



Submission to the

National Cultural Policy Consultation 2026

Submitted by: Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO)

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About Sydney Youth Orchestras

Founded in 1973, Sydney Youth Orchestras (SYO) is one of Australia's leading orchestral training organisations and the only program providing pathways for young orchestral musicians from beginner to pre-professional level. SYO annually supports thousands of young musicians across a range of ensembles both weekly and intensive, offering exposure to the full orchestral canon as well as contemporary Australian work.

SYO embraces its vision to boldly shape the future of orchestral music as it has done for five decades. Young musicians who have benefitted from SYO programs can be found in all professional orchestras in Australia and around the globe.

SYO is a proud member of the Australian Network of Youth Orchestras (ANYO) and is deeply committed to ensuring that for young people in NSW, participation in orchestral music is not determined by geography, income, or background.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to shaping Australia's next National Cultural Policy. This submission responds to the five pillars framework established in *Revive* and reflects our experience as a national training organisation working across metropolitan, regional, remote and First Nations communities.

Pillar 4: Strong Cultural Infrastructure — The Crisis in Youth Arts Access

SYO's experience over the past decade illustrates a deepening paradox: while demand for orchestral music participation has grown, the inequity of access has grown faster. The structural conditions that once created pathways into orchestral music, particularly school-based beginner programs, have significantly contracted. Where schools previously offered instrumental programs that introduced children to orchestral instruments from scratch, many now operate extension-only models that presuppose prior tuition and equipment driven by the family. For a growing number of children, SYO is not a 'next step' in a broader music education pathway, it is the only point of entry.

This is a structural failure with long-term consequences for the sector. If we do not invest in the beginners today, we will not have the orchestral musicians, audience members, or advocates of tomorrow. SYO calls on the next National Cultural Policy to explicitly recognise the role of youth arts training organisations as foundational cultural infrastructure, not minor to the sector, but central to its future.

Funding Models and the User-Pays Barrier

The current funding environment places SYO in a structurally constrained position. Without secure and ongoing government investment, our capacity to keep fees accessible (or preferable fee-free) is limited, and our ability to offer subsidised places is insufficient to meet need. The 'user-pays' model that governs much of the youth arts sector functions as a silent equity barrier, systematically excluding families who cannot absorb the cost of tuition, instruments, uniforms and transport.

The next National Cultural Policy should move beyond project-based and time-limited funding and instead provide the sector with the infrastructure certainty it needs: multi-year operational funding, subsidised access to rehearsal and performance space, and a national access and equity fund that youth arts organisations can draw on to reduce financial barriers for young people and families.

Our ability to meet the needs of children who wish to experience orchestral music is not limited by their interest or capacity — it is limited by funding.

Pillar 3 & 5: Investing in Youth Arts is Investing in the Future Sector

The work SYO undertakes is not simply pedagogical, it is sector-forming. Young musicians who participate in SYO programs are exposed to new Australian composition, contemporary orchestral practice, and live performance as both participants and audience members. These early, formative experiences are what cultivate the next generation of musicians, concertgoers, donors, volunteers, and arts advocates.

SYO's programming also includes dedicated access initiatives for people living with disabilities, regional touring and collaborative partnerships; we recognise that inclusive practice is not an add-on but a core responsibility of any organisation that takes its public mandate seriously. Investments made at this level, in inclusion, in contemporary Australian work, in early-career exposure, are the investments that will shape the sector's character, capacity and culture for decades to come.

We urge the Australian Government to establish a dedicated national framework for youth arts education and participation, driven by an independent body with the expertise, networks and mandate to coordinate investment, research and advocacy across states and territories. This framework should sit independently of primary and secondary education policy, acknowledging that arts training organisations operate in a distinct and complementary space.

Pillar 1: First Nations First — The Importance of Relationship, Time and Trust

SYO's experience working with First Nations and remote communities has taught us that genuine, community-led cultural projects are only possible when the foundational work of relationship-building has already been done. This work takes years, not months.

Over six years, SYO has developed a sustained presence in the Far West of NSW, one of Australia's most music-rich but infrastructure-poor regions. Through patient, community-centred engagement, SYO has found new ways for orchestral music to be relevant and resonant in those communities. This is not imposing metropolitan frameworks, but listening, adapting, and amplifying what is already there. This work was recognised in an [ABC Backroads feature on the Outback Choir](#), which showcased how deep community relationships can produce culturally authentic, extraordinary outcomes.

The current structure of government funding rounds does not support this kind of work. Short-cycle, competitive funding creates pressure to demonstrate outcomes before relationships have matured. It incentivises deliverable-driven models over trust-driven models, and it makes it structurally very difficult for communities with limited administrative capacity to initiate, lead, or sustain projects on their own terms.

The Critical Role of Regional Development Organisations

Where community capacity to drive a project is not yet present, there must be a bridge. Regional Arts Development Organisations (RADO) and regionally-based arts companies serve this function. They hold the networks, the trust, and the cultural knowledge that allow larger organisations like SYO to operate meaningfully in remote and regional contexts. These organisations are not intermediaries in the transactional sense; they are the connective tissue of Australia's decentralised cultural ecosystem.

