

Music and Place — an essay for the Australian Music Centre online magazine

By Don Aitkin

The first concert I went to, in 1948 I think, was a schools concert by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra held in the Albert Hall, Canberra. I can remember only the conductor's illustrating the various instruments in the orchestra — and the sheer size and scale of a symphony orchestra, this one occupying the entire stage. Canberra had only a few schools at that time, and I was in 6th class at Ainslie Primary. But the Hall was full. It didn't occur to me at the time that without such a hall I couldn't have heard an orchestra live. I simply took the hall for granted.

Two years later I was in second year at Armidale High School, in northern New South Wales, and once again I went off with my class to a schools concert in which Joseph Post conducted the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and re-introduced me to the instruments of the orchestra. This time the concert took place in the Armidale Town Hall; again, the orchestra filled the stage, and filled this hall too with glorious sound. These were the days before Classic FM, downloading, CDs, and even LPs. The only serious music I could hear, given that we did not have a gramophone, was on the ABC's AM station, reception of which was chancy, but where I could hear thirty minutes of 'Favourite Tenors', on Sunday nights, as I remember. Again, had Armidale not possessed a town hall that could seat several hundred people I couldn't have heard the SSO. A few years later still, I went there to hear Daniel Barenboim, then a 15 year-old pianistic prodigy. Heaven knows what kind of piano he had to play on; perhaps he brought it with him.

So halls were important, and taken for granted. In 1948, and for a long time afterwards, the Albert Hall served as Canberra's town hall. Today, it is a place where Persian carpets and Italian leather jackets are sold, and Canberra still does not have a 'City Hall', though it does have a number of sites where you could hear a symphony orchestra, and indeed it has its own excellent CSO. Most of the town halls in Australia were built either in the 1880s, when the colonies were rich and civic pride high, or in the 1920s, when the expanding suburbs of the cities followed the earlier example. These halls were where you went for any live entertainment of any scale. They had a stage, a curtain, some provision for theatre, and seats that could be removed if the hall was to be used for dancing, one of its main functions.

By the time I heard Daniel Barenboim, the musical life of Australia was changing quickly. I bought my first LP in 1954 (it was Decca's third recording in this format, Clifford Curzon's version of the Greig piano concerto), and began to spend most of my available money on records, as did many others of my generation. Post-war prosperity led to a new cycle of hall-building, now much more focussed on performance than on bingo and balls. The Canberra Theatre, seating 1200, opened its doors in 1964, and within a decade or so every capital city had its very own brand-new performing arts centre, the most controversial, and probably the earliest to be conceived, being the Sydney Opera House.

The new spaces had no difficulty in finding patrons or performers. Music — and theatre, ballet, opera — were becoming the cultural food of the growing, educated middle class, helped by another resurgence, that of education in performance and in composition. The older conservatories grew in scale and new ones appeared to match them; Australia had a national institute for dramatic art; television provided new opportunities for the graduates; the older orchestras grew in size and new ones appeared everywhere. The number of symphony and smaller orchestras in Australia now approaches 200, and the number of composers exceeds 400.

Australia is a very different society to the one in which I grew up as a boy. It is much better educated, much wealthier (notwithstanding the current crisis) and much more interested in what I would call cultural pursuits. We have not lost our fondness for sport, not at all — new sportsgrounds, especially those designed to seat scores of thousands, are also common. But we are building places and spaces for quieter and more reflective activity, such as the new National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. These spaces lend themselves also to musical performance. The Canberra International Music Festival, to give an example, sites its concerts in many of that city's major cultural institutions, the National Gallery, the National Library, the War Memorial, Old Parliament House, the National Film and Sound Archives, and so on. The outcome is a win/win: the Festival brings to each place a new set of visitors, and acquires in turn a wonderful opportunity to match music with art, or maps, or war, or film. The result is a richer musical experience for Festival patrons, and a new appreciation by them of the outstanding qualities of the institution.

Building new spaces should be a continuous civic activity, given that our cities are steadily growing. Canberra's Theatre, for example, was opened when the city contained fewer than 70,000 people. Now the city is five times larger, and greatly needs a space that will allow ballets like 'Swan Lake' and operas like 'Aida' to be staged. Yes, the Canberra Theatre once housed such productions, but the theatre is now too small to make a season viable. A new lyric theatre for the nation's capital would need to seat 2,500. There would be no difficulty in filling it. Across Australia, we use our places and spaces for music most imaginatively, but as our population grows we need new places for new possibilities. There are 21 million of us today. By 2030 there will probably be 31 million. Will we then need mega concert halls, or just more of them? The time to be addressing that question, giving the lead times involved in designing and building these spaces, is now.