

National Cultural Policy- submission



Who I Am

My name is Sophie Raymond, an independent Australian artist, songwriter, filmmaker and creative producer/director based in Sydney, with periods of time based in regional NSW. I work across music, live performance, community participation, education and cross-sector cultural collaboration for more than two decades.

My work has moved between grassroots music venues, orchestral collaborations, documentary and animation, community arts and large-scale participatory performance. I have worked with independent artists, schools, scientists, environmental organisations, youth organisations and major cultural institutions. My films and collaborative works have received multiple awards, and screened at major international festivals including Sundance Film Festival, Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival and International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam. *Mrs Carey's Concert*, co-directed with Bob Connolly, broke Australian box-office records for a documentary, and I also worked with Adam Elliot on his Oscar-winning animation *Harvie Krumpet*.

I also hold a degree in Anthropology, which has deeply informed my interest in ritual, storytelling, collective behaviour, cultural transmission and the ways communities create shared meaning through creative practice and participation.

Over many years I have consciously chosen to remain based in Australia and contribute to Australian cultural life and pathways for other artists. This has included pioneering the Aussie Croc Pot Australian Acoustic Showcase at the International Folk Alliance in the early 2000s, as well as developing collaborative creative projects such as S.L.A.G. (Southern Ladies Animation Group), For All Earthkind, and most recently the Sea Kin project at the Australian National Maritime Museum.

The themes explored in the film *Recorder Queen*, created with Genevieve Lacey, speak strongly to this commitment — examining questions of Australian culture, artistic identity and what it means to sustain creative life and practice within this country.

Over recent years I have been developing *For All Earthkind* — a long-term participatory arts initiative exploring how shared cultural experiences might help communities engage with the climate crisis not only intellectually, but socially, emotionally and collectively.

The project has involved orchestras, choirs, schools, young people, First Nations collaborators, community performers and cross-disciplinary partners. While still evolving, it has become increasingly clear to me that the work is not simply about presenting performances. It is testing what cultural infrastructure itself could look like in the 21st century.

What I See

Australia is entering a period where climate instability, technological acceleration and social fragmentation are occurring simultaneously.

At the same time, many people are searching for forms of participation, belonging and meaning that are not purely transactional, commercial or algorithmically mediated.

This need can be met by extreme ideas that give simple answers to complex questions, inflame outrage and emotion, and provide a short-term sense of agency and being heard.

But history shows us it can also be met by consciously designed, arts-based civic moments.

We have national sporting rituals. We have commemorative rituals. But there are comparatively few recurring civic-cultural experiences that invite people to gather across generations, sectors and communities to collectively imagine the future together.

Arts and culture have a profound role to play in strengthening the social fabric, civic connection and emotional wellbeing of the nation.

Not because art “solves” climate change or racism, but because culture shapes how societies:

- relate to each other
- process complexity
- sustain democratic imagination
- transmit values
- rehearse futures
- build emotional resilience
- maintain connection to place and to one another

The climate crisis is not only a scientific or technological challenge. It is also a cultural challenge.

Increasingly, I see audiences, schools and communities looking for opportunities to participate directly rather than simply consume content. People want spaces where they can make meaning together.

Australia is a hugely multicultural nation. Yet many experiences of one another are increasingly mediated — through news cycles, algorithms and political abstraction — rather than grounded in lived experience and relationship. This feels particularly important in Australia, home to the world’s oldest continuous cultures, yet also a country where many people have limited direct engagement across communities and cultural experience. Some of the most meaningful moments I have witnessed through participatory arts practice have emerged not simply through representation, but through the shared act of making, rehearsing and creating together.

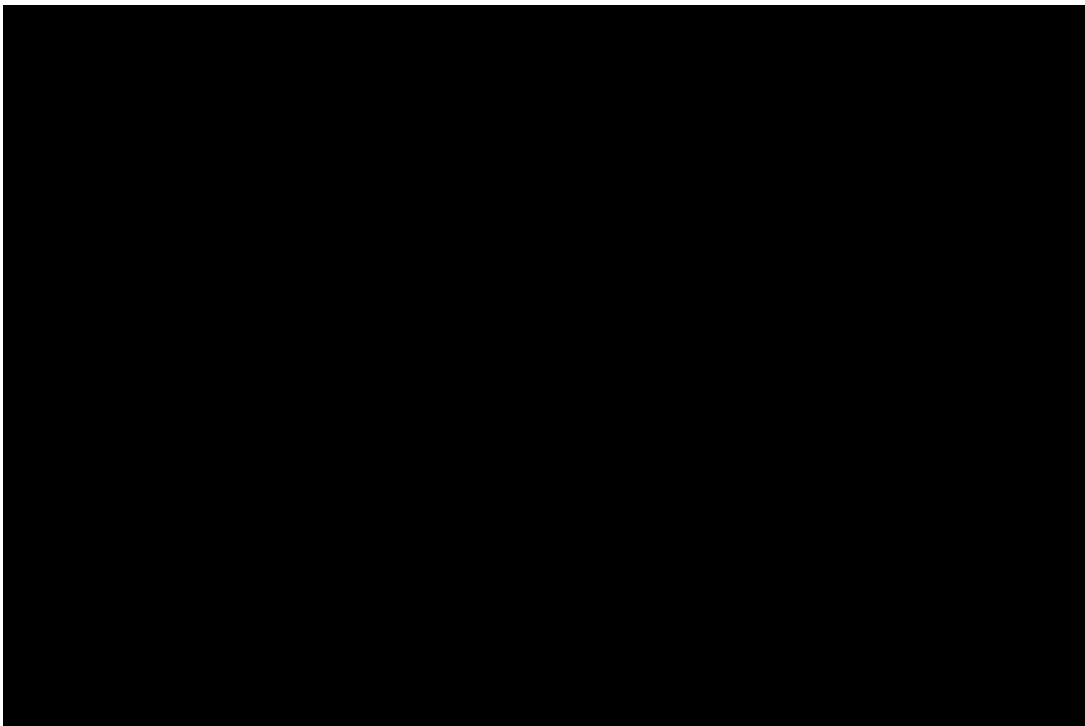
Music, storytelling, ritual and collective performance remain some of the oldest and most effective human technologies for building this kind of connection.

