

# 'Beware of Snakes, Spiders and Sinclair.'

## John Sinclair (1919–1991), Music Critic for the Melbourne *Herald*: The Early Years

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Anyone who, purposely or no, stands in the way of musical progress in Melbourne runs the risk of being impaled on the sharp journalistic lance of John Sinclair who has become one of the most widely read and controversial writers in that city.<sup>1</sup>

This assessment of Sinclair was made early in his career as a music critic, and is significant in that it reveals the extent of the impact he was making on the embryonic music scene in Melbourne only four years after his appointment to the Melbourne *Herald* in 1947. The fact that such a statement could apply with equal validity until the early 1970s, when the invective of the controversial and idiosyncratic Felix Werder at the *Age* held sway, is a measure of the consistency of his approach; it is also a measure of his unwavering dedication to the cause of music and to the removal of all meretricious influences from its development.

Sinclair came to music criticism via an unusual pathway. Apart from an ability to play pianoforte for his own amusement, he had no formal music training. However, he did exhibit a talent for painting, to the extent that he was a well-accepted member of the artistic circle led by John and Sunday Reed at Heide, 'becoming part of the creative turmoil of the 30s and 40s which hurled Australian painting into the modern world.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, his potential as a painter was assessed so highly that in the early 1940s he was awarded a stipend by Sir Keith Murdoch, proprietor of the *Herald*, who overlooked some other prominent artists, Sidney Nolan among them, in favour of Sinclair. Despite this, and for reasons which are unclear, Sinclair did not persist with a career in painting, although he retained an interest in visual arts to the end of his life and contributed occasional articles on it to the *Herald*.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, his association with the Heide circle and their artistic beliefs had significant resonances in his subsequent career as a music critic. Within the context of his determination to encourage a vibrant and enduring musical culture in Melbourne equivalent to the artistic one in which he had participated, Sinclair became an advocate for contemporary music and a champion of those Australian composers and performers whose talents he deemed worthy of support.

Sinclair's long career as a professional music critic began in 1947, when, acting on the advice of Sir Bernard Heinze,<sup>4</sup> Sinclair wrote to the *Herald*, placing his credentials for the position in the following terms:

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<sup>1</sup> 'Critic Gets his Own Back,' *People* 5 Dec. 1951: 39.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Hince, 'A Second Career in the Arts that Lasted 40 Years,' *Age* 11 Jan. 1991. There are numerous references to Sinclair and some photographs of him with various members of the Heide group in Janine Burke, *Joy Hester* (Melbourne: Greenhouse, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> The last was an article on Sidney Nolan published in the *Herald* in 1987, some two years after he was formally dismissed from that newspaper in 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Thérèse Radic, *Heinze* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986) 146. Given the patronage of Keith Murdoch for his painting, Murdoch may have assisted in his appointment, although Sinclair does not acknowledge this.

I have devoted considerable time to an intensive study of various periods of European music from the fifteenth century until today and have contributed musical articles to literary journals. I am not a practicing [sic] musician and I regard my own performance at the piano as valuable only in the field of research and the development of a wider musical sensibility. Although the music critic must have the trained perception necessary to determine the merit or otherwise of a performance, it is equally important that he should possess the ability to translate his musical experience into terms accessible to the layman. The function of the critic is still relatively undeveloped in Australia, and it is one that I regard with the greatest interest.<sup>5</sup>

Given his previous relationship with Murdoch and the support of Heinze, it is likely that Sinclair obtained the position at the *Herald* with relative ease, despite his lack of training in journalism, his amateur status as a musician and his inexperience as a music critic.

At the start and periodically thereafter, his relationship with the *Herald* was a tempestuous one; there were frequent clashes with editors and, especially, sub-editors over autonomy. Unused to the ways of a newspaper office, Sinclair resented their interference with the material he wrote, to the extent that, in frustration, he resigned in 1955. However, he was persuaded to withdraw his letter of resignation by Archer Thomas, editor of the newspaper, who wrote:

Please don't be a dope and insist on resigning. It's silly to go walking out because of a row... You've established an important place for yourself which in times of trial I've defended. And now you want to wreck it all over something that can easily be fixed. I've been on your side through quite a lot of strife, so why react so at one snarl? I'd appreciate it very much if you'll tear up your resignation and go on with the work you've built up.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the implied history of conflict prior to this letter, earlier correspondence between Thomas and Sinclair reveals that the two had crossed swords on a number of occasions before this, and this was an opportunity for Thomas to be rid of his troublesome music critic. Despite the frequent disputes and problems, however, he knew that Sinclair was an asset to the *Herald*. His articles and reviews attracted controversy; they sold newspapers. Large Numbers of Melbournites who never attend a concert read Sinclair, and since late 1947 it has been possible in Melbourne to pull a cocktail party out of the doldrums simply by mentioning his name.<sup>7</sup> Evidence of this lay in the frequency of letters to the editor either supporting or attacking Sinclair, and the complaints made in person to the paper by offended musicians and ABC administrators. Further testimony to the extent of his early fame/notoriety was a three-page article devoted to him in the (then) semi-tabloid weekly *People* magazine in 1951, liberally illustrated with photographs of a cigarette-in-mouth Sinclair working in his 'Bohemian' home in a Parkville loft.<sup>8</sup> Although, Sinclair withdrew his resignation, he gained the important concession that no sub-editor would be permitted to interfere with his copy: '[Sinclair's] crits and his stuff for the stage and screen pages run as written, unless there are potent reasons

