

Nicole Canham: The Poetry of the Present

2017 Peggy Glanville Hicks Address

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Stories are a very old method of making sense of our experiences, and of mapping our journeys through life. The story and learnings of my journey as a musician, and your own stories of the place music holds in your life, are central to my talk tonight.

The ability of artists, arts workers, and listeners to recognise how our experiences form part of a positive story of possibility and potential is critical for several reasons.

When we understand and know how to share our stories with others, we reinforce our sense of self.[1] We also make it easier for others to really see who we are and to know what we stand for. These are vital anchors at a time when many of our systems of value, along with people's life and work expectations, are being thrown into disarray through rapid social change.

Four main themes bind my own story together. First, music was a very important part of my childhood. In those early years I formed the powerful impression that musicians are people who make a positive difference to other people's lives.

That belief has sustained my sense of purpose over the last twenty years: my professional activities have provided a framework for exploring various transformative aspects of music and music-making.

Second, when I was about 20, I started to feel very strongly that my choices in music should somehow reflect who I am – a female, Australian artist working in the late 20th and early 21st century. That preoccupation has significantly influenced the direction of my creative life. My first professional gig, at the age of about 18 or 19 was playing the clarinet in a production of Stephen Leek's children's opera, *Killcallow Catch*, directed by Judy Clingan.

Perhaps because of this early encounter, and the special place the experience holds in my life as a professional musician, playing the music of living composers somehow feels more authentically me. My interest in the compositional process also inspires my curatorial work.

Third, in the last five years or so, I've begun referring to myself as an artist rather than as a musician. It better reflects the range of platforms and roles through which my creativity finds an outlet, and so I use the terms musician and artist interchangeably. And finally, I'm a problem-finder[2] by nature.

One of the characteristics of problem-finders is that they ask their own questions – they don't necessarily try to solve existing problems, or problems presented to them by someone else. They also often ask a great many questions, which usually require refinement and change along the way.

A lot of my work has been concerned with creating more genuinely democratic, transformative experiences for people through the arts. So my journey as an artist has really, at its core, been about finding ways to empower myself to answer questions around the nature of the arts experience, and the higher purpose the activity of making art, and making music, serves today.

On that journey, I've encountered the same ideas and arguments about why it's hard for us to think of including everyone in what we do. Or why everyone shouldn't be included.[3] Not enough money. Not enough time. Subscribers won't like it. Stakeholders won't like it. But although these are issues we unquestionably face, are they the most critical issues we are facing now? What I want to talk about tonight is the importance of sustaining a bigger vision of our work beyond our own immediate challenges.

I'm also going to talk about some of the ideas that have sustained and inspired me to think in terms of alternatives, rather than absolutes. Some of these ideas are conceptual, such as the poetry of the present, the challenge of complexity, the importance of meaning making, and of metaphor, and the nature of independence. There are also practical ideas to be considered too: the benefits versus the cost of public funding, and the ways in which we build community and advocate for ourselves. For me these ideas form the basis of an alternative route through our shared problems, and the inspiration for a host of new solutions.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks drew upon the work of D.H. Lawrence in two of her compositions - the Etruscan Concerto, composed in 1954, and her choral work, This place of fire.[4] So it seems rather fitting that for my address tonight, I was also inspired by D.H. Lawrence.

Poetry is, as a rule, either the voice of the far future, exquisite and ethereal, or it is the voice of the past, rich, magnificent (...) But there is another kind of poetry: the poetry of that which is at hand: the immediate present. In the immediate present, there is no perfection, no consummation, nothing finished.

The living plasm vibrates unspeakably, it inhales the future, it exhales the past, it is the quick of both, and yet it is neither.[5] Lawrence's essay, The Poetry of the Present, was published in 1919. Lawrence entreated other poets to look to the present in order to create a living form of poetry.

In essence, Lawrence was asking us to find new meaning in the present, which we often take for granted. If we substitute the word poetry with the word music, then we encounter two challenges that are salient with respect to making new music today. The first challenge is to keep our focus on “the immediate present” as a source of artistic ideas.

Many of us will likely agree with that point. But I think he pushes us further than that, because making the work of the immediate present is about the process of being in the present and seeing what comes out of that, rather than manufacturing a product or running a business.

This makes the second part of Lawrence’s challenge more difficult. In order to fully embrace this present moment as the stimulus for our creative work, our ways of thinking and working must evolve to reflect “that which is at hand.” This requires thinking and working processes that support the ability to respond rapidly to shifting circumstances. But although these processes are vital for artists today, they don’t always come easily. We may find ourselves longing for the way things were, or dreaming of the way we would like them to be.

Thinking in this way takes us out of the present moment. Things may seem simpler, solutions more straight forward. But there is one major problem with allowing ourselves this indulgence: the present is not simple, and it is certainly not straight-forward. We can’t speak about the present time without acknowledging the growing complexity of our environment.

