SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY 2026

Music in Me, Australian Youth Orchestra

Introduction

The National Cultural Policy presents an important opportunity to strengthen how arts and culture are experienced by all Australians.

For this vision to be realised, every child must have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the arts from the earliest years of schooling. This is where participation begins, where confidence is built, and where the foundations of lifelong engagement are established.

The Australian Youth Orchestra (AYO), through its *Music in Me* program, contributes to this foundation.

As one of the eight national arts training organisations comprising the Arts8 collective, AYO has spent nearly 80 years developing Australia's professional musicians and creative workforce. Through *Music in Me*, AYO also supports primary school teachers and schools to deliver quality music education, ensuring for more than ten years now that more young Australians can participate, create and connect through music.

AYO is lodging a separate organisational submission addressing AYO's stewardship of national orchestral training capability and broader questions of cultural infrastructure, system coordination and workforce sustainability. This submission, lodged on behalf of the *Music in Me* program, addresses the foundational layer of that work — the implementation of music education in Australia's primary schools through teacher mentoring. The two submissions are designed to be read together, speaking from the apex and the foundations of the same national pipeline.

This submission focuses on how the next National Cultural Policy can support that work in practice.

“Every child should have the opportunity to learn and create music.”
- Richard Gill AO, founder

Music in Me: building capability in schools

Music in Me is AYO's national music education teacher mentoring program. Founded by the late Richard Gill AO and operating since 2015, the program is now in its eleventh year of national delivery.

The program works directly in classrooms, pairing expert mentors with teachers over a sustained period. Together, they plan, teach and reflect — building the teacher's confidence and capability to deliver music independently.

This approach recognises the realities of the current system.

Most primary schools rely on generalist teachers to deliver the arts. At the same time, opportunities for teachers to specialise in music have declined, and specialist roles are not consistently available across schools and regions. Both are needed to build a robust and quality music education strategy.

Music in Me responds to this by supporting both parts of the workforce:

- **Generalist teachers**, mentored to build their confidence and competence to teach music as part of their everyday practice
- **Novice specialist teachers**, supported to develop their skills and confidence through mentoring

In both cases, the goal is the same: to build lasting capability within the school, so that music education continues after the mentor's involvement ends.

The model is grounded in evidence. Independent peer-reviewed research by Monash University (Barrett, Zhukov & Welch, 2019; Barrett & Zhukov, 2021, 2024; Zhukov & Barrett, 2025) demonstrates that *Music in Me* mentoring produces substantial growth in teacher confidence to teach music — from an average 3.5% at program entry to 76.5% at completion — and that 90% of principals report satisfaction with the program’s outcomes. Across eleven years, the program has reached 598 schools and 1,131 teachers in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia, in public, Catholic and independent settings.

These outcomes are consistent with a broader research base. International evidence shows that quality, sequential music education improves cognitive function, literacy, numeracy, attendance, wellbeing and social cohesion (Guhn, Emerson & Gouzouasis, 2020).

Furthermore, the Music in Me program specifically aligns with the key national priorities of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034: equity and excellence; wellbeing for learning and engagement; and a strong and sustainable workforce, demonstrated across the body of research to date.

The opportunity

Australia has a strong cultural policy framework in place.

Revive articulates a clear ambition: that all Australians should be able to access and participate in arts and culture, and that artists and creative workers are central to national life.

Across the sector, there is broad agreement that arts education is fundamental to achieving this vision. We support and align with the work of our colleagues advocating for stronger recognition of arts and music education within national policy, including *Music Education: Right from the Start* (Alberts | The Tony Foundation, 2026) and the National Advocates for Arts Education (NAAE, 2026).

The challenge, however, is not only one of recognition. The challenge is ensuring that policy ambition is realised consistently in classrooms across Australia.

The evidence on this gap is now well established. Year 12 Arts subject enrolments declined nationally by approximately 21% between 2015 and 2023 (Gattenhof and Saunders, 2026). In primary Initial Teacher Education, average music education training hours have fallen from 17 in 2009 to just eight by 2022 — a more than halving in 13 years (Hocking and Collins, 2023). Recent ACER research in NSW found that 82% of teachers report their initial teacher education in music was inadequate, 55% received fewer than 10 hours of music education during their training, and 69% rank music below eight or more other subjects in their confidence to teach it (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2024). Under *Revive*, the Commonwealth committed $2.6 million over five years to specialist in-school arts education programs (Australian Government, 2023) — modest in scale relative to the broader Commonwealth investment in education priorities such as STEM.

In many schools, particularly in regional, remote and low socio-economic communities, access to quality music education remains uneven. Without addressing this implementation gap, the broader goals of cultural policy — participation, workforce development and audience engagement — will remain difficult to achieve at scale.

A practical approach

Rather than introducing additional policy structures, we propose a focus on implementation.

Arts and music education can be embedded across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy — provided there are effective mechanisms to support delivery within schools.

This includes:

- supporting teachers to deliver music as part of the curriculum
- building capability within schools, not relying solely on external programs
- aligning cultural and education policy settings
- investing in models that are scalable and sustainable

The remainder of this submission shows what this approach looks like across the five pillars, illustrated through Music in Me as a practical example.

Embedding across the five pillars

Arts and music education are not adjuncts to the National Cultural Policy. They are foundational to all five pillars, and are already contributing across each pillar. This can be further developed through specific, identifiable mechanisms.

Pillar	What this looks like in practice	Mechanism
First Nations First	Recognition that First Nations music, language and pedagogy are foundational to Australia's cultural transmission, embedded in resource development and teacher capability under First Nations leadership.	First Nations–led commissioning and resource development; sustained investment in First Nations musicians, composers and educators.
A Place for [redacted]	Equitable access to arts and music [redacted]	Place-based delivery models of [redacted]

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