

# Art Music in Regional Australia

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## Regional Music Research Group Research Papers.

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## Abstract

Art Music (broadly referred to as 'classical' music) is often brought to the regions from urban areas as a form of musical missionary work, bringing 'culture' to the locals. Art music, however, also exists in and of itself in non-metropolitan regional centres. Separate from urban activity, it takes place over several layers within regional communities; from amateur-based ensembles to professional performers. There is strong audience support for this genre of music in the regions, but measures need to be taken to strengthen the connection, relevance, and accessibility of music for audiences who may not be exposed to, or feel confident in attending 'classical' music events or activities.

**Keywords:** regional, music industry, art music, classical music

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## Introduction

This industry paper investigates the conditions of the current regional music environment as it relates to art music practice. It offers the perspectives of four professional musicians from Tasmania, New South Wales, Victoria, and the Northern Territory, brought together for the Regional Music Research Group Seminar Series in December 2021. The panel conversation centred around the contribution local art music makes within its community in social, cultural and economic contexts, and how to connect with local audiences. The overall impression from the discussion with these panellists was that professional musicians in regional communities participate in several different activities, more broad-ranging than those of their metropolitan counterparts, which often blur the lines between assumed and conventional delineations between 'community' and 'professional' music.

Regardless of comparative levels of artistic excellence or achievement, musicians strive to develop an emotional, personal connection with their audience to successfully share and contribute to the culture of the community. It is for this reason that context within performance - namely venue and program - plays an important role in the vitality of art music within regional and rural Australia.

This paper centres on musicians that live and work within regional Australia. It does not take into consideration metro-based musicians working or touring in regional Australia. We drew on the experience of four regional artists:

- **Hugh McKelvey**, a multi-instrumentalist, teacher, conductor and performer based in Ballarat.
- **Julia Fredersdorff**, a violinist and early music specialist based in Tasmania. Julia is also the artistic director of [Van Diemen's band](<https://www.vandiemensband.com.au/>).
- **Prof. Martin Jarvis**, the founding conductor of the [Darwin Symphony Orchestra](#), based in Darwin.
- Dr Graham Sattler, a Regional Music Research Group member and former Executive Director of the Mitchell Conservatorium, based for 20 years in Central Western NSW.

## **Background – Art Music In Regional Communities In Australia**

Like other forms of music-making in regional areas, art music crosses several layers from youth and amateur music practice, music education and community music, to professional artists and arts organisations creating and presenting high quality musical activity. This was highlighted by the panellists when discussing the state of art music within regional Australia.

It was evident that the qualities of professional and amateur music performance are a little less distinct than they may be in urban areas. Those that participate in local orchestras, choirs and other ensembles range from amateur music lovers, through adults in other industries who reached high levels of musical proficiency at school or university, to high-end professional performers. This challenges the definition of 'community music' more from what researchers still can't quite define. Veblen (2008), who leans towards community music being for a wide range of participants and social good, claims that community music is found in 'both informal and formal contexts of musical activity', and shaped by particular social settings. Bartleet (2009) conducted a large research project 'Sound links' which examined musical communities in Australia, similarly to Veblen, they define community music as groups or programs made of people that share a common interest, committed themselves to the well-being of each other, and owned by the community (Bartleet, 2009, p. 180). There is little to explain where professional music making might fit within regional communities, yet we know this distinction becomes clearer in metropolitan settings with the assistance of higher ticket prices, greater opportunity (and competition) for performance as sole or primary occupation, and more prestigious venues.

Defining levels of music making in regional and rural areas of Australia is not always distinct. The metropolitan model, with larger population base, economy and therefore opportunity,

presents more of a binary. Performing, either alone or as part of a group, paid at industry rates (either full-time or freelance) is considered professional. A portfolio career, comprising some teaching, community or school ensemble direction, choral conducting, solo or ensemble 'gigging' is not necessarily given the same status. Community music making is often referred to as 'amateur', which of course implies that it is not a viable or substantial career.

