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I am writing as a practising artist who has worked across many parts of Australia's cultural sector for three decades - as a solo percussionist, chamber musician, prolific commissioner of new work, artistic director, educator, mentor and advocate for contemporary Australian music. Through my work with Ensemble Offspring and the wider arts community, I have collaborated with a huge range of composers, performers, festivals, educators, presenters and communities across Australia and internationally.

Australia's cultural sector is extraordinarily innovative and resilient, but it remains structurally fragile. Much of the country's artistic innovation comes from independent artists and the small-to-medium sector, yet these parts of the ecology continue to operate under significant financial duress and increasing insecurity. Artists and organisations are expected to deliver ambitious creative outcomes while managing rising costs, workforce instability and growing administrative demands. One of the most important changes I would like to see reflected in the National Cultural Policy is a stronger commitment to long-term sustainability for individual artists and the small-medium sector more broadly.

Multi-year operational funding is essential for organisations such as Ensemble Offspring to plan strategically, commission new Australian work, tour, retain skilled staff and musicians as well as build meaningful relationships with audiences and communities – but currently there are so few companies who are awarded this type of funding (and at an all-time low annual amount) that this funding acts more as a bandage than any sort of a real lifeline.

As an artistic director and mentor, I am also deeply concerned about the future pathways available to emerging and mid-career artists. Australia has already lost a plethora of highly skilled artists and arts workers because sustainable careers are increasingly difficult to maintain. Artists are too often expected to absorb unpaid labour in a climate where the act of 'playing music' is still often considered a fun and not work! Fair remuneration, professional development opportunities, structured mentorships and project funding for these young artists are all critical to ensure the next generation of artists can thrive.

Arts education must also be recognised as a central part of Australia's cultural future. Studies have shown, time and time again, that access for all school aged children to some sort of music education is integral to their overall development. Pie in the sky thinking entails an Australia where public school students also having access to high-quality music and arts education - including opportunities to engage with living Australian artists – but that is far from even a dream currently. Music education is absolutely vital for developing creativity, curiosity and cultural literacy in our children and teenagers. The arts are not peripheral to society; they are essential to how we connect, communicate and understand ourselves.

I would also like to see stronger support for new Australian creative work nationally and internationally. Australian artists are creating work of exceptional originality and quality, but opportunities for touring, export and international exchange remain limited. Investment in these areas would strengthen Australia's cultural identity and global presence while creating important opportunities for artists and organisations.

Music and the arts more broadly contribute profoundly to education, wellbeing, community connection and Australia's international reputation. A strong National Cultural Policy has the opportunity to create a more sustainable, ambitious and inclusive future for Australian artists, organisations and audience – and let's be honest that essentially comes from much greater government investment!