

National Cultural Submission

By Catherine Henwood, CEO, Perth Symphony Orchestra | 23 May 2026

I support the next National Cultural Policy that builds on Revive while moving from recognition of the value of arts, culture and the creative industries to system design. As CEO of Perth Symphony Orchestra, I urge particular focus on two priorities.

Culture is public infrastructure. The policy should adopt a broader definition of cultural infrastructure. Infrastructure is not only buildings; it is the operations, programming and workforce, alongside the digital systems, touring networks, data, governance and community relationships that make cultural life possible. Capital investment must be linked to cultural plans and long-term operating capacity, or we build venues no one can afford to fill.

Perth Symphony is itself this kind of infrastructure, existing *without* a permanent home. In 2025 we reached 119,917 Western Australians across 243 performances and workshops, engaged 1,282 musicians, commissioned 105 new works, and toured to Moora, Karratha, Roebourne and the Goldfields — at one point staging a concert on a stage built of 500 hay bales. None of this lives in a building; it lives in relationships, workforce and trust built since 2011.

In 2025 we turned a corner, recording a surplus of \$151,432 — our first since 2020 — but we did so with earned income and private philanthropy. Only 4% of our income comes from the State Government's annual operating grant. If the State and Federal Governments are serious about the creative future of our country, investment in the small-mid tier companies is essential. We are proud of what we sustain on so little, yet a single good year is not structural stability. National policy must invest in the people and systems that make assets culturally productive, not in concrete alone.

Restore arts education as a national capability. Arts education is not discretionary enrichment; it is central to social development and cultural participation. Strong cultural learning pathways help young people build confidence, critical and creative thinking, empathy, collaboration, identity and civic capability — and they normalise participation across a lifetime.

We see this in our work in regional schools. In 2025 we delivered 148 workshops across 70 schools and reached 7,055 young people, including 1,281 Indigenous youth. Through Kalgoorlie Voices, high-school students worked toward Certificate II music units, opening real pathways into the creative industries for young people who would not otherwise have had them. In Roebourne, our musicians worked alongside Elders so that children navigating community grief could find confidence, connection and a stronger sense of cultural identity through music. Every Green Shoots Moora participant told us the program gave them access to something they could not otherwise reach.

The work of Dr Anita Collins translates two decades of neuro-musical research – which shows that learning music uniquely strengthens language, executive function, and overall brain development in every child - into a science-based case that music and arts education should be a core part of every student's schooling, not an optional extra.

I encourage the Australian Government to treat arts education as a national capability strategy, to align cultural policy with education, regional development and social cohesion, and to recognise the distance, cost and remoteness that shape cultural life in Western Australia. If the policy does not build confidence to invest, it will not increase investment — and the communities who most need culture will be first to go without.



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