In smaller cities and towns, those with a population base of ten per cent or less of major metropolitan centres, professional musicians, regardless as to whether they work independently away from their communities, often take part in community groups. This can include both an overt leadership role, and a participant role in which the artistic experience is high, but the payment is either low or non-existent. Blurring the distinction between 'amateur' and 'professional' music making into one of 'community', where local ensembles, orchestras and choirs combine amateur, student and elite musicians; represents a unique crossover of the community itself. Hardcastle (2015, p. 159) in an attempt to distinguish the different organisational types that are found in regional communities considers representation, primary purpose, and whether musical proficiency is required. This resulted in 4 organisational types:

- Type 1: Represents a sociocultural community, recognises music as its primary purpose, and selects on the basis of musical proficiency.
- Type 2: Represents a sociocultural community and recognises music as its primary purpose, but is open to membership without an expectation or test of musical proficiency.
- Type 3: Represents a sociocultural community and does not recognise music as its primary purpose.
- Type 4: Does not represent a sociocultural community, recognises music as its primary purpose, and selects on the basis of musical proficiency.

This topic formed the initial panel discussion, a way of defining musical activity found in the regions. The conversation examined pro-am ensembles including brass bands, symphony orchestras and the role of Regional Conservatoria, a network of 17 non-metropolitan, all ages, participatory music education organisations unique to NSW, forming the crux of regional musical life in certain areas. The entrepreneurial nature of professional artists in regional areas, and their DIY portfolio career see them participating in community ensembles in addition to their own professional pursuits (Cunningham et. al, 2022).

## **Engagement And Importance Of Place:**

There are two contexts in which to consider engagement. There is the place in which people are listening to or performing music and there is the music itself. Regional areas may be limited in their infrastructure and resources, but from limitations comes creativity. Breaking down established notions of the formal concert hall, music ensembles in regional areas find unusual and unique performance spaces that relate to their audience. From performing on a river in Kakadu (Jarvis), to gin trails in Tasmania (Fredersdorff), musicians bring the music to the people, rather than the other way around. This form of engagement from a place-

based approach makes forms of art music more accessible to a diverse audience. It offers another interest and a 'special experience' which can lead to new modes of funding and sponsorship (Jarvis) – local music, for local audiences.

## Community Connection:

As touring musicians from regional areas, artists begin to understand the connection with the community, and the place in which they're performing. Long-term touring options where places are revisited establishes a strong network with the local area and in turn, provide more economic stability as they establish a regional network. Conversation and dialogue are established, and meaningful programs are developed.

If you do start to build that dialogue and form those connections in each community, there are key members of those communities who tend to lead as far as helping promote, helping to set up. (Fredersdorff).

'Artificial gestures of exclusion' and 'genuine gesture of sharing' (G. Sattler)

Music needs to be accessible and relatable, but not with the intention of 'playing down' to a regional audience. As long as the music is packaged well, people will come. For example, outdoor concerts where Australian music is performed within the Australian environment, providing a context for the work (Martin), or providing an additional experience that's unique to the local area. Many of the panellists described their musical activity as a 'first' for local communities, particularly children. It is important that these events become accessible and available to a wide audience.

There are several touring funds/organisations available to artists: Musica Viva's Regional Touring, CreateNSW Regional Arts Touring, and Music in the Regions who send metro-based ensembles and soloists out to regional, rural and remote areas. There is question as to whether the connection is made with the audience as a FIFO touring artist(s). Sattler suggested that 'gone are the days that a seriously high-level ensemble might dare to come to a country area and expect a full house' unless there's that element of celebrity. Performers from metropolitan areas are expensive and create risk for the venue or host. A new model could be to share the financial and economic risk along with a feeling of social and cultural responsibility to develop and create a more authentic experience for performers and audiences. 'Work needs to be done here with more convincing, compelling, and mutually respectful partnership(s) between metro-based organisations and local host entities like regional conservatoriums' (Sattler). One noteworthy example of metropolitan artists and organisations making meaningful contributions to regional areas is the Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Playerlink program, which does connect motivated professional orchestral musicians, role models, with aspiring orchestral musicians in non-metropolitan payers. This annual programme provides somewhat of a 'bootcamp' over three days during which bonds can be established that have frequently become mentor/mentee relationships providing pathways (Sydney Symphony Orchestra 2024). Public performances at the conclusion of these annual programs, involving a combination of SSO mentors and local players, are also accessible art music performance outcomes in themselves.