<sup>5</sup> John Sinclair, letter to Archer Thomas, 15 Jan. 1947; John Sinclair Papers, La Trobe Library, MS13101, box 3760/5. Sinclair's letter has the address 'Templestowe Rd. Heidelberg,' indicating that he was resident at Heide at the time.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Thomas to Sinclair, 29 Mar. 1955, Sinclair Papers.

<sup>7</sup> 'A Critic Gets his Own Back' 40.

<sup>8</sup> 'A Critic Gets his Own Back' 39-41.

why it should be altered—such as danger of libel or undue obscurity or breaches of *Herald* style.<sup>9</sup>

After this, Sinclair had virtually a free hand to write as he wished, although three years later he was threatened with dismissal after some errors in fact in his review of an Ida Haendel concert.<sup>10</sup> At around the same time, Sir Bernard Heinze, who had fallen out with Sinclair over the uncomplimentary reviews of most of his concerts, is reported to have approached Murdoch demanding that Sinclair be removed from his position, a request which was denied.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Heinze had thought that, having recommended him to the *Herald*, Sinclair would reciprocate by writing laudatory reviews of his concerts. If so, he had mistaken his man, for Sinclair proved to be no great admirer of Heinze the conductor. Over the ensuing years other threats of impending dismissal were made but not carried out until 1985, when the stated reason for the termination of his services at that time was for an error of fact.<sup>12</sup>

From the beginning, Sinclair's direct and uncompromising reviews, with their scant regard for reputation, shook the musical establishment. The impact of this early work was such that it drew the comment:

Before Sinclair entered the field in Melbourne, the stock-in-trade of music critics was a large, multi-syllable vocabulary and a benign willingness to bestow diluted blessings on any musician to whose concert they were invited. In contrast Sinclair's vocabulary consists largely of one-syllable words and his general philosophy of criticism embraces the honest intention of giving discredit where discredit is due.<sup>13</sup>

Overstated and inaccurate as this description is, it is indicative, nevertheless, of the contrast in style between Sinclair and his predecessors.<sup>14</sup> His writing was blunt, direct and uncompromising, but by no means always negative in tone. Indeed, quality performances were generously acknowledged, often in as lyrical a style as he could muster; artists such as Solomon, Stern, Kubelik, Yehudi and Hepzibah Menuhin, Klemperer, Seefried and others would have had no cause for complaint with his reviews of their many concerts.

His consistent refusal to be cowed by the reputations of artists, especially visiting overseas 'celebrities', was evidenced from his earliest concert reviews, a stance which was to cause frequent clashes with the public, music administrators and his employer over the years. Indeed, so perturbed was Keith Murdoch over a review of a concert by the pianist Lili Kraus shortly after Sinclair took up his position on the *Herald* that, eschewing the customary practice of a newspaper proprietor distancing himself from his working journalists, Murdoch wrote:

I have no wish to influence your crits, but I cannot but think that your Lili Kraus notice was cruel, and considering her position in the world of art, and her known performances, I should say an unnecessarily rude notice. The function of criticism is not to say in a few words very damning or highly approving judgements, but to help the readers to understand clearly the true values of performances. It should be done, however, without excessive emphasis, particularly as we are a long way from the

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Thomas to News Editor, Copy, 1 Apr. 1955, Sinclair Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas, Note to Sinclair, 26 Mar. 1958, Sinclair Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Farren-Price, personal interview, 6 May 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Hince, 'John Stewart Sinclair,' *The Oxford Companion to Australian Music*, ed. Warren Bebbington (Melbourne: OUP, 1997) 517.

<sup>13</sup> 'A Critic Gets his Own Back' 39.