Any attempt to tackle our individual, and collective, creative challenges must also address broader themes of complexity and change. Sustainability theories highlight how difficult it is to motivate people to change. Their central tenet is very simple: “All of the problems we face are of our own making.”[6] This is a line of thinking that is very difficult for some people to accept. Yet when we adopt an inappropriate mindset for the problem at hand we perpetuate destructive behaviours instead of finding solutions.

The growing imbalances that sustainability theories seek to address aren’t limited to matters of the eco-system; our societies also reflect widening inequality and increasing poverty, Australia included.[7] We can’t fully understand these problems through “individual, institutional or local issues in isolation.”[8] Rather, we need to understand how the whole system works in relation to each of the parts. We also need to understand how “a system governs, or regulates, itself,”[9] and then we need to be prepared to adapt accordingly, even if we didn’t choose, or initiate, the particular challenges that we face.

Careers scholars have also been working on the problem of complexity as it relates to changing work environments for some time. As whole industries and professions move towards the kinds of work patterns and insecurity that artists have been living with for a long time,[10] the characterisation that what we do is a Peter Pan “lifestyle choice”[11] is incorrect.

We are sentries. We are prophets. We are the heralds[12] of a very individually demanding model in which we are each responsible for managing and developing our professional identities in what are often uncertain and trying circumstances.

The challenge now is not to match our skills to the available jobs. This paradigm is dying out. Today, the single-most influential factor in designing a satisfying and sustainable working life in 21st century knowledge societies is the ability to make meaning.[13] Our perception of our work experiences, including our responses to challenges, transitions, failures and successes, determines how rewarding we find what we do.[14]

Pursuing one’s purpose in complex environments involves connecting the personal and the professional in profound ways, rather than adopting inherited, or out-dated stories, about the way our adult lives, or indeed our creative lives, should unfold.[15] Managing career complexity doesn’t mean we have to resign ourselves to disadvantageous situations. We can change the game entirely, if we are willing to think of ourselves as change agents.[16]

We may experiment in our music making, but how many of us are willing to completely change the game of making music? Although for many artists the act of meaning making is integral to their creative practice, making sense of where one’s artistic work fits in a rapidly changing cultural context isn’t easy. These twin challenges reflect their own distinctive narratives: on one hand we have the tremendous freedom of the agent of change, and on the other hand we frequently find the pain of the misunderstood and undervalued artist.

The dissonance between our habits of meaning making and the current circumstances grows. This dissonance also places us in a bind if we leave it unresolved. We may be advocating for the new with out-dated arguments. We may be assessing ours, and others’ success through a lens that is inappropriate for this time, and for our field. And the stories we tell about our work may only address half of what is going on. Making new meanings that reflect the possibility of the present becomes a vital skill.

Re-thinking and reframing individual and shared stories in these volatile conditions becomes a courageous and necessary act of survival.

Crafting new stories of what we do also helps our community, and others, to envision and appreciate the powerful social role that artists will play in healthy 21st century societies. Recent developments around federal arts funding,[17] and the cutting of Government subsidy to mostly arts-related VET courses[18] provide two powerful examples of why new stories are needed.

“That which is at hand,” for the creation of Australian new music has undergone a substantial shift over the past 18 months. In order to craft new stories, we must be present to the pain of the challenges arising from these shifts, and present to the possibilities that lie therein. The redirection of Australian federal government investment in the arts has been a significant set back for the independent and small to medium sector.

These unexpected funding cuts affected the most vulnerable groups in our arts ecology who also produce the lion’s share of new music – and indeed, new artistic work in general.[19] The partial, and more recent indication of the possible full reinstatement of the funding, is cold comfort for those artists who have cancelled their projects, for people who have lost their jobs, and for organisations who have folded entirely.

These changes also impose immediate and medium-term practical constraints upon individual artists’ professional development at every career stage, across a range of art forms, not just music. Even if you are not a person who seeks funding yourself, the systematic, or accidental, dismantling of creative people’s developmental pathways will ultimately be felt at every level of the arts sector for some time.

For me, the situation illustrates the precariousness of relying upon on a national support structure for artistic endeavour that, apparently, could be cast into complete disarray with relative ease, and no prior warning.[20] However, this shift in the system wasn’t entirely negative. Within the artistic community, the collective effort of the independent and small to medium sector to come together as a community to advocate for ourselves was inspiring.[21] This emergent energy, born out of frustration and anger, must now be built upon and harnessed for more positive ends: to create new structures of support that other people cannot take away. Rather than framing our survival around structures of other’s making, we have an opportunity as a community to fully embrace our independence. But this would require us to shift the focus of our narrative from the negative dependency our need for funding often fosters and focus instead on the virtues of independence.

Flying fish encapsulate everything that is great about independence.