Australia has already demonstrated globally through initiatives such as Earth Hour that shared symbolic participation can travel far beyond its point of origin. But I believe the impact deepens further when participation moves beyond symbolic gesture into shared making — where communities prepare together, gather together and shape events locally through ongoing conversation and collaboration. That is when cultural participation begins to weave more deeply into the social fabric itself.

What I Am Already Doing

In 2024, *For All Earthkind* explored how live performance and digital technology could work together to create a shared civic-cultural experience across cities through a synchronised performance of *Tomorrow's Sun* — a large-scale participatory work responding to Australia's collective experience of the Black Summer fires.

Through the use of a live link of conductor Aaron Wyatt (Nygoonar), performances in Sydney and Melbourne were synchronised in real time, allowing geographically separate audiences and performers to participate within the same musical and ceremonial framework. The event brought together the Australian Youth Orchestra in Melbourne and the Sydney Youth Orchestra in Sydney, alongside school students, community choirs, orchestral musicians, First Nations performers, young people, elders and public participants in a shared act of music-making and reflection.



The event culminated in a powerful “healing of Country” finale, with William Barton and Véronique Serret performing in Sydney while Waanaga Blanco danced in Melbourne’s Federation Square. The event demonstrated how locally grounded cultural participation, supported by contemporary technology, can foster intergenerational connection, intercultural exchange and collective experience at both community and national scale.

For All Earthkind has evolved as an experiment in participatory cultural infrastructure.

The project explores the possibility of synchronised, locally shaped performances occurring simultaneously across different communities, connected through shared themes, music and digital technologies, while still allowing regional identity and cultural specificity to remain central.

Importantly, the model does not depend on a single centralised event. Its strength comes from distributed participation.

A school, regional orchestra, youth choir, local council, Pacific community, First Nations organisation or neighbourhood arts collective could each shape their own version while remaining connected to a larger shared national and international moment.

The work combines:

- live music
- orchestral and community participation
- storytelling
- education
- digital connection
- civic gathering
- youth engagement
- climate and ecological themes
- First Nations collaboration and leadership
- locally embedded creative responses

The project has also explored how ‘old’ human forms of connection — singing together, gathering together, making things together — might work in partnership with contemporary technologies capable of linking communities across large distances simultaneously. In a country shaped by both regional isolation and the tyranny of distance, this creates opportunities for shared cultural participation that is locally grounded while nationally connected.

Technology alone does not create belonging. But technology can amplify and connect shared acts of participation.

This feels increasingly important in a time where many social experiences are becoming individualised, commercialised or disembodied.

I believe there is significant opportunity for Australia to invest in recurring participatory cultural frameworks that strengthen social cohesion while also supporting local creative ecosystems.

What's Getting in the Way

Current funding and policy structures often separate:

- arts
- education
- environment
- community development
- wellbeing
- film and media
- civic participation

Yet projects operating in this space naturally move across these boundaries.

In my experience, this kind of cross-fertilisation is often made possible by independent artists and creative producers who move between sectors over long periods of time, gradually learning the languages, priorities, constraints and possibilities of different fields. Independent practitioners are frequently the connective tissue between institutions, communities and disciplines. Yet support for this type of work is often minimal, fragmented and highly prescriptive.

Much of this developmental and relationship-building labour also occurs voluntarily and over long periods of time. Independent artists are often uniquely placed to build trust and connective relationships across communities, sectors and institutions. But this work is difficult to sustain when the time required for relationship-building sits outside funded delivery and remains economically precarious. As a result, many valuable cultural processes remain necessarily short-lived despite their broader public value, and the ongoing pressures of sustaining this largely invisible labour can frequently lead to burnout across the independent sector.