The next National Cultural Policy must provide sustained, secure funding for Regional Arts Development Organisations as a precondition for meaningful First Nations engagement and regional cultural development, not as a downstream consequence of it.

Pillar 3 & 5: Connecting Young Artists to the World

International pathways for study, performance and cultural exchange are formative for young artists and essential to the long-term health of Australia's professional arts sector. Yet systemic and structural barriers continue to place these opportunities beyond the reach of talented young artists who lack family financial support. The next National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to address these inequities directly.

The Visa Savings Barrier for International Scholarship Recipients

A significant and largely invisible barrier confronts young Australian musicians who have earned full international scholarships for postgraduate study. These scholarships generally that cover tuition, accommodation and living costs. However, many destination countries require visa applicants to demonstrate access to personal savings as evidence of financial self-sufficiency while abroad. This requirement exists independently of scholarship income and cannot be satisfied by even the most generous scholarship offer alone.

For musicians from financially secure families, meeting this requirement is straightforward. For talented young artists from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or financially independent, many of whom have devoted years to their training rather than accumulating savings, it is an insurmountable obstacle. The effect is that admission to the world's leading conservatories becomes contingent not on artistic merit, but on personal wealth. SYO calls on the Australian Government to establish a government-backed visa underwriting fund that provides eligible scholarship recipients with the financial evidence required for visa purposes, without the funds needing to be drawn upon. Such a fund would be low-cost in practice and high-impact in reach, enabling Australia's most talented young musicians to access the international training they have earned.

De-risking International Touring for Small Arts Organisations

The fragile nature of international touring has never been more apparent. Australia's geographic position means that international travel is not incidental to cultural activity, it is central to it. When global events disrupt air travel, Australian performing arts organisations face catastrophic financial exposure: non-refundable venue deposits, rebooking costs, accommodation penalties, and the human cost borne by the young artists involved.

Standard travel insurance does not cover disruptions caused by acts of war, geopolitical conflict, or other force majeure events. In April 2026, SYO experienced this directly: 86 of Australia's most talented young scheduled to travel to Europe on tour, including a performance at the Berlin Philharmonie, had their Emirates flights cancelled at three weeks' notice due to the Middle East conflict. The financial impact exceeded \$100,000 and no insurance mechanism was available to offset it. SYO calls on the Australian Government to establish a dedicated international touring insurance fund for small and mid-sized performing arts organisations, one that provides emergency underwriting/insurance when touring activity is disrupted by events beyond the control of the organisation and outside the scope of commercial insurance. This investment would protect Australia's cultural diplomacy pipeline and ensure that organisations of SYO's scale can commit with confidence to continue to represent Australia on the world stage.

Summary: SYO's Key Calls to the Next National Cultural Policy

Sydney Youth Orchestras respectfully calls on the Australian Government to:

- Recognise youth arts training organisations as foundational cultural infrastructure and fund them accordingly with multi-year operational support.
- Establish a national access and equity fund to reduce financial barriers to participation in youth arts programs across all socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Create an independently governed national framework for youth arts education and participation, separate from school curriculum policy, to coordinate sector-wide investment and advocacy.
- Reform funding structures to allow long-cycle, relationship-based engagement with youth arts, First Nations and remote communities, acknowledging that community-led outcomes cannot be mandated on short timelines.
- Provide secure, ongoing funding for Regional Arts Development Organisations as essential infrastructure for First Nations cultural engagement and regional development.
- Invest in the youth arts as the long-term pipeline for Australia's cultural workforce, creative audiences, and the sector's future vitality.
- Establish a government-backed visa underwriting fund to enable talented young Australian artists from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to take up international scholarships where visa requirements mandate evidence of personal savings.
- Create a dedicated international touring contingency fund to underwrite small and mid-sized performing arts organisations against force majeure travel disruptions that fall outside the scope of commercial travel insurance.

SYO also strongly supports key issues raised in the ANYO Submission that the next National Cultural Policy addresses:

- Children's rights and access to the creative arts as a fundamental entitlement and the growing burden on families that, without adequate public investment, turns this right into a privilege of the financially secure
- The acute risk facing youth arts organisations due to insecure venue access a structural vulnerability that threatens continuity of training and community participation
- The absence of dedicated, direct funding for young artists within the current policy pillars, and the limits of relying on the education system to fill this gap, including the false equivalence between upskilling teachers and resourcing specialist youth arts practitioners

- The imperative to invest in specialised youth arts organisations as the primary mechanism for identifying and nurturing the next generation of Australia's professional artists
- The profound and undervalued role that youth orchestras play in building social cohesion, bringing together young people across cultural, geographic and socioeconomic divides through the uniquely unifying experience of ensemble music-making

We thank the Minister and the Office for the Arts for the opportunity to contribute to this important process. SYO looks forward to continued dialogue and to playing an active role in shaping the cultural landscape for the next generation of Australians.

Mia Patoulios

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Sydney Youth Orchestras
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