

'Spread this notion of the music club':

dynamics of class and patronage in Melbourne 1900-1940.

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In 1939, Thorold Waters, editor of *The Australian Musical News*, wrote two editorials which appealed to his readers to renew their interest in the music club movement. His reasons for the revival of music 'clubs' echoed the sentiments of earlier campaigns used by musical societies during their heyday in the twenties. Waters drew attention to the need for Australian musicians to participate in music clubs in order 'to provide the happy combination of relaxation and artistic stimulus'.¹ According to his article entitled 'Spread this notion of the music club: Sydney's activity is one for all to follow', the aim of the music club movement was to spread and promote the broader concept of music as 'one of the valuable essentials in the plan of life, not simply an affair for specialists'.² This was a philosophy common to several of the larger music societies established during the twenties, who pledged to broaden the music appreciation of the wider community through monthly public concerts featuring local music and musicians.

In Melbourne, two musical societies in particular influenced the development and growth of local music activity. The British Music Society and the Musical Society of Victoria were formed in order to increase interest in the musical activities of the local community. However, intentions aside, the diverse patronage of these two societies ultimately affected the fulfilment of this philosophy, and the future of their organisations. This paper is based on three sources: *The Australian Musical News*, Stella Nemet's *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, and Jim Davidson's recent publication *Lyrebird Rising*, which is based on the life of Louise Hanson-Dyer.³

Between 1900 and the late 1920s, the social climate was ripe for the establishment of musical societies. Professional performances of chamber and orchestral music were infrequent since Melbourne had not yet established a permanent orchestra or chamber music group. Radio was still in the experimental stages, and thus the bulk of music making occurred in the home, or in the local community. At this time, many performances were amateur; participation was encouraged because of its positive effect on the moral

well-being of individuals. Choral societies, brass bands and community singing provided inexpensive forms of entertainment which gained popularity during the depression. Community-based music activities provided a musical education for all members of the community, rich and poor alike.

The principle of educating the wider public, particularly the less affluent, found expression in the mutual improvement societies of the mid 1800s, which 'assisted personal advancement'.⁴ The Musical Association of Victoria, later to become the Musical Society of Victoria, applied the same principle to music education. Established in 1861 by 'a group of leading musicians and music lovers', the main objective of the Musical Society of Victoria was 'the mutual improvement of its members in all branches of Musical Art and Science'.⁵ The aim of the Society was to foster a wider interest in Australia's own musical culture, as well as European and British cultures, and its founders set about implementing their objectives in a number of ways. They held concerts featuring local performers and the works of local composers, organised composer competitions, established a public examination system and gave lecture-demonstrations on a wide variety of musical subjects. Local professional musicians were encouraged to join the Society but were required to satisfy certain criteria. To be classified as 'Members' they had to have received a formal music education and to earn their living as a musician. As professional musicians, they were asked to fulfil three tasks during the year, which according to the membership rules had to 'illustrate one of the three branches of musical art and science'. Members were required to participate in a performance, to contribute an original composition and to present a paper on a topic of musical relevance. Amateur musicians and interested music-lovers were also welcomed into the club, and were classified as 'Associates'. Their potential was seen as valuable, because of their future capacity to 'influence and further the object[ive]s of the association'.⁶

In *The Australian Musical News* of March 1924, the author defined the main objective of the Musical Society of Victoria:

[The Society's] object was to promote the development and culture of musical life in Melbourne, and indirectly in the whole of Victoria... If there is to be any national development of music in Victoria, the public and the profession must have confidence in their own musicians, encourage any distinctive characteristic which may reveal itself, and take a deep interest in the musical culture of the community.⁷

Part of this Society's overall aim was to establish an extensive library of local and international music for the use of the general membership. It was hoped that this would encourage more frequent music making amongst members in their own homes, and thus broaden their interests to include contemporary music in particular. Thus, the heart of the Society lay with the people. Its impetus was created from genuine humanitarian ideals which were pursued with determination from their inception to the present day. It was the first musical society to do this, and the most successful.

