

Introduction

My Churchill Fellowship can best be described as a series of conversations. I met and interviewed sixty-nine people based in the USA, France, Germany and the UK. Most of my interviewees work with music, mainly in the field of classical music. Our conversations varied in length. Most people were happy to talk about specific details of their own work and professional experience, and then to extend into broader philosophical and cultural themes. The questions I posed differed — this was not a 'controlled' study.

I deliberately set up a broad study topic, which I loosely summarised on meeting people as 'the future of classical music'. It gave me license to meet with people working across a large cross-section of the arts/music community, from practitioners to administrators, policy makers, publicists, producers, presenters, publishers, philanthropists, people running venues, working in radio, film, leading organisations, directing festivals, working in tertiary and community education.

My Fellowship was an unusual one, in terms of the time it took. I began my studies in February 2007. Just a week into my Churchill trip, my father died unexpectedly. The Trust was kind enough to let me defer the rest of my Fellowship. I was extremely grateful to be given the chance to take it up a second time.

Report

The impetus for me to submit my application to the Churchill Trust came from my sense that the world of classical music¹ in Australia was under threat. I felt concern that this sphere was shrinking. '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, defensiveness, and despair: perceived losses and corrosions of the western classical heritage have been grimly chalked up, and the conclusion has been that the artform is facing extinction.

I wanted to examine whether this was similar in other parts of the world, and if so, how this challenge was being addressed. My hope was that classical music itself was not outdated and irrelevant. My instinct was that its main challenge lay in its modes of presentation, commonly perceived to be exclusive, staid.

I was surprised at how quickly a cultural map emerged in each country. While some areas of discussion were geographically and culturally specific, particularly in relation to funding and policy and its effects on the arts scene, many themes emerged that were common across countries. The expansive nature of my study topic allowed me to form overviews of several music scenes around the world. Its scope meant that my study is broadly thematic, rather than in any way comprehensive.

Museums in a contemporary world

Outside the small cohort of classical music practitioners, industry workers and devotees, the majority of people in Australia have no opinion whatsoever about classical music. Those in the broader community who think about it at all generally perceive it as elitist and shrouded in rituals that make it outdated and impenetrable for the uninitiated.

In its current form, the industry of classical music is best called a heritage enterprise. Classical musicians work to build and maintain museums of sound. In seeking to know our history, we seek to know the human spirit in its many incarnations. In creating new works in this same tradition, we add to the catalogue of treasures that define and shape our identity. Many music schools and tertiary institutions are training classical musicians to faithfully re-present the past. The ethos is not about the creation of new music now, or the future of the artform, but the perpetuation of a historical canon.

For many years, skilled museum curators have been creating exhibitions and events that actively draw threads through the past into the present and future. We in the classical music world have been slow to become sophisticated curators. The kinds of links with contemporary culture that are commonly made by classical music institutions/presenters/practitioners are often superficial, and hence, not

¹ I define classical music loosely as notated western art music

particularly sustainable, educative or attractive. As a heritage outfit, our skills are behind the times.

Until fairly recently, the unspoken assumption upon which the presentation of classical music was based ran as follows: if you programme great works played well, audiences will come to hear them. This simple equation no longer holds.

It has changed in part because the market is saturated with music. Fierce competition for audience attention comes from an astonishing array of music choices. Perhaps most importantly, competition comes from the myriad of other demands on contemporary lives. Work schedules, financial pressures, family and domestic needs, the pull of the internet, film, television and other leisure activities all absorb time and resources. In short, modern, capitalist life does not encourage sitting quietly listening to great musical works of the past.

The equation has also changed because it relied on knowledge of an established canon. The following for classical music is generally centred on a particular repertoire — favourites which audiences know, revere, and like to revisit. Connection to a long line of beloved classics is core to the whole enterprise. When this knowledge is whittled away, so too is interest in the artform.

Education and participation

General standards of basic music education and literacy in Australia have been subject to constant attrition over at least a generation. There is now a huge gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. On one hand, small numbers of students in privileged environments are developing exceptional musical skills from an early age. On the other, huge numbers of students do not know how to read or play even the simplest of tunes. The number of people in Australia participating in classical music via radio, concert attendances, amateur music making, and CD/download sales is small. I see a direct corollary between the deterioration of our music education system and the tiny percentage of our population engaging with classical music.