There are limited long-term frameworks for supporting cultural initiatives that are:

- participatory rather than purely presentational
- intergenerational
- nationally connective but locally adaptable
- climate-responsive
- community embedded
- cross-sector by design

Much cultural funding remains short-cycle and project-based, which makes it difficult to build continuity, ritual and long-duration public participation over time.

There can also be significant tension between bureaucratic processes and creative or Indigenous ways of working. Many of the most meaningful cultural processes are relational, responsive and adaptive by nature. They evolve according to the people involved, the relationships formed, the time available, the place in which they occur and the energies emerging within communities themselves. These ways of working do not always fit neatly within rigid reporting structures, predetermined timelines or narrowly defined funding categories.

There is also a tendency for culture to be viewed as supplementary rather than infrastructural.

Yet social cohesion, civic imagination and collective belonging are forms of national resilience.

The arts sector is frequently asked to demonstrate measurable economic outcomes while many of its deeper civic and cultural contributions remain undervalued because they are harder to quantify.

One small example can be seen in Phase #1 of *For All Earthkind*, where the project's opening song was performed across several large-scale events, including the NSW Public Schools Combined Performing Arts Festival. We estimate that approximately 2,500 young musicians and singers learned and performed the work.

Performance is a form of embodiment. It requires hours of rehearsal, listening, cooperation and shared preparation. Participants do not simply consume the experience — they inhabit it together.

In a culture increasingly measured through clicks, impressions and “likes”, it is worth asking how we value depth of participation. What metric meaningfully translates the experience of learning, rehearsing and performing together?

In time alone 1 “like” = 5 minutes of time to watch a music performance online.
Conservatively musicians would take 5 hours to learn, rehearse and perform a piece.

So 1 listener ‘like’ = the value of 60 participants ‘likes’. Multiplied by 2500 = 150,000 ‘likes’.

What I Believe Australia Could Invest In

I would encourage the National Cultural Policy process to consider culture not only as an industry, but as civic infrastructure.

This could include greater investment in:

- recurring national participatory cultural events
- locally led but nationally connected cultural frameworks
- long-term intergenerational projects
- First Nations-led cultural collaboration and care for Country practices
- partnerships between artists, schools, scientists and communities
- regional adaptation models rather than centralised metropolitan delivery
- cultural participation as part of democratic and social resilience
- large-scale public creative experiences that are accessible beyond traditional arts audiences

There may also be significant opportunity in relatively modest localised grant models that enable communities themselves to host and shape events within broader national frameworks.

Importantly, government can help guide intergenerational and intercultural participation through the structure and criteria of these grants.

One could imagine a local school performance developed alongside Traditional Custodians and local Aboriginal dancers, while a Country Women's Association branch collaborates with a local Sikh community to host catering and shared gathering spaces around the event. In another town the cultural mix and artistic response would look entirely different — shaped by local people, local stories and local relationships.

The strength of the model lies precisely in this local ownership within a larger shared cultural framework.

There is also significant educational potential in participatory cultural frameworks of this kind. Projects such as *For All Earthkind* can support existing music and arts education while also creating broader entry points into history, geography, science, ecology, storytelling and civic participation. Shared creative works can help students engage emotionally and socially with complex issues in ways that complement formal curriculum learning. There may be opportunities over time for frameworks of this nature to connect more deeply with national curriculum priorities, particularly around intercultural understanding, sustainability and collaborative learning.

The project has also explored how “old” human forms of connection — singing together, gathering together, making things together — might work in partnership with contemporary technologies capable of linking communities across large distances simultaneously. In a country shaped by both regional isolation and the tyranny of distance, this creates opportunities for shared cultural participation that is locally grounded while nationally connected.

I also believe there is a significant opportunity for Australia to become an international leader in culturally-led climate engagement — particularly within the Australia-Pacific region.

Australia has some of the world's oldest living cultures, highly developed artistic sectors, strong community traditions and advanced digital infrastructure. There is an opportunity to bring these strengths together in ways that are participatory, place-based and future-facing.

Closing Statement

The question may not simply be how we fund more art.

It may also be:

What kinds of shared cultural experiences will help societies remain connected, imaginative and humane during periods of rapid change?

In a fragmented era, culture is not peripheral infrastructure. It is part of the connective tissue of society.

Projects such as *For All Earthkind* are only one possible model, but they suggest that large-scale participatory culture — grounded in local communities, First Nations knowledge, music, storytelling and shared public ritual — may have an important role to play in Australia's future cultural life.

Importantly, this kind of work naturally speaks across many of the National Cultural Policy pillars. It supports First Nations cultural leadership and intergenerational knowledge sharing; strengthens local and regional cultural participation; creates opportunities for young people and emerging artists; builds connections between education, community and creative practice; and explores how Australian stories and experiences can be shared nationally and internationally through both live and digital forms.

I believe there is a significant opportunity for Australia to think more ambitiously about culture not simply as content or industry, but as an active civic practice that helps communities participate in shaping the future together.

I would welcome further opportunities to contribute to these conversations as cultural policy continues to evolve.