

The impetus for me to submit my application for a Churchill Fellowship came from my sense that the world of classical music¹ in Australia was in a tight corner. I wanted to find out whether this was similar in other parts of the world, and if so, to learn how this challenge was being addressed.

'The death of classical music' has been a perennial topic in the arts community in Australia over the last five to ten years. Facing the challenges of a rapidly changing world has left many of my colleagues with a sense of bewilderment and despair. As the sustainability and relevance of the artform have been called into question over the last years, people have leapt to defend the fortress.

Separatist politics can be a shrewd way of defining and strengthening the identity of a group. But separation also breeds isolation.

Preservation

In its current form, the industry of classical music is best called a heritage enterprise. Most music schools and tertiary institutions with courses that are repertoire based are training classical musicians to faithfully re-present the past. The ethos is not primarily about the creation of new music now, or the future of the artform, but the perpetuation of an historical canon and a particular set of performance traditions.

General standards of basic music education and literacy in Australia have been subject to constant attrition over at least a generation. On one hand, small numbers of students in privileged environments are developing exceptional musical skills from an early age. On the other hand, huge numbers of students do not know how to sing, read or play even the simplest of tunes. I see a direct corollary between the deterioration of our music education system and the tiny percentage of our population engaging with classical music. We have lost track of the roots and sources of our audiences.

By losing the participatory nature of music making, we have lost an essential part of the ecosystem. Knowing what it feels like to participate makes listening much more active and engaging. Links between concert platforms and 'normal people' have been eroded, and what's happening on concert platforms is becoming increasingly alien and irrelevant.

Australian musicians working internationally in the field of classical music are prized. We are valued for our high level of skills, our commitment, our work ethic, and our fresh, bright approach. In many ways, for a country with a small population and a young western culture, we are punching above our weight.

¹ I define classical music loosely as notated western art music

Nonetheless, many of our finest musicians leave Australia. Most see it as a choice between living at home and pursuing a career. It is imperative that we address what is keeping many of our most talented artists from living here, and contributing to this culture.

Looking forward

When I applied for a Churchill fellowship, I was concerned at my sense that I was working in an ever-shrinking realm in Australia. During my Churchill journey, my thinking and perspective shifted radically. When I left, I imagined that my task was to try to find a way to expand the province for classical music in Australia, or at least, to ensure that its ground was held. As a result of this trip, I am much less interested in concepts of territory or preservation.

I don't think that classical music is dead, or even in its death throes. Within the privileged spheres that have housed and fed it for centuries, it is still an honoured guest. Both abroad and at home, I have met many inspiring, highly intelligent and articulate people working to preserve its heritage and safeguard its continuation. I have no doubt they will succeed.

I don't think that classical music is outdated or irrelevant. Many of the sounds of classical music are still as profoundly illuminating and moving as they were when they were first created.

The arts sit uncomfortably in a consumerist world. It is not possible to count the emotional, intellectual and cultural values and effects of art in the same way that it is possible to count the box office takings. We have been seduced by the idea that success = growth. In fact, success and growth are very different. Lack of growth (economic turnover, audience numbers etc) need not be failure. Less quantifiable concepts of beauty, pleasure, adventure, dreaming time, challenge and learning are essential in the arts. Our role as artists is as urgent as it has ever been.

I do think that what faces classical music currently is a period of redefinition, and potentially one of transformation. It strikes me that many of the decisions that have been made about classical music as a result of the apparent threats to it over the last generation have been made out of fear and anger. They have been about guarding terrain, reinforcing, or preserving barriers. But it seems to me that we are guarding the wrong things.

Commissioning and performing more works in a concert hall tradition adds to the museum. But it does not address any of the fundamental schisms between the presentation of the work and the general population. We need to think about removing the obstacles between the art and people engaging with it. We need to think about collaborations that take our music into different spheres, and hence, to different listeners. It was not always the

case that classical music was heard and played almost exclusively by a privileged minority.

My wish is that all of us who are connected to classical music think deeply about what it is we seek to hold dear. I would like us to think equally profoundly about how we might embrace change. I would like us to respond to the current cultural climate with hope, great creativity and openness. I would like us to think about creating ways for people to participate in music at every level, to consider making relationships and creating communities around our work, rather than selling tickets and expanding concert series. I would like us to turn our gaze to the world and walk into it with open arms, rather than turning our backs and shielding what we have. We have so much to gain.

Genevieve Lacey is a freelance recorder player. She is a serial collaborator and is passionate about commissioning new works and creating new contexts for her instrument. Her current major project, in partnership with the UK filmmaker Marc Silver, is the creation of an installation and performance artwork called '...us'.