<sup>14</sup> Thorold Waters, critic for the Melbourne *Sun* until 1947, was forceful and well-informed. However, the *Sun* was a tabloid, and far less influential than the *Herald*, *Age* or *Argus*.

main musical centres of the world, and our knowledge must be limited by the extent to which we are able to acquire it.<sup>15</sup>

It is not known if, as was his wont, Sinclair replied to this reprimand. What is clear is that Murdoch was taken at his word: there was no discernible change to the tenor or thrust of Sinclair's concert reviews. Indeed, it was fortunate for the future health of Melbourne's music that he was not intimidated by this missive from such a powerful and influential person as Murdoch. Sinclair's reviews and articles at the time were indeed sometimes harsh and uncompromising in style and continued to be so. As one sample from a number which could be cited, his review of a Heinze/Ronal Jackson concert in 1950 demonstrates the destructive aspect of some of his writing:

To an accompaniment that was no model of shapeliness, Ronal Jackson, as soloist, gave a most unconvincing performance... (of arias by Verdi and Leoncavallo). However, his handling of the serenade from 'Don Giovanni' suggested that he may make an excellent Wotan.<sup>16</sup>

A review such as this would have endeared him to neither artist, nor to their many admirers in the profession and amongst the public. Yet, to Sinclair, the performance was clearly a poor one; he believed that it was necessary to write harsh criticism if high standards were to be maintained in professional concerts. Had Sinclair followed Murdoch's advice, with its overtones of cultural cringe and indiscriminate homage to noted performers, his writing would have lost its potency and capacity to influence. In any case, there is clear evidence that by far the majority of his writing was temperate and constructive; nevertheless, it was criticism such as that above which earned Sinclair a notorious reputation here and overseas. In London, for example, some musicians contracted by the ABC to tour Australia were advised by colleagues who had played in Melbourne previously that they would enjoy Australia, but they should 'beware of snakes, spiders and Sinclair.'<sup>17</sup> Thus he was branded a negative, destructive critic. This view was hardly justified, but it persisted.

As a response to published or reported attacks on him, Sinclair expounded his personal views on music criticism on a number of occasions. Two of the earliest insights into his beliefs appeared in 1952, the first in an article in January of that year. There he said:

I believe the critic has an obligation to be clear, even at the risk of being called a dictator. It is his job to know his subject, to set his standards and then to hold to them so that any thoughtful reader, on the evidence of a series of criticisms, can determine where he and the critic stand in relation to music. Only then can the reader form a worth-while opinion of the music on which the critic has reported.<sup>18</sup>

Following a press conference with the sixteen-year-old American violinist Michael Rabin in July that year, Sinclair expanded on his earlier statement. Rabin, the possessor of a formidable technique but comparatively undeveloped as an interpreter of music, had evidently been somewhat intemperate at this conference, claiming to know more about violin playing than

<sup>15</sup> Keith Murdoch, letter to Sinclair, 13 Oct. 1947, Sinclair Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Sinclair, 'All But the Sink,' *Herald* 3 Mar. 1950.

<sup>17</sup> Jenny Fullard, personal interview, 4 May 1997. Fullard is the daughter of Len Fullard, founder of the Oriana Madrigal Choir, a group which specialised in early choral music. She recalled hearing this from a number of ABC touring artists who visited their home in Camberwell.

<sup>18</sup> Sinclair, 'A Lecturer Bites Critic,' *Herald* 31 Jan. 1952.

any critic, and describing Australian critics as hilarious. Now hilarity was never a term which could have applied to Sinclair,<sup>19</sup> who commented:

Critics do not exist...solely for the benefit of performers; nor do they try to teach musicians their craft. The critic stands between the musician and the public and contributes to the understanding of music by measuring the individual work or performance against the widest possible background. In the process, of course, the artist may often learn from the critic. Which is fair enough as after all a critic spends his life learning from the artist.<sup>20</sup>

Complaints about his temerity to criticise performances by those who, on account of their fame, or 'celebrity' status, were deemed to be beyond criticism were so frequent during the 1950s and early 1960s that Sinclair would state and restate his position from time to time. Most complaints came from the performers themselves and from concert-goers, the latter having difficulty with the notion that luminaries did not always play or sing impeccably, or that the programs they presented were not always beyond reproach. In 1954 he published the most comprehensive exposition of his views to that point:

Judging by recent experience, it seems that only a small percentage of the people who like music know what constitutes good music criticism, or even what part the critic plays in the musical life of a community...The critic is not, as is so often supposed, the musician's opposite number and natural enemy—someone whose chief pleasure in music lies in a professionally developed ability to find fault.<sup>21</sup>

With the rise of modernism in Australia during the 1960s, the *Sydney Morning Herald* deemed it appropriate to send its chief music critic, Roger Covell, on a four-month 'enlightenment' tour of Europe, Russia and America to familiarise himself with the state of music in the rest of the world.<sup>22</sup> A few years later, John Sinclair requested a similar tour for himself from the *Herald*. This was refused, allegedly owing to the economic difficulties facing the newspaper at the time. Accordingly, Sinclair sought funds from elsewhere. His letter of application at that time is the last known exposition of his ideas on criticism. It is remarkably consistent with his earlier published beliefs; importantly, it also reveals his own self-view:

I am, after all, the doyen of Australian critics. I have never believed that my responsibilities were confined to review of performances or even that this was the most important facet of my work. I have always believed that my responsibility was to the cause of music in the widest sense; that I had a responsibility not only to make reputable judgements about performance but to understand the many and complex factors that determine the quality of music making in the community.<sup>23</sup>

Sinclair had many detractors among professional musicians, especially from within the ranks of the Victorian Symphony Orchestra (VSO), who resented being criticised by someone

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<sup>19</sup> He was described as 'dour and humourless' by Leonard Dommett, personal interview, 17 Mar. 1996. Dommett was leader of the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra 1965–80 and frequently encountered Sinclair at ABC-sponsored receptions.

<sup>20</sup> Sinclair, 'Critic and Violinist,' *Herald* 24 Jul. 1952.

<sup>21</sup> Sinclair, 'What do You Know about Criticism?' *Herald* 18 May 1954.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Covell, personal interview, 18 Aug. 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Sinclair, letter to the Australian Council for the Arts, 16 Sep. 1973, Sinclair Papers.

who was not a trained musician.<sup>24</sup> After Georges Tzipine's first concert as resident conductor for the 1960 season, the poor reviews he received sent him straight to the media, which gave prominence to his request for the ABC to ban all music critics from his future concerts in Melbourne. In seeking to do this, he made the following assertion about Australian critics:

Their reputation has reached the point overseas where world-famous artists refuse to visit Australia for fear of their reputations being ruined... Never in the world have I read anything like the Australian critics say. In France they would be laughed at. I welcome constructive criticism, but it is time these critics were banned. I was warned about Australian critics and especially Melbourne critics before I left Paris.<sup>25</sup>

Tzipine's views reflected those expressed in London the same year by the expatriate Australian conductor Charles Mackerras after he had completed a successful tour of Australia. Performers such as Mackerras and Tzipine, both with established reputations, were sensitive to criticism from what must have been to them a cultural backwater. It would seem that they were unduly incensed when critics such as Sinclair proved capable, perceptive and fearless commentators on the quality of performances they and other international artists provided. The glowing reviews these same critics frequently gave to outstanding performances by artists from Australia and overseas was evidence of a stalwart independence of thought and commendable objectivity. In any event, Tzipine's threat was not implemented, nor did the steady flow of international artists—many of high repute—cease to come here, as Mackerras had suggested they might.

Among local solo performers, opinions of Sinclair differed. There were those, such as leading accompanist Margaret Schofield, who could not abide him.<sup>26</sup> A similar position was taken by Max Cooke, pianist and Conservatorium lecturer.<sup>27</sup> Both thought him destructive. Three other leading musicians from the 1950s and 1960s, Mac Jost, Ron Farren-Price and Len Dommett, were ambivalent; their views on Sinclair were largely shaped by recollection of his reviews of their own concerts.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, a number of players in the VSO/MSO, and later the Elizabethan Trust Orchestra came to realise that in Sinclair they had a willing and forceful intermediary between themselves and ABC administration; the many letters of thanks they sent him are testament to this aspect of his work.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the most positive early approbation of his work came from the pianist Hepzibah Menuhin, who lived in Victoria for a short time in the 1950s. She confirmed to him the rightness of his approach when in a letter she praised him for his intellectual leadership and 'a quality of mind and heart which makes you outstanding anywhere... there is a sharpness to your pen which everyone feels is healthy medicine, however little they may like to taste of it themselves—only we like our doctors to be resolute and to administer it without apologies.'<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately for Sinclair, not all artists shared Menuhin's outlook, and, as negative reviews were titillating to read and seemed impertinent to established 'name' artists, these were more widely commented on than his positive reviews.

The simmering hostility of many professional musicians towards Sinclair reached the press

<sup>24</sup> Dommett, personal interview 1996.

<sup>25</sup> 'Conductor Wants Ban on Australian Critics,' *Age* 7 Jun. 1960.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Schofield, personal interview, 5 May 1992.

<sup>27</sup> Max Cooke, letter to the author, 6 Oct. 1997.

<sup>28</sup> Mac Jost, personal interview, 4 Sep. 1997; Farren-Price, personal interview 1997; Dommett, personal interview 1996.