By 1920, the Musical Society of Victoria had been in operation for 60 years. During this time, its membership had increased steadily to include not just practising musicians, but music lovers of the broader Melbourne community. The Society welcomed all members of the public to join and to participate in concerts and related activities. Their intention to make music accessible to all members of the community was a genuine and unique concept that had remained unparalleled by other musical societies. Contemporaneous musical societies such as the Melbourne Music Club and the British Music Society did not pursue this democratic ideal of music making with the same vigour. Performance opportunities were reserved for the more reputable and respected professional musicians in Melbourne, whose concert repertoires consisted largely of the European compositions fashionable at that time. As reflected in contemporary reviews, concerts were increasingly promoted for the image and prestige accorded to the Society rather than the actual educational value which they might bring.

The Australian branch of the British Music Society was founded in Melbourne in 1921 by the wealthy and influential socialite Louise Dyer. Its genesis lay in her apparent life-long personal ambition to promote Australian musicians and composers. The president of the British Music Society was Thomas Brentnall—'accountant by profession and flunkey by temperament'. However Louise, who was appointed secretary and her husband James, who acted as treasurer, were the

real power base of the society and provided financial backing when necessary.⁸ In theory, the Society expounded the same type of democratic ideal as the Musical Society of Victoria: to bring music to all people regardless of their social standing. Like the Musical Society of Victoria, it established its own library, circulated a monthly bulletin that came from its headquarters in London, and opened its membership not only to 'practising musicians, but all who [we]re conscious of the national importance of music as an element in culture'.⁹

The formation of the British Music Society was announced at the same time as Melbourne music societies were preparing for an event in the coming months entitled 'Music Week' in which musical performances would be brought to the people. Information about the ensuing event was made available by Thorold Waters in his editorial of August 1921 entitled 'The Week of Music'. The proposed aim and activities of the event were outlined with evangelical fervour, with references to 'converting' the public, 'whose gospel will henceforth be music'. Its objective was to promote local music-making through daily performances in churches, community halls, picture theatres, town halls and schools throughout Melbourne. Waters says:

Such activities...help to keep intact the glorious fame of music in this young nation....The scheme that we are about to propound...will contain a wider proletarian appeal than those others, and it will, we hope, impress the politician....There will be a glorious sense of comradeship during Music Week, because of music's humanising influence. There will be a stronger grip in the handshake; a glowing response to the friend's smile in the street; a more whole-hearted appreciation of beauty in its many forms, spiritual, natural, architectural, pictorial, sculptural, physical, for is not music a great, a vigorous stimulant to right thinking and right living.¹⁰

There is no doubt that Louise Dyer and her associates were swept up in the huge tide of enthusiasm for 'the democratisation of music'.¹¹ An appeal for public interest in the British Music Society which appeared on the same page as the editorial quoted above, spoke of a sense of enthusiasm and brotherhood amongst its members. It was, in a sense, taking advantage of the musical fervour for Music Week generated by Thorold Waters. Louise Dyer promotes the intent of the society with equivalent zeal on page five of the same issue:

For a long time there had been lamentations that British Music was suffering from neglect—that is to say, composers were not receiving that assistance and that appreciation from their fellow-countrymen and countrywomen that was the happy lot of composers of other nationalities. This did not deter them from the exercise of their talents, but it militated greatly against the success of their efforts. They were in great danger of remaining inute, inglorious Miltons. The panacea for this was organisation and propaganda.¹²

The idea of supporting one's national music heritage was not a new one, as it had, at this stage, been espoused by the Musical Society of Victoria over many decades. Under the guise of the British Music Society, Louise Dyer was echoing the sentiments of the London office in order to rally prospective members to her cause. Indeed according to Jim Davidson, the London headquarters issued a statement at its inception three years earlier, in which they 'sought to establish connections between "higher artistic centres" and "the picture palaces, the labour organisations and armies of religion", who through their numerous bands provided "the only instrumental music heard by large sections of the population"'.¹³ For Louise and the Society, such a noble principle seemed, in theory, to be within fairly easy reach. However in practice, it proved too much of a challenge for what was essentially an elitist organisation.

