

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Public and anonymous

Individual



Short submission (text box 500 words or less)

Australia's musical heritage is extraordinarily rich and largely unrecovered. It encompasses First Nations traditions, the contributions of settler colonial society, and the musical heritage of migrant and minority communities from across Europe, Asia, and the world. Many of these traditions represent early attempts at intercultural dialogue and inclusive national identity-building that remain directly relevant to contemporary Australia. Yet there is almost no institutional support for the research that would recover, document, and make this heritage accessible.

The crisis is structural. Leading universities have quietly dismantled the infrastructure that once supported music research. The Australian National University plans to disestablish its School of Music. Monash University has closed its musicology and ethnomusicology programs. The University of Melbourne has excluded musicology from its Conservatorium's strategic vision. Across the country, serious study of music history and culture is being replaced by narrowly vocational "music industry" units with little historical or cultural depth.

The consequences extend beyond the academy. Without musicologists and ethnomusicologists, we lose the capacity to understand our own musical past, and with it, the knowledge that gives Australian music its identity and significance. There is currently no national programme for critical editions of Australian music. There are virtually no post-doctoral positions in musicology. Independent scholars who have completed PhDs have no funded pathway to continue contributing to the national conversation. The research that does get done is unfunded, precarious, and increasingly driven overseas.

Music is not entertainment. It is moral architecture. It cultivates empathy, bridges cultural divides, and inspires civic virtue. Peter Sculthorpe described the spirit of Australia's earliest serious composer as "a formative part of the Australian ethos" whose influence was "more than musical: it has also been moral and ideological." This vision of music as foundational to civic life should inform cultural policy.

The new National Cultural Policy should:

1. Recognise musicology and ethnomusicology as protected national capabilities essential to understanding Australia's cultural heritage across all communities.
2. Establish dedicated funding for independent cultural researchers working outside university structures, who are producing internationally significant scholarship with no institutional support.
3. Create a national programme for the recovery, critical editing, and preservation of Australian musical heritage, including the multicultural and intercultural traditions that reflect who we are as a nation.

Performers keep music alive. Scholars document its history, interpret the present, and shape the heritage we leave behind. Fund the critical scholarship that writes the biography of our nation. Without it, we have music but no memory. We need to expand the mandate to the scholars that make it legible, and situate it within our history. This will also institutionalise outcomes and funding will increase, audiences will comprehend and see meaning and value where they might have otherwise missed it.