<sup>29</sup> See Sinclair Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Hepzibah Menuhin, letter to Sinclair, 24 May 1952, Sinclair Papers.

only occasionally. Less restraint was evident from the public, many of whom wrote anonymously to him. Rebutting a description of himself in a 1952 lecture at the University of Melbourne as a cultural dictator, Sinclair noted the intemperate nature of the language used, likening it to letters in his possession describing him variously as "A pig-faced wowser," "an anti-semite," and "a man who has gathered to himself a dirty little band of unwashed foreigners." Determined to have the last word, Sinclair concluded: 'As I deplore the modern decay of invective, I find such remarks stimulating.'<sup>31</sup>

Sinclair was perturbed by many of the attitudes he observed among the musical public. For years he waged a campaign against the practice of late-coming to concerts and chided the guilty for the disrespect they showed the music, its performers and the audience. At the opera he was outraged at the inattention displayed during the overture and the loud conversations which went on before the curtain rose. As with other commentators, he viewed this as symptomatic of an immature musical culture, one which saw music more as fashion, a social event, rather than an inherent necessity of life.<sup>32</sup> The articles he wrote on these cultural weaknesses drew letters of protest from the public, but were offset by a number of published letters supporting his position. By the mid-1960s, the relentless protests made by Sinclair and others caused these practices to wane.

More important to Sinclair were some of the ingrained prejudices he observed amongst the public. In particular, their indifferent attitudes towards Australian composers and performers were a major and on-going concern. With respect to local performers, the culture of concert-going which the ABC had fostered was built around the presence of the international celebrity, and audiences often resented being offered local performers in their stead. Sinclair railed against this view, advocating a far wider representation by quality Australian performers at concerts than the ABC allowed. At the conclusion of the 1952 season he wrote: '1952 has given us good music...but in the long run it is the quality of indigenous musical activity, and not the playing of visitors that determines the worth of a year.'<sup>33</sup>

Public attitudes towards contemporary Australian composers were worse still, ranging from indifference to outright rejection, depending on the composer's style. For Sinclair, experience had taught him to expect lukewarm audience reception from ABC subscribers to Australian works, and he seldom lost an opportunity to chide them for their negativity. One of his earliest diatribes occurred in 1952, following a poorly-attended Assembly Hall concert dedicated to the music of Alfred Hill at which the composer, then eighty-two years old, was present. The heading of his review the next day read: 'Size of Audience a Musical Disgrace,' followed by the admonition:

No matter what you feel about the contemporary relevance of Mr. Hill's music, his position in our musical history is already firmly established. Add to this the fact that this was the first concert devoted entirely to his music in his native city, and it becomes obvious that music lovers, and especially the leaders of our musical community, should have made it a matter of honour to be present. But that did not happen and the diminutive size of last night's audience was a disgrace to Melbourne's music.<sup>34</sup>

Three years later, Sinclair attended the first performance of Dorian Le Gallienne's Symphony in E. All his reviews to that point clearly showed that Sinclair had the highest regard for Le

<sup>31</sup> Sinclair, 'A Lecturer Bites Critic,' *Herald* 31 Jan. 1952.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Current Affairs Bulletin* 23.4 (Dec. 1958): 55; Nicholas Tarling, 'Is Australia Still an Outpost?' *Meanjin* 21.2 (June 1962): 204-06; Vance Palmer, 'Comment,' *Meanjin* 16.2 (June 1957): 100, 223.

<sup>33</sup> Sinclair, '1952 Has Given Us Good Music,' *Herald* 8 Dec. 1952.

<sup>34</sup> Sinclair, 'Size of Audience a Musical Disgrace,' *Herald* 2 Dec. 1952.

Gallienne's music, so doubtless he had considerable interest in this premiere. In the event, his dismay at the casual attitude of the audience towards the occasion, their apathetic response to the piece itself and the general culture of public indifference to Australian music that persisted at the time is encapsulated in his review of the concert:

Any student of Australia's musical climate would have seen in the deadly calm, the absence of excitement, publicity or fuss preceding last night's Youth Concert, unmistakable signs that something important was about to happen—and sure enough this program by the Victorian Symphony Orchestra under Walter Susskind brought a first performance of a symphony by Dorian Le Gallienne.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this and other similar admonitions—in which he usually directed some of the blame towards concert organisers for the lack of publicity and their unwillingness to program subsequent performances of new Australian music—it is clear from his concert reviews and articles that public attitudes towards it changed little until the mid-1960s. Then under the enlightened direction of John Hopkins, the ABC regularly programmed first and repeat performances at adult subscription concerts by composers such as Sculthorpe, Butterley, Meale, Werder and others. During Hopkins' tenure, subscription-concert audiences grew to expect some Australian music, often in the presence of the composer, and this, coupled with the continuing advocacy for Australian music from leading Melbourne and Sydney music critics, assisted in a gradual public acceptance of it.