In order to measure the extent to which these societies carried out their aims and objectives, reviews of their concerts, which appeared in *The Australian Musical News*, were examined. Both the Musical Society of Victoria and the British Music Society held monthly concerts of chamber music throughout the 1920s. The Musical Society of Victoria held its concerts in informal settings in order to direct the listener's attention toward the music. These concerts consisted of performances by well-known local musicians throughout the community, who gave their services gratuitously until the depression years, when a small standard fee was introduced.

Since 1900, the Musical Society of Victoria had made special provisions within their prospectus to support and promote Australian composers. They introduced competitions for original chamber works especially for the purpose of encouraging local composers. In the first of these competitions in 1900, the prize for best string quartet was awarded to Viola Jager, and second prize to Mona McBurney, whose

works came to be featured regularly in the Musical Society's annual Australian Composers Night, established in 1919.¹⁴ In the *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, Stella Nemet stated that one of the primary objectives of the society 'right from its inception, was to encourage original compositions by its members' and to feature them in regular concerts open to the public.¹⁵ Eventually, submissions were welcomed from all Australian composers regardless of membership status. Between December 1920 and October 1930, eleven Australian Composers Nights were held. *The Australian Musical News* reviewed these concerts each year, listing the works performed and the composers and performers who took part. Composers around Australia who submitted compositions for inclusion were listed in the October 1921 issue of the *Musical News*:

During the last two years works by the following Australian Composers have been produced by the society: N.S.W., Mirrie Solomon, Alfred Hill; Queensland, A. F. Benjamin; Victoria, Cecilia McMullen, Linda Phillips, Marie Forbes, F. Bennicke Hart, L. Lavater, Henry Tate, Claude Haydon, St. Ledger Burton.¹⁶

Over the next nine years, they were to add another twenty-five to that list including W. Arundel Orchard, Dudley Glass, Roy Agnew, Mona McBurney, Una Bourne, Florence Ewart, Frank Hutchens, Margaret Sutherland, and Esther Rofe.

The Musical Society of Victoria continued to support local music and musicians in a period which considered the imported product as representative of the highest artistic standards. It is clear that in continuing to hold the Australian Composers' concert series, the Society placed its membership at risk. In 1924, the Society reaffirmed its support for local musicians at a time when reviews of its annual 'Australian Composers' Night' were less than encouraging:

Now that the world itinerary of the great artists includes Australia, the necessity [to visit Europe] is not so great. Moreover, many of our local musicians have studied in England and on the Continent, and are intimately acquainted with the atmosphere, culture and interpretation of modern musical thought.... There can be no reason why students of ability should not attract high rank, and find the emancipation of their own individuality. Thus they will become free to speak their own message, which is theirs and theirs alone, and make their own contribution to

the growth and development of the musical soul of the nation.

In a review of the annual Australian Composers' Night in 1922, the critic commented:

There were many schools of composition represented at the Musical Society's August concert. The romantic German, modern French, modern British and ultra-modern impressionism and, strangely enough, nothing that really savoured of an Australian atmosphere or definite national appeal.¹⁷

Alfred Hill's *Maori String Quartet*, a work performed regularly throughout the twenties, received a rave review by a critic in 1920 because of its 'Australasian genre'.¹⁸ However, in September of 1924, this composition was criticised for its connection with New Zealand.¹⁹ In the same review, Florence Ewart's *Three Bush Songs* were alluded to as 'German lieder' and Linda Phillip's *Four Pieces for Piano* as a conglomerate of 'three different styles'. In a review of the Musical Society of Victoria's annual concert of 1925 entitled 'Australian-Almost! Night for Our Composers', Stewart St Ledger Burton's *Russian Dance* was described as 'not legitimately Russian'.²⁰ In 1926, the review of the same annual concert was entitled 'Australian Composer: Mostly in a Debussy Mesh'. This criticism continued in the same vein, with a description of Arthur Benjamin's *Sonata for Violin and Piano* as 'desiccated bits of Cesar Franck'.²¹ Some Australian composers escaped such criticism, their works being described as original and 'Australian' in style. The compositions of Cecilia MacMullen, Una Bourne, Fritz Hart, Mona McBurney and Claude Haydon received positive reviews on a regular basis. As these critical reviews illustrate, Australian composers were caught in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, criticised as too imitative of established European styles; on the other, denigrated for attempting a more distinctive Australian style.

