

Prologue

It is said that in the early 1970s, 80% of all arts funding combined went to individual artists and 20% to organisations. Now, thirty years later, those percentages have been reversed: 80% of the funding goes directly to the landmark performing arts companies, and individual artists receive about 20%.

Over the last twenty years, the average call cost for a freelance (i.e. non-salaried) musician has remained unchanged, about \$100–\$120 for a three-hour call. The amount of work available today, however, has declined dramatically, as companies seek to control their costs and only utilise the services of their salaried artists. If the rising cost of living is taken into account, freelance performers today are earning less than half of what they did a generation ago.¹ Many fall below the poverty line, and most are earning incomes in the low \$20,000s. This is not just the case for the modestly talented: it applies to many who are the best at what they do. A well-known opera singer told me of one year in which she had so much work that it nearly killed her. However, she almost doubled her usual annual income and it represents her career high in earnings. She made \$41,000 that year.

Many Australian arts freelancers realise at the end of the tax year that they would have been better off on the dole.

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The story so far

From the dawn of human history, art has been a spiritual act, an offering to the gods, or perhaps a mechanism to create magic to alter the physical world, often to attract food or rain. During the rise of the great ancient empires, especially those of Rome and China, it became more decorative and luxurious, serving to create pleasure for the emperors and those who could afford it. During the Dark Ages, what we know now as classical culture and learning was concentrated in the world's monasteries, where it survived and was passed on. In the Renaissance the arts flourished, first in the royal courts and churches, then in the salons of the rising middle classes. England, Holland, Italy, France and Germany became particularly influential marketplaces for the arts, as wealthy merchants paid for artists to write music, poetry, novels and plays, as well as to paint, sculpt and perform. As a result, artists began to desert the patronage of monarchs and popes, and operate as individuals, selling their services to the highest bidder.

This involved great risk: in the 1790s, while Haydn

Survival of the Fittest

piled up sacks of gold in London, Mozart almost starved in Vienna—but the stage was set for the rise of the freelance artist. It was Beethoven who created the dominant archetype we continue to treasure, the heroic and Romantic ideal of the lonely artist, ahead of his time and understood only by a few. Over the next two centuries those artists who engendered a mythology around them did well (see Picasso) and those who had talent but no marketing instinct died in poverty, to be recognised posthumously as ‘true’ artists (see just about everyone else).

The middle classes liked the arts because they were entertaining, even salacious. They injected beauty and stimulation, perhaps even a little meaning, into their otherwise repetitious lives. London became the concert stage of the world and everyone played there (with the notable exception of Beethoven). The wholesale importation of European talent had the curious effect of destroying England’s own creative talents. There is a 200-year void between the great English composers Purcell and Elgar—as cultural importers, we should take note.

By the late 1800s, the European cultural wars had started in earnest, and wealthy governments used nationalistic schools of art to demonstrate their cultural superiority alongside their dominance on the battlefield. France and Germany in particular competed to determine which was the truly civilised European state. Schoenberg is on record as saying that the development of his 12-tone system would guarantee the ascendancy of German culture for another hundred years. This nationalistic compet-