Contrasting with his generally low esteem among performing musicians, Sinclair enjoyed the confidence and respect of a number of prominent music critics; included in their number was Dorian Le Gallienne. In order to have a regular income, Le Gallienne had accepted the position as music critic with the Melbourne *Argus* in 1950. When the *Argus* closed in 1957, Le Gallienne held the same position with the *Age* until his untimely death in 1963. He soon became firm friends with Sinclair. They were an unlikely pair. Le Gallienne was a well-respected musician in the community; Sinclair was not. Le Gallienne stood very tall and erect, and was well groomed (in public); Sinclair was short, stooped and rather unkempt. The two of them would often sit together at concerts, a practice which caused disquiet amongst some local musicians, who came to the conclusion that Sinclair needed to sit with Le Gallienne in order to gain the insights needed for accurate criticism.<sup>36</sup> This was an unsustainable view, for not only had Sinclair established his style and reputation some years before Le Gallienne began with the *Argus*, but their reviews of the same concert frequently differed. However, when issues in relation to the development of a mature musical culture in Melbourne arose, often at their instigation, they were of one mind. This was no bad thing, for the likelihood of change was enhanced by similar positions being taken by Melbourne's two leading critics in the most respected daily journals in the city.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the congruence of their views on the future of music in Melbourne, there is no recorded statement of Le Gallienne's opinion of Sinclair. It is a sign of his esteem for Sinclair, however, that he left him one thousand pounds in his will—a considerable sum in 1963.

Apart from Le Gallienne, Sinclair was well regarded by other leading Australian music critics, particularly those who wrote for the Sydney press. Evidence of this came as early as

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<sup>35</sup> Sinclair, 'Music,' *Herald* 6 Sep. 1955.

<sup>36</sup> Farren-Price, personal interview 1997; Fullard, personal interview 1997.

<sup>37</sup> The *Argus* was in decline from around 1953, and Le Gallienne was given no space for special articles after he returned to Australia in 1954. However, he again wrote extended articles when he moved to the *Age* in 1957.



1949, when he received a letter from Kurt Prerauer, who called him 'one of the few critics in Australia who really know anything about music...I as a fellow critic in Sydney had always promised myself the pleasure of making your acquaintance when I visited Melbourne.'<sup>38</sup> Other prominent critics whose careers ran parallel to Sinclair's included Roger Covell at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Kenneth Hince, founding critic at the *Australian* in 1964 and subsequently critic for the *Melbourne Age* as successor to Felix Werder in 1976. Both were firm admirers of Sinclair. Hince struck up a friendship with him which lasted until the former's death in 1991. The obituary which Hince wrote described Sinclair as

one of the great newspaper critics of modern times in Australia...his major achievement, and the one in which he might take the most pride, was that he shared the last decades of 'The Herald's' greatness: and that over the years his writing constantly rallied public interest in music, and made sure that this interest was concentrated on the right places.<sup>39</sup>

For his part, Covell has said: 'Sinclair was perceptive regarding the details of a performance, but was not so interested on the views of music; he usually knew when a performance went well. Hince and he got on well; Sinclair was cordial with Felix whom he thought interesting.'<sup>40</sup> Two of these statements require comment. First, the remark that Sinclair 'was not so interested on the views of music' refers to his disinclination to philosophise, in contrast to Felix Werder, whose reviews from the mid 1960s were often platforms for his modernist ideas as much as concert criticisms. Second, it is highly doubtful if Sinclair's relationship with Werder was a cordial one. Certainly he did not respond well to Werder's music, about which he wrote in 1949:

Few young composers in Australia are treated so royally as Felix Werder, a complete program of whose works was performed by players of the Musica Viva Society in the Assembly Hall on Saturday night. Were Felix Werder another Mozart, or even a Le Gallienne this would have been a unique opportunity to have hailed his advent. But he is not. He is a young, talented and prolific writer the very fecundity of whose talent leads him to write a great deal more music than is inspired by creative vision or is woven with any real mastery of the musical craft.<sup>41</sup>

Matters did not improve between Sinclair and Werder when, following a performance of his Third String Quartet in 1953, Sinclair declared: 'Mr Werder's music is written fluently, and is perhaps not without melodic character, but its significance evades me.' Werder never forgave Sinclair for these remarks, and was fond of quoting the last part of the 1953 review as evidence of the problems facing the Australian composer when confronted by 'philistine critics.'<sup>42</sup>

In common with critics from across the spectrum of the arts, Sinclair interacted with the various organisations that were responsible for the delivery of music in the community. In Melbourne during the 1950s and 1960s, musical life was dominated by the ABC. The Victorian Symphony Orchestra (from 1965 the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra) provided subscription

<sup>38</sup> Kurt Prerauer, letter to Sinclair, 17 Jul. 1949, Sinclair Papers. Prerauer became critic for the influential fortnightly journal *Nation* in the early 1960s.

<sup>39</sup> Hince, 'A Second Career.'

<sup>40</sup> Covell, personal interview, 18 Aug. 1997.

<sup>41</sup> Sinclair, 'Music,' *Herald* 21 Mar. 1949.

