



The Unley Concert Band Salute at Bullecour. Courtesy of the Unley Concert Band

Playing for Keeps

Brass and concert bands have long had an important place in community music making in Australia. Kevin Cameron examines the origins and progression of community bands, the place of community music in the wider arts environment, and discusses the difficulties encountered by community music organisations in accessing funding support, particularly in South Australia.

In a climate of economic uncertainty, globalisation, and increasing competition for government support, all arts organisations face significant challenges. While innovation and creativity is at the heart of much artistic activity in the minds of practicing artists and funding bureaucrats, the business models promoting audience development, inclusive practice, outreach, and financial success are increasingly important. How does community music – music activity completed by amateur musicians at a grassroots level within local communities – respond and adapt

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to these challenges? This article examines the origins and progression of community bands, the place of community music in the wider arts environment, and discusses the difficulties encountered by community music organizations in accessing funding support, particularly in South Australia.

The brass and concert band movement has a long history in Australia. Australian bands were formed in cities and towns across Australia and performed a valuable service of providing live music for all types of events. The civilian band movement was inspired by the virtuosity, skill, and contest success of the English bands, one of which (Besses o’ the Barn) undertook two world tours in the first decade of the 20th century. This world famous concert and contesting band made a tremendous impression on bandsmen and members of the public during its extended stays in Australia. Band associations were formed from the 1890’s with a view to organizing band competitions, and the famous and most prestigious of the Australian contests – Ballarat (1900) and Tanunda (1910) – were underway and attracted great interest. A special feature of the major British contests was the engagement, from 1913, of contemporary composers to create substantial original works to be used for contest test pieces. The movement continues to commission works and has developed a very large catalogue of ‘classic’ works for the band genre.

Tusa (1999) states that an institution that pretends to find efficiency gains on a continual basis year after year reflects the economics of the peasant’s milch cow – that continually saving on feed will eventually result in death. Community bands – and other community groups – face significant and numerous difficulties. These are usually groups entirely consisting

of volunteers. Volunteer committees must manage all the financial, logistic, and promotional activities of their group while hoping to have some time to enjoy the playing aspect – usually their reason for joining the group in the first place. Bands usually perform in public for modest fees, charge member subscriptions, receive limited in kind support from local government authorities, and attempt to fundraise for the purchase of equipment. The rising costs of instruments, print music, rehearsal and concert venue fees, and insurance make it difficult for groups to achieve their full potential as they are constantly undertaking the struggle to survive.

Community music groups traditionally receive support from local government in the form of grants. These grants are for operational expenses and typically would be regarded as ‘small grants’ in the range of \$2-5K and are usually not insulated against CPI increases. The level of support varies greatly. Some councils supply rehearsal halls, cash grants, venue subsidies, and capital expense grants to their bands and orchestras. Other councils provide very little, and expect bands to perform – for no cost – at a range of annual council events.

Bennett & Carter (2001) continue to observe that cultural organizations making their case to government can no longer rely, and probably no longer wish to rely, simply on arguments for the virtue of culture ‘in itself’. Bands justify their existence in terms of community contributions to the wider fabric of community culture, the provision of low-cost instrumental music education and ensemble experience to the young through specialized youth programs, community access to live music performance to all at little or no cost, and an inclusiveness that welcomes all with an

interest in banding and works to develop connectedness in the community. These are very practical reasons – unrelated to music as an art form – for the nurturing and support of community music groups.

Hillman-Chartland & McCaughey (1985) describe amateur arts as a ‘recreational activity’, and as a leisure activity that serves to ‘self actualize’ a citizen’s creative potential. However, there is a suggestion that the unpaid individual in a voluntary association will, through practical participation in an amateur artistic activity, will become an audience member for a ‘fine art’ (or professional) activity, or a consumer of a product created by a ‘commercial’ artistic enterprise. It is a curious notion in the arts funding world that suggests ‘going’ is more important than ‘doing’, yet the development of audiences for professional companies seems to equate, or be linked to, participation in much of the grant literature. The grant literature published by Arts SA displays strong targets, as articulated by the Premier and Arts Minister. These targets relate to the following:

- Originality, enterprise, and innovation of our creative community
 - Contemporary musicians
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
 - People with Disabilities
 - Bringing artistic projects to fruition, establishing and sustaining careers, and making it possible for all ages to experience the arts and culture in South Australia.
- It is disappointing that there seems to be no direct mention of the following ‘doing’ activities:
- Development of artistic skills and experience
 - Valuing a wide variety of artistic styles and genres
 - A focus on youth, artists in the community, or programs for the disadvantaged
 - Artistic participation and appreciation
 - Presentation of a diverse range of performances

In many ways, local bands and other community music ensembles address many of the above points, those as stated by Arts SA and those more usually associated with community participation in the arts. This being the case, and given the precarious financial nature of community music groups and the limited time that participating volunteers have to devote

to administrative and promotional tasks, what are the funding possibilities for such groups?

Three Criteria and Eligibility statements from Arts SA are problematic for community music groups, as follows:

Artistic merit, quality, innovation, and originality: many of our community music groups are fine ensembles and serve to stretch the technical and interpretive skills of the participants. Often such groups accept participants with varied backgrounds and experience and the directors of these groups frequently work minor miracles to create a complete whole greater than the sum of disparate parts. Programs are frequently challenging, innovative, and presented in original ways – community bands have long discarded the ‘lion tamer’ uniforms and peaked caps commonly associated with bands of the past. However it is hard to compare these amateur groups that rehearse mostly for two hours a week with a fully professional group of specifically selected and skilled musicians.

Audience development: community groups certainly have an established following. However, it is difficult to build an established audience – and keep it growing through outreach - when the costs of organizing and producing concerts is prohibitive to the extent that only two or three major concert events are possible each year.

Community participation: This is an area where community music groups are well established - *access, social inclusion, cultural diversity, and artistic benefit to the community* are trademarks of community music groups.

Cultural leadership: Is it suggested by Arts SA that an organization must have the potential to have an *impact on South Australia's reputation as a center of cultural leadership, and the resultant economic benefit* to be considered for funding. Although South Australian bands have won numerous interstate, national, and overseas contests over the years and undertaken leading roles in the development and promotion of banding here and elsewhere, it seems that a different type of leadership is envisaged.

Professional development: Although many professional musicians work with community music groups in the roles

of conductors, advisers, and tutors for remuneration, is it possible for a community music ensemble to have an impact on enhancing the professional reputation of artists, or advance their careers in a realistic sense? Many professional practitioners work with community bands and orchestras using their skills to make a contribution to their communities, not for any professional gain. However, it is worth noting that many professional musicians started their musical careers in the local band, youth orchestra, or choir and given significant experience, mentoring, and early opportunities that shaped an ultimate professional interest.

Viable planning: This area is a problem for community music groups, for reasons mentioned above. Planning for these groups by volunteer committees is often a weakness, limited by a lack of time rather than a lack of enthusiasm

One of the Eligibility requirements is much more problematic for community music groups:

Projects without professional arts outcomes, such as amateur productions... fundraising, competitions, awards, and prizes...

How then is it possible for community music ensembles to be funded? These groups do not exist to produce professional arts outcomes, and the major banding events on state and national calendars – band championship contests – are entirely ineligible for funding as these events trace their histories – and the associated traditions, reputations, and successes of over 150 years – back to competitive roots.

Government funding bodies support the work of entities undertaking professional arts activities on a commercial basis. Meanwhile, community music organizations are restricted to submitting applications in programs with names such as the *Community Arts Development* program. These funding allocations in these programs are relatively small and the grants are highly contested. Although community bands support the stated objectives of *community engagement and celebration, cultural diversity, social inclusion, and increased access to the arts for targeted communities of need*, those in South Australia must produce a special project or mount a festival to be eligible for

assistance. These requirements place a significant risk and burden on the volunteers that manage the already taxing day-to-day operations of these organizations.

Community bands and other community based music groups certainly enrich the cultural fabric of communities by presenting accessible music performance to a range of community events and stakeholders, all arranged and performed by local people. The community band develops the artistic skills of its membership by providing an opportunity for active artistic participation, and present opportunities for active artistic education across a large cross section of participants and audiences with diverse interests. These active and vital community assets face significant challenges that restrict their activities and limit their effectiveness. With adequate funding from local and state government authorities, these groups have the potential to substantially increase artistic access, participation, and profile at the grassroots level, incorporating the lessons learned from over a century and a half of contribution and broad support in the community.

References

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