In contrast to the deliberate focus of the Musical Society of Victoria on Australian Composers, the British Musical Society merely sprinkled their concerts with Australian content. European compositions tended to provide the theme. Consequently, they escaped the sort of criticism to which the concerts of the Musical Society of Victoria were frequently subjected. The Australian works performed tended to be the most popular and well-known of the repertoire, or those already performed by other societies which had at-

tracted positive reviews. The British Musical Society preferred the participation of higher profile composers and performers, such as Alfred Hill, Louis Lavater, Cyril Monk and Arthur Benjamin who were described in 1924 as 'professors at the conservatorium'.²² So concerned was the British Music Society with profile, that they approached Alberto Zelman and his quartet to become the official British Music Society quartet, offering them a substantially higher amount of money than usually paid. Indeed, Louise Dyer prided herself on paying performers in excess of the usual wage.

Thus, although the British Music Society managed to make the lives of selected musicians more comfortable, it did little to support and promote Australian performance and composition in the long term. As the years passed the Australian content diminished to the point where the inclusion of local works became merely a token gesture. By the late 1920s, the British Music Society's noble intentions to support local music were proving to be nothing more than a facade. This situation is foreshadowed in a review which publicly praises the Musical Society of Victoria for its 'earnest endeavour to develop local music creativeness'. Dated 1920, the critic of the review unwittingly describes the British Music Society as the antithesis of the Musical Society of Victoria:

If other institutions which, for purely commercial reasons grind the axe of Australia for the Australians, followed this excellent example, and in as unostentatious fashion promoted the welfare of the young composers, the future culture of our young nation would be well served.²³

Indeed, the British Music Society's concerts were anything but unostentatious. They were lavish, expensive affairs under the personal auspices of Louise Dyer, who often held the concerts in her home in the affluent Melbourne suburb of Toorak. According to Louise's biographer Jim Davidson, such events made the 'membership of the BMS highly desirable'. In his book *Lyrebird Rising*, he describes several of these affairs, including the first of only four Australian Composer's concerts:

Over 200 people attended, being seated in the large hall and the dining room opening from it; the press, encountering Louise's talent for floral arrangements for the first time, noted them in detail and drew the conclusion that the evening was the highlight of Music Week in 1922.²⁴

Of a concert held for the occasion of Louise's forty-second birthday in July 1926, Davidson says:

She moved about in a deftly embroidered gown of pale pink parchment, amidst marigolds, mauve chrysanthemums, and candlelight which muted the blood-red intensity of roses given in tribute. The pastel shades were carried across by Blamire Young, who designed Louise's dress, to the two period watercolours which led off the printed programme. The music was extraordinarily varied...beginning with Italian baroque and ending with a bracket of English songs.²⁵

This event retained all the trimmings of previous concerts, but had, by then, abandoned the Australian Composer theme. The British Music Society's 'about face' a few years after its inception thus eradicated any hope of achieving the democratisation of music. The *London Bulletin* of 1926 had stated: 'Music, like all the arts, is essentially an aristocratic culture, and the present movement towards its democratisation is erroneous'.²⁶ Members of the British Music Society supported this view with their conscious and exclusive support of professional musicians at a time when community music making was in its prime.

Eventually, Australian Composer evenings were abandoned altogether in favour of evenings with a British or international theme. In this adjustment of the focus of their concert themes, Louise Dyer was able to maintain the interests of an image conscious class who longed to identify themselves as British rather than Australian. However in doing so, it contradicted the very principle on which it was based. The democratisation of music had paled into insignificance at the expense of maintaining an image which connected professional with aristocratic, and amateur with anything less.