<sup>42</sup> Felix Werder, personal interview, 16 Jun. 1994.

concerts in the Town Hall, and many of the international soloists who played concertos with the orchestra gave ABC-sponsored recitals during their visits to Melbourne. Even in opera, oratorio, and chamber music—areas nominally outside its orbit—the Commission was in some way involved.

As with his counterparts Le Gallienne and Felix Werder at the *Age*, and, to a lesser degree, Linda Phillips at the Melbourne *Sun*, Sinclair was vitally interested not only in analysing the quality of the various performances he attended, but also in aspects of music in the cultural life of the city. Here, the support of his superiors at the *Herald* was critical; his passion for the cause of music in Melbourne was such that, in addition to his concert and opera reviews, each week he was given a generous amount of space to write on issues of importance in the musical life of the city. As the ABC was so dominant a force, it was natural that these articles often focussed on aspects of its practices. Sinclair saw the ABC as central to the development of a healthy and mature musical climate in Melbourne, and identified its policies as deficient in a number of key areas. Broadly, these encompassed the perceived inadequacy of concert programs, and the lack of opportunity afforded Australian composers and solo artists to be heard at the subscription concert and recital series.

One of Sinclair's earliest crusades was to oppose the ABC practice of promoting its forthcoming subscription concerts by highlighting the 'celebrity' performers it had attracted from overseas, omitting any reference to the music being played. This being in sharp contrast to international practice, Sinclair attacked the policy time and again. Finally, in 1954, he was able to report 'a turning point in the history of Australian concert management... for the first time since the inception of subscription concerts... the prospectus issued to intending Victorian subscribers this year gives not only dates, prices and the names of performers—but a fairly comprehensive list of the music to be played during the year.'<sup>43</sup> It marked the beginnings of a change in focus from the imported international performer—so successfully inculcated by the ABC to that point—to the music being played.

This cult of a focus on overseas artists to the exclusion of local performers at ABC subscription concerts was seen by Sinclair as especially damaging to the development of a mature musical culture in Melbourne. And while he frequently chided the public for their indifference and inability to discriminate between good and bad performances, his real target was the ABC and its policies:

The ability to discriminate is not so much a gift as an acquired art and the present pattern of Melbourne music does not favour its acquisition...our music is built up on the importation of visiting celebrities...But their influence is too transitory and the factors determining taste and discrimination are not such exotic highlights but the practices and traditions indigenous to the country or city concerned.<sup>44</sup>

A further persistent complaint from Sinclair was the conservative programming policies of the ABC. He saw as unhelpful for the creation of a mature musical society the tendency of the ABC to favour the standard repertoire of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries at the expense of twentieth-century music. By 1952 he noted that the ABC was repeating music so frequently that 'even the more conservative of Melbourne music lovers are becoming bored.'<sup>45</sup> Although the ABC held overall responsibility for programming, the musical taste and expertise of the conductors and soloists it engaged did affect the programs offered to audiences. Accordingly,

<sup>43</sup> Sinclair, 'ABC Details a Fine Job,' *Herald* 25 Mar. 1954.

<sup>44</sup> Sinclair, 'Do You Know if it's Good?' *Herald* 1 May 1950.

<sup>45</sup> Sinclair, 'ABC Concert Programmes too Familiar,' *Herald* 19 Jun. 1952.

when Alceo Galliera, a fine musician, was appointed resident conductor of the VSO in the late 1940s, his conservative tastes led to somewhat routine programming. Sinclair was dissatisfied with the music presented, declaring:

the ABC has an obligation to foster public taste and to provide conditions in which Australian musicians can develop and mature—and this cannot be done by abandoning modern music and building up large audiences through the music of Tchaikowsky, Beethoven and Brahms.<sup>46</sup>

He suggested a compromise: that one of the two subscription series should contain a higher proportion of modern music than the other. Now it could be argued that the ABC, in its role as educator, should not have employed Galliera; however, in its defence, it must be acknowledged that after the war Victoria was not the first choice for leading conductors to reside, and the ABC was under pressure to fill the vacancy. Nevertheless, the timid programs did create a conservative audience resistant to contemporary music. By the time the ABC tried to change the culture by appointing composer and contemporary music advocate Juan Castro as resident conductor in 1952, a conservative attitude to music was firmly entrenched in audiences. It was clear to Sinclair that the prime responsibility for the development of discriminating audiences lay with the ABC, a responsibility that it was not taking seriously. Matters came to a head with the first Melbourne performance of *The Rite of Spring* later that year when there were protests from the audience, threats to return season tickets and a barrage of complaining letters to newspapers. The response of the ABC was to declare that for the remainder of the season 'dissonance is out—there will be nothing as controversial at future concerts.'<sup>47</sup> Sinclair was outraged, and sprang to the defence of the music, declaring: 'I am completely on Stravinsky's side. The power of the work leaves me no alternative.'<sup>48</sup>

