

Give notice

Dear Editor

I was on the Music Board for the period 1973-77. It was at that time that the setting up of an Australian Music Centre was a real priority of the Board. There was a protracted struggle between the Board and the Council as to the feasibility and appropriateness of the idea, that being a time when the question of the degree of autonomy of Boards vis a vis the Council was unresolved. In time the Board's view prevailed and independent action to establish the Centre was taken.

We are all aware that the Centre, as with other initiatives, had its difficulties, but its role and effectiveness were accepted as significant. Over the last decade the Centre has had a decided and potent policy of promotion of, and support for Australian composers and composition.

It is one of the great success examples of funding.

If I personally have any criticism of the Centre's operations it is that there has been, and is, scope for wider activities; that, for example, contact with and promotion of Australia's performing activities could complement the existing policy. It was, therefore, with surprise that I learnt that a reason for a severe reduction in funding was that it was doing too much.

The funding role is not an easy one and often calls for hard decisions to be made. But there are two principal aspects to funding: policy and assessment on the one hand and procedures and openness on the other.

Most arts performing and service organisations plan and budget in advance - indeed in many instances are contractually bound in advance. It is, therefore, essential if there be any proposed change in funding for organisations which have had a reasonably long record of support that due notice be given. Even more, that where reasons for reduction exist there be prior discussion - mail, phone, fax and sometimes face to face facilities exist.

No organisation can expect permanent support, but all organisations with generally ongoing funding should have the reasons for reductions or termination given as well as the courtesy which people broadly (one hopes) sharing the same aims, should extend to one another.

Many of us have been critics at one time or another of the administration policies or standards in the ABC orchestras. The ABC, sometimes promptly, others belatedly, has been responsive, but, and this is the significant point, it has never wavered in its constancy of support for its orchestras even at times when it has had to make cuts in other areas. Hence there has been stability for players, conductors and administrators and not anxiety and insecurity. (Please, I do not want to suggest that the ABC is the best or most suitable repository for orchestras for all time but I applaud its proper consistency.)

The pity is that the Australia Council reacts to criticism defensively. It would be much better if it spoke with its critics instead of resenting them. I know of very few, out of a great number of people, who want to see the Council diminished or destroyed in its significant functions. It should be its own continually reviewing critic.

There is no perfect system for assessment for funding. The closed thinking on exclusively 'peer assessment' in all areas should be opened and discussed. I believe there has been for years a failure to have some form of consumer input. Not all consumers of arts (not terminology I like but it will do) are conservative or resentful of the new, but they are attuned to considerations often overlooked by Council and Boards. We all should be constantly aware that virtually all arts activity (and certainly with performing arts) exists in large part to meet, challenge, please, stir and confront audiences; there are ways of having their voices heard, and these should be part of Council/Boards' thinking.

If the Council suffers reductions in Government funding, let that loss, other questions being even, be proportionately shared. But, above all, where it is claimed decline in quality in any activity is evident, give due notice; there

may exist real decline or a bad patch already being overtaken. To have made a radical reduction without notice in what in fact was a significant Music Board initiative in support of Australia's music is hard both to take and to understand.

Kenneth W. Tribe
Sydney, NSW