When the depression hit Melbourne in the late 1920s, the existence of all the music societies depended on the implementation of certain changes. As the financial situation worsened, memberships of these societies plummeted whilst their running costs rose significantly. Increasingly, less expensive entertainment was sought within the domestic and local sphere as it had been prior to the formation of musical societies. The Musical Society of Victoria established suburban branches, and shifted its emphasis toward the amateur musician, who provided entertainment at most of the monthly meetings. Whereas the Musical Society of Victoria recognised the need for change, and adapted

its structure accordingly, the British Music Society did not.

By the late 1920s, Louise Dyer's personal interest in the British Music Society had waned as she headed for permanent residence in Europe in the search of new challenge—the establishment of a publishing house for the compositions of European and Australian composers. Her physical withdrawal from the British Music Society contributed to a loss of interest by its members, and the Society never really recovered. By its refusal to adapt to the changing needs of the community and by continuing to advocate professional standards of music making in particular, the British Music Society turned away future supporters of their cause. They failed to recognise that today's amateur was tomorrow's professional.

The Musical Society of Victoria, however, recognised the potential of their members. In the days of their examination system, successful Diploma candidates were 'made honorary candidates for a year and given the opportunity to play at their concerts'. This was effectively the Society's best method of self-preservation, and by the 1940s it had become the Society's ultimate salvation.

Regardless of their varied agendas, there is no doubt that the collective efforts of music societies in Victoria have assisted in raising the profile of Australian music-making in the long term. They supported a network of young musicians by acting as a medium through which their ideas and interpretations could be tested. Their range of activities provided young performers and composers with the enthusiasm and sense of purpose necessary for the growth and development of an indigenous musical culture.

Notes

¹ Thorold Waters, 'The Gentle Art of being Clubbable: Australian musicians are in need of it', *The Australian Musical News*, May 1939, p. 3.

² Thorold Waters, 'Spread this notion of the music club: Sydney's activity is one for all to follow', *The Australian Musical News*, June 1939, p. 4.

³ Stella Nemet, *History of the Musical Society of Victoria 1861-1981* (Melbourne: Musical Society of Victoria, 1981); Jim Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising: Louise Hanson-Dyer of L'Oiseau-Lyre 1884-1962* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994).

⁴ W. Bate, *Lucky City: The First Generation of Ballarat 1851-1901* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978), p. 229.

⁵ Nemet, *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, p. 11 and p. 13.

⁶ Nemet, *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, p. 9 and p. 13.

⁷ 'Creates the Spirit: Musical Society of Victoria. Bigger Doings this Year', *The Australian Musical News*, March 1924, p. 20.

- ⁸ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, pp. 91-92.
⁹ Mrs James Dyer, 'The British Music Society', *The Australian Musical News*, August 1921, p. 5.
¹⁰ Thorold Waters, 'The Week of Music', *The Australian Musical News*, August 1921, p. 3.
¹¹ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, p. 89.
¹² Mrs James Dyer, 'The British Music Society', p. 3.
¹³ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, p. 138.
¹⁴ Nemet, *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, p. 27.
¹⁵ Nemet, *History of the Musical Society of Victoria*, p. 27.
¹⁶ 'Australian Composers', *The Australian Musical News*, October 1921, p. 124.
¹⁷ 'Australian Composers', *The Australian Musical News*, September 1922, p. 87.
¹⁸ 'Musical Society: Australian Composers' Night', *The Australian Musical News*, December 1920, p. 172.
¹⁹ 'Our Own Composers', *The Australian Musical News*, September 1924, p. 31.
²⁰ 'Australian-Almost! Night for Our Composers', *The Australian Musical News*, September 1925, p. 25.
²¹ 'Australian Composer: Mostly in a Debussy Mesh', *The Australian Musical News*, October 1926, p. 29.
²² 'Goossens and other Moderns', *The Australian Musical News*, January 1922, p. 267.
²³ 'Musical society: Australian Composers' Night', *The Australian Musical News*, December 1920, p. 172.
²⁴ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, p. 95.
²⁵ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, p. 110.
²⁶ Davidson, *Lyrebird Rising*, p. 138.

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