Perhaps in our zeal to meet the competition from within and without the music industry, we have become careless about nurturing other parts of our ecosystem. Education, amateur music making, community involvement all have been neglected. We have lost track of the roots and sources of our audiences.

A healthy amateur scene is critical for the overall health of the environment. The amateur music scene in the UK is collectively the largest commissioner of new works. Amateur music accounts for a large percentage of music lovers, and hence, engenders great involvement in classical music

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. Given poor education, resulting in dropping musical literacy and skills, amateur music making activities are shrinking. In this way, links between concert platforms and 'normal people' are being further eroded, and what's happening on concert platforms is becoming increasingly alien and irrelevant.

The concept of the *animateur* doesn't exist in Australia. In England, these people have become a vibrant part of the musical ecosystem. They literally animate, facilitate, explore and present music. They are music communicators, devising and facilitating ways into the music for audiences, students, and people from all corners of the community.

Separation and isolation, privilege and defence

For centuries, classical music has been written for and played to privileged audiences. Today, the majority of people for whom classical music is significant come from an advantaged socio-economic sphere.

As the sustainability and relevance of the artform have been called into question over the last years, a mentality of 'defending the fortress' has emerged. Ideas of maintaining 'integrity' in an arts organisation have often become morally loaded and restrictive, prioritising taking care of a dwindling traditional constituency over welcoming newcomers. Many of the strongest defendants of the tradition of classical music that I interviewed were those who do not regularly make music themselves, but who hold positions of considerable power in the industry.

Separatist politics can be a shrewd way of defining and strengthening the identity of a group. But separation also breeds isolation. The current isolation of classical music is intensified by the fact that becoming fluent in classical music's language requires years of education and patience. In the modern world, labour-intensive practices of rigor and discipline have minimal appeal. In the modern world, learning a language of the past is seen as less desirable than engaging with the present or helping to shape the future.

Within the world of classical music, there is a further split between traditional classical music and new music. Many classical musicians maintain that classical music is still reeling from the avant garde music of the 1960s. They suggest that extreme modernism created a rift between audiences and music that has never healed.

The coterie of new music devotees is an even smaller subset of the world of classical music. Several composers I met contended that within this microcosm, there is little critical debate. Composers of contemporary classical music have become so marginalised, their conversations are held largely among themselves. The state of the scene is perceived as so fragile that there are fears that any criticism from within will dismantle the whole enterprise.

Classical music needs to be written and talked about intelligently and engagingly. We perpetuate our place on the fringes by not being able to communicate about what we do in a language that is generally

comprehensible and inviting. If we are happy to remain cultural fringe-dwellers, we need to embrace the culture of the outsider, and take on the radical role that it offers, rather than trying to make ourselves over in a poor likeness of popular culture.

Policies, business models

Over the last ten years and more, arts funding policies have encouraged arts organisations to 'professionalise' at every level. In fact, becoming professional has become synonymous with becoming corporate. As a result, CEOs of major arts companies, Chairs and directors of boards are not necessarily musically literate. Arts policies have underlined the socio-political aspects of music making and creation; ideas of inclusive practices and socially responsible art making have held strong currency. Playing the funding game has become an essential part of creating and presenting new projects. Musicians and organisations have been encouraged to be entrepreneurial, to set up networks, to 'value-add' whenever possible. All this has been an attempt to broaden the reach and relevance of classical music.

As a result, many of the large-scale, flagship arts companies around the world are in a financially stable condition. Some of them are flourishing. At the same time, many small to medium size, independent organisations have disappeared. Sitting on boards and grant application judging panels I have noted that my colleagues have become very adept at arts-speak, at strategically planning and pitching projects around funding requirements. I admire this ability to move with the times and to use systems to enable musicians to get on with making sound. But I note too that few people are speaking or writing about music itself in their applications, their interviews, or in broader public forums. It feels as though as a group, our bureaucratic and corporate vocabulary has expanded, while our ability to speak eloquently, plausibly and passionately about our art has diminished. I also note that my colleagues' imaginations and work practices are being shaped to funding policies, rather than the other way around. I found that these concerns were relevant in other countries too. One particularly perceptive interviewee noted that if you create the right structures, the right people and projects will emerge and be supported. At the moment, we don't seem to have the balance right.