## Acceptance:

Art music is still seen as 'elitist', something that should be housed in a concert hall with a particular way to dress and a specific place to clap. Each of the panellists is trying to break down these stigmas so that their art is shared by a wider audience. Artificial, modern-day conventions are removed, and approaches to audience interaction such as banter, sharing stories and allowing the audience to get to know the musicians' personalities can improve the concert experience.

... so that everyone feels completely at ease and that kind of stuffiness is gone and it immediately changes their receptiveness' (Fredersdorff).

This idea of banter, comedy or having a laugh was also shared by Prof. Jarvis. The panel agreed that people need to feel comfortable, that the experience is relevant and welcoming.

The task, the responsibility, of making the music relevant is 'ours' as the musicians, not 'theirs' as the prospective audience members' (Sattler).

## Education – How To Keep Regional Musicians In The Regions.

To keep skilled musicians within our regional and rural areas, we need to move away from the 19th century 'conservatoire' model of music education. Music education and training needs to be more relevant, provide skills and knowledge in 'how to manage themselves, how to run a teaching practice, how to develop audiences, how to sell themselves' (Jarvis). Tertiary institutions need to provide relevant skills for classically trained musicians to develop their craft and present this within their community.

We need to change the paradigm if we're going to encourage people to be essentially a resource in a community, to enjoy that resource and not to see amateur music making something lesser is actually the best form of music making. (Jarvis).

This change can occur if tertiary music students are equipped with the skills required to be a musician in today's music industry, one which develops a range of skills attributed to a portfolio career (Bartleet et al, 2019).

The panel agreed that mentors, teachers, leaders, need to be realistic, informed, and respectful in guiding and informing students' expectations as to what constitutes a meaningful career, or life, in music.

## COVID

There was little discussed about the impact COVID had on regional musicians, this could possibly be due to there being fewer restrictions placed on regional areas. One point was raised and that was the affordability of living in major cities and the effects of COVID had resulted in musicians moving to regional areas, this was witnessed by Julia, particularly in

Tasmania. This in turn, may lead to an increase in regional audiences. By moving to the regions, professional musicians will increasingly enhance the quality of regional music and increase the amount of activity of community music in regional areas (Sattler); bringing the definition of 'community music' to lean further away from a divide between amateur and professional.

## Conclusions:

Art music remains to be a vital part of regional communities. Whether there are home-grown professional musicians, or community music ensembles, there is still a demand for art music. Having said this, it must be relevant. It must connect audiences to a place or the music itself, be accessible, and not pitted against other forms of music. Unlike musicians who want to record, performers seem to remain within their area rarely venturing to other parts of the regions, and rarely across state or territory borders. To strengthen the expert nature of a regional artist, there needs to be a change in musician training, an acceptance that musicians require a number of skills and a broad range of knowledge to be able to contribute to regional areas, and there needs to be incentives for regional musicians to spread their music to other areas. While the COVID-19 pandemic may have seen more musicians move to regional areas, there remains to be seen further integration of professional musicians with community ensembles and seeking regional opportunities rather than those in the metropolitan areas and capital cities.

## Citations

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The **Regional Music Research Group** is a collective of academics and practitioners from universities and cultural institutions in Australia and New Zealand. We are bound by an interest in how music operates in regional areas. More information is available at <http://www.regionalmusic.com.au>.

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