-	1 hr, 25 mins - Top of the Pops 2001 (30 mins) - Making Elisir (rpt) (55 mins)	-
<i>Sept</i>	1 hr, 10 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Eye to Eye with Betty Churcher (rpt) (10 mins) - Radio Pictures (rpt) (30 mins)	-	1 hr, 55 mins - Remembering Jacqueline Du Pre (rpt) (55 mins) - The Guitar Age (rpt) (30 mins) - Top of the Pops 2001 (30 mins)	1 hr, 35 mins - Last night of the Proms (rpt) 1 hr, 35 mins)
<i>Aug</i>	40 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Eye to Eye with Betty Churcher (rpt) (10 mins)	-	30 mins - Top of the Pops (30 mins)	2 hrs - American Ballet Theatre in Le Corsaire (rpt) (1 hr, 30 mins) - Karajan: The Beethoven Symphonies: Symphony No 1 in C Major, Op. 21 (rpt) (30 mins)
<i>July</i>	55 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - The Arts Show (rpt) (25 min)	4 hrs, 5 mins - Sutherland, Pavarotti, Bonyngé Gala Concert (filmed at the SOH in 1983) (rpt) (3 hrs, 55 mins) - Bach Moves (WA Ballet) (rpt) (10 mins)	30 mins - Top of the Pops (30 mins)	-

<i>June</i>	1 hr - Message Stick (30 mins) - Larsen and Lewers (20 mins) - Betty Churcher (10 mins) - The Last Word (20 mins)	1 hr, 30 mins - A Midsummer Night's Dream (1 hr, 30 mins)	2 hrs, 15 mins - In Search of the Lonesome Yodel (rpt) (55 mins) - Human all too human: Satre (50 mins) - Top of the Pops (30 mins)	-
<i>May</i>	1 hr, 35 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Arts Forum (35 mins) - Betty Churcher (10 mins) - The Last Word (20 mins)	-	2 hrs, 10 mins - Saul Zaentz (rpt) (50 mins) - Top of the Pops (30 mins) - Nigel Kennedy (rpt) (50 mins)	-
<i>April</i>	20 mins - The Last Word (20 mins)	30 mins - Sydney Int. Piano Competition (30 mins)	1 hr, 40 mins - Edward Grieg (profile) (rpt) (1 hr, 10 mins) - Top of the Pops (30 mins)	-
<i>March</i>	1 hr, 15 mins - Message Stick (30 mins) - Michael Nelson Jagamara (25 mins) - The Last Word (20 mins)	1 hr, 20 mins - A Walk with Words (rpt) (30 mins) - Sydney Int. Piano Competition (50 mins)	2 hrs, 35 mins - Robert Rauschenberg: Man at Work (rpt) (55 mins) - A Swan Song of Rare and Vanishing Beauty (about Jacqueline Du Pre) (1 hr, 15 mins) - Top of the Pops (25 mins)	-

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

(TO BE INSERTED ON PAGE FACING FRONT PAGE OR SOME SUCH)

This report was commissioned by the Community and Public Service Union on behalf of its ABC members in ABC Radio. It was commissioned on December 8th 2003 and was delivered on March 17 2003. In the time available for the production of the report it was not possible to undertake the kind of in-depth research and analysis that would normally be done for a matter of this complexity. In particular I have not had time to do a full analysis of hours of arts coverage, I am unable to supply a definitive list of all arts programming over the period, I cannot provide detailed audience or budget analysis, nor am I able to give a detailed account of how various management structures (and re-structures) have helped or hindered the ABC in the fulfillment of its mission for the arts.

However, I do canvas a number of these issues and make some judgments about them on the basis of what evidence I did have access to. I make it clear as I go what sort of evidence I am relying on. I also raise a number of questions for ABC management and staff which may be of assistance, as they consider together how to move forward to ensure that the kind of arts broadcasting which Australia needs from the ABC is provided.

In the course of the research I have used the following kinds of documents: public ABC documents such as the Charter, editorial policies, and Annual Reports, newspaper reports, arts policy reports and the like. Twenty interviews with artists, arts administrators, ABC staff have been conducted. Unfortunately no ABC managers would agree to speak to me, and no doubt the report suffers from not having had the benefit of a full range of views. I have also taken as many informal soundings with audience members as I had time to do.

I would like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed for this report and I would like to especially thank my research assistant who gave highly intelligent and rapid assistance to the project.