The arts sit uncomfortably in a consumerist world. It is not possible to count the emotional, intellectual, 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 quality, pleasure, adventure, challenge and learning are essential in the arts.

Popular culture

The 'airspace' for classical music is shrinking: outside the dedicated radio stations, few others programme any classical music, and in print media, columns inches are being constantly reduced. Classical music has

virtually no TV presence, which renders it invisible to the majority of people.

Multiple interviewees in different countries observed that as a result of recent political and educational policies, there is now a generation of people who have had little or no contact with high art. Classical music is termed elite. Elite is a derogatory adjective in connection with the arts and education, in contrast to its use in sport.

Interviewees also noted the erosion of significant cultural institutions in their countries. In particular, publicly funded radio stations that used to function as critical educators are now merely programming to the market, and using classical music as relaxing background music.

One of the biggest challenges for classical music is to create a context for its presentation that is culturally relevant. It is imperative for classical music practitioners and organisations to embrace digital culture, as the possibility there for opening up the club to a much broader environment is huge.

Age

Most classical music 'consumers' are not young. Classical music is something that for many generations, people have come to appreciate later in their lives. Audiences have not been young for a long time. The current concern is that the classical music audience will not continue to renew itself. There are now generations of people who have never experienced classical music. The fear is that that they will not simply 'discover' it later in life.

Marketing

A great deal of contemporary marketing is trying to sell classical music by making it look like pop music. The idea is to attract a younger, hipper audience. Unfortunately, many of these tactics have not addressed some of the fundamental challenges. It is not a long-term solution to employ a stage director, dress musicians in designer clothes, have them photographed by a fashion photographer, and inserted into a glossy brochure.

In a world that is so strongly visual, so manically multimedia, the formal, darkened space of a concert hall, where audiences are supposed to simply listen, is an extremely challenging notion.

Contemporary visual arts are more popular than contemporary classical music. Perhaps part of the huge publicity and media success of the Brit Art phenomena, which has no equivalent in music, is due in part to the fact that visual art is collectable. In a world obsessed with material possession and investments, visual art becomes valuable. A piece of music can't carry the same monetary worth.

Ways forward...

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. We are seen as 'new world' players, well schooled in 'old world' traditions, but not hampered by them. A handful of our composers, performers, conductors and ensembles are genuinely considered to be world class. Here in Australia, contracts with some of our cultural institutions and presenting bodies are desirable engagements for musicians working at a top international level. In many ways, for a country with a small population and a young western culture, we are punching above our weight.

Nonetheless, many of our finest musicians leave Australia. I have had countless conversations with friends and colleagues who maintain that they have had to make a choice between living at home and pursuing their career. Most of them left Australia to study in their early 20s and have not returned. It is imperative that we address what is keeping many of our most talented artists from living here, and contributing to their own culture.

When I applied for a Churchill fellowship, I was concerned at my sense that I was working in an ever-shrinking realm in Australia — the realm of classical music. I was determined to travel to other parts of the world to assess whether the situation was similar in other places, and if so, to see how these same challenges were being met by imaginative people.

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. I encountered many inspiring, highly intelligent and articulate people working to preserve its heritage and safeguard its continuation. I have no doubt they will succeed.

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.

Notions of genre are not so prevalent in a contemporary world. Listeners and players, especially of a younger generation, are not restricted by labels of high/low art or classifications that divide jazz from pop, classical or world music. So why are we guarding those boundaries?

Music is an artform that is fluid by nature. Of all the arts it is the one most able to bleed across ideas of genre or category. Music is a clear candidate for collaborative work. It so easily seeps into multiple contexts and roles.

Many of the sounds of classical music are no less relevant, profoundly illuminating and moving than they were when they were first created. The problem lies with the most of the institutions that currently surround and support this music. At the moment, these institutions are not supple enough. They are not creative enough. We are guarding the wrong things. We have sought to emulate corporate models rather than refining our own and presenting truly creative ways of enlivening people's lives and imaginations. Our role as artists is as urgent as it has ever been.

We need to consider very carefully what we are creating now, which aspects of the now institutionalised tradition we are venerating. 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. The arts shouldn't take place only behind the closed doors of concert halls, theatres and galleries. We need to think about removing the obstacles between the art and people engaging with it.

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. That is the heart of my recommendation for this report. I have a strong sense it will also become both heart and body of my own work for years to come.