Another failure of ABC policy condemned by Sinclair was its neglect of music by Australian composers; at best, new Australian music was sometimes played at Youth concerts. After years of muted criticism of this practice, in the Olympic year of 1956 he decided to hold back no longer, declaring:

the ABC has no constructive and articulate approach to Australian music today... [it] couldn't care less about Australian composers. How then does the ABC suggest that we will ever develop a music of our own, or even develop a healthy musical community?<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the next two decades, he was a firm but discriminating advocate for more contemporary music—both Australian and international—at ABC subscription concerts, although it was clear that he had a blind spot where avant-garde music was concerned. His reviews of such music indicate less surety than elsewhere; indeed there are some inconsistencies and possible contradictions evident, most notably in the mid-1960s. In May 1965 he wrote that 'avant-garde music is fraught with problems. One problem is that it sounds all the same.'<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Sinclair, 'Audience Drop Worries ABC,' *Herald* 17 Dec. 1953.

<sup>47</sup>Sinclair, 'At Future ABC Concerts: All Will be Harmony,' *Herald* 2 Aug. 1952.

<sup>48</sup>Sinclair, 'And a Critic Backs Stravinsky,' *Herald* 2 Aug. 1952.

<sup>49</sup>Sinclair, 'Does the ABC Care?' *Herald* 4 Jul. 1956.

<sup>50</sup>Sinclair, 'Something to Think About,' *Herald* 14 May 1965.

<sup>51</sup>Sinclair, 'Creative Songs Fresh, Vital,' *Herald* 22 Oct. 1965.

<sup>52</sup>Sinclair, 'Modern Music for the Faithful Few,' *Herald* 3 Mar. 1966.

Five months later in a review of an ISCM concert he cautioned his readers to remember 'that all so-called avant-garde music is not the same.'<sup>51</sup> This apparent change of heart could have been viewed as the result of his own deeper understanding of the style were it not for this comment in reviewing another ISCM concert early the following year that 'problems of comprehensibility aside, so much avant garde music sounds the same.'<sup>52</sup>

Such apparent inconsistency was unhelpful at a time when there was so much ferment in Australian and international composition; it would also have added fuel to the argument of his opponents among academics and professional musicians that Sinclair was less than competent to occupy the role of music critic. Despite this, it is clear that he supported the efforts of the ISCM and the local Society for New Music to broaden the cultural horizons of Melbourne audiences. Their concerts always received free advance publicity in his columns and were comprehensively reviewed. His attendance at composers' conferences in Adelaide and Hobart in the early 1960s indicated his genuine interest and support for the efforts of local composers to establish an identity and a presence in Australian concert halls.<sup>53</sup> In print he was selective in his advocacy for individuals, as Felix Werder and others could testify. Where he was of the opinion that a composer had talent and musical integrity, he was unstinting in his praise. Mention has been made of his high regard for Le Gallienne's music, and composers such as Robert Hughes, Margaret Sutherland and, later, Peter Sculthorpe were well reviewed; he also made accurate forecasts for future reception of a number of Sculthorpe works following their premiere in Melbourne.

Apart from his ongoing support for twentieth-century music, there were two other causes for which Sinclair was a notable advocate: opera and chamber music. Every year from 1947 until the eventual establishment of the Elizabethan Trust in 1955 he wrote extensive articles on the need for a permanent opera company in Australia. Similarly, the lack of a permanent chamber music group in Melbourne seemed to be a cultural omission to him, and he was persistent in his espousal of such an ensemble. This was partly answered in the early 1950s when Paul McDermott formed a string quartet from the members of the VSO. This ensemble gave subscription concerts in Melbourne for the next two decades.

After he was dismissed from the *Herald* in 1985, Sinclair spent the rest of his life in financial difficulties, a regrettable state of affairs for one who had been so single-minded in his devotion to the cause of music in Melbourne. However, were he to have reflected on the early years of his work in music criticism, he might claim with some justification that he was instrumental in helping to shape the musical culture in Melbourne during the critical formative period of professional music making in that city. He was aware that his criticisms and articles were often viewed as unnecessarily harsh and unsympathetic, especially by those to whom they were directed, but the intention was honest and straightforward: to serve the cause of music in the community. The high regard in which he was held by other leading Australian critics is testament to the quality of his work, and the many letters of thanks sent him by local musicians and organisations who were the recipient of his help assist in presenting a balanced perspective of his work. Perhaps the extent of his achievement is best summed up by his colleague and friend Kenneth Hince:

The general accuracy of his comments and his outstanding concern for the good of music in Melbourne and for the welfare of performing musicians were recognised throughout the musical community and made a strong contribution to the well-being of musical life in Melbourne.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> He and Roger Covell were the only critics who attended regularly and reported on proceedings.

<sup>54</sup> Hince, personal interview, 6 May 1992.