Independence, for me, isn't about doing everything alone. It is about being different, and embracing that difference. Unlike excellence in performance or composition, which are largely explicit displays of skill, excellence in independence expresses itself differently. Independence emerges through trying new things, through failure, and through being flexible in our identities.

True autonomy arises from artistic vision, from being oneself, and is characterised by resilience and conviction rather than requiring special training or specific non-musical skills because independence is nurtured rather than studied.[22] Independence flourishes in environments where there is permission to change, which these days amounts to permission to survive: flying fish use their wing-like fins to leap out of the water in order to avoid predators.

They don't accept the idea that they are small fry in the hierarchy of the ocean. They use everything they have, especially their difference, in order to prolong their survival. The culture of independent creative environments is potentially similar in this regard, and radically different from hierarchical work settings, or other competitive structures such as funding bodies or the schools of music where many of us trained. So while we often focus on the benefits and the need for government funding of artistic activity, which I do not dispute, we rarely talk about its pitfalls: it is a dangerous practice when we start letting other people determine how and when we're allowed to fly. Or when people want to engage us in a debate about whether flying is an activity of any merit at all. Being independent is about not relying on other people to find, or fund, the solutions to our problems. It is about using all of our abilities, no matter how unorthodox this may seem.

The metaphor of the maverick is particularly powerful here, and many have harnessed it to describe the work of artists and musicians.[23] Howard Becker suggested that "every organized art world produces mavericks, artists who have been part of the conventional art world of their time, place and medium but found it unacceptably constraining."

Mavericks, he wrote, benefit from the freedom to take "a slightly different path through the art world's traditional series of problems and solutions." [24]

Traditions of new music and experimental music-making in particular have consistently pushed this envelope for sometime, as have the mavericks in the audience who have accompanied them on that journey. But in the early 21st century, the vanguard of music-makers and music listeners shouldn't only be concerned with pushing art form boundaries.

If we are going to position ourselves outside of the mainstream, we must take advantage of every freedom that being mavericks or non-conformists affords us, including the freedom to be more daring and inventive in our problem solving than we have ever been.

We – makers, movers and shakers, and listeners alike - need to be willing to be at the forefront of broadening our own and other people's understanding of the social impact of artists, of art-making and of creativity.

This includes challenging assumptions about who artists are, how they should structure their work, how they think, what they need to know, what they believe and value, and how they sustain their creative practice. We need to challenge assumptions about what the audience wants, who they are, what they need, and what their relationship to the performers and composers should be.

We need to see whether our assumptions pass the 21st-century-present test, and to recognise that there is great power in taking this position. Rather than continually be responding to someone else's agenda or apathy in relation to the arts, the process of empowering ourselves, through finding the problems ourselves, allows us to craft new stories that reflect the poetry and the possibility of the present.

But what would these new stories be about? We could begin by rewriting our approach to building community, which often seems to be based around the challenges of making the work – which is the doing part - rather than how we can inspire each other towards higher order conversations about the change process and what it means to be an artist today – which is the being part.

Shared problems may be more effectively addressed by looking beyond the issues of how to 'do' the work better. This might also help to shift our focus from wondering who the best 'doers' are in our community, and moving towards a more collective sense of citizenship. Do we know, for example, who our best facilitators are? What beliefs and values motivate their choices or their patronage of our work?

Are there ways in which doing and facilitating can be viewed as more than two rather separate roles? We certainly have nothing to lose by trying something different: David Throsby recently reminded us that after more than 30 years of lobbying for policy and funding that acknowledges and supports the independent professional artist, very little has changed. Independent artists' incomes remain low. Recognition of our work as professionals remains problematic.[25]

While this situation remains as it is, the opportunity cost to us as musicians, and to our communities, grows.

I suspect, however, that if we were to survey everyone in the room tonight to ask them what the essence of some higher purpose for making new music might be that we would struggle to agree. Many of our conversations about what to do as a sector tend to flounder because we will probably never agree about our higher purpose. What we really need to do is to take a higher order view of our shared problems, which are much bigger than the immediate challenges associated with making the work.[26]

It is only in this space that a dialogue about future sustainability can be had. We need to turn our attention away from the challenges of making the work and ask instead: who are we being, when we are being artists? What is our role, if any, beyond making the work?

There's a joke about doing and being that's been making the rounds for about fifty years: Socrates said, "to be is to do." Sartre said, "to do is to be." Sinatra said, "do-be-do-be-do." The concept of Knowing doing and being[27] has been widely applied across a range of fields to better understand how people use their knowledge to their advantage, and to greatest effect.

Knowing is the technical know-how and other skills necessary for doing the work: it's often theoretical. Doing is knowledge put into practice. Being is something different. Being relates to self-awareness, being reveals an understanding one's values, and a commitment to maintaining these values with integrity. It is about engaging other people in our vision, it is about leadership, and citizenship, and building trust. Being reflects an understanding of the impact of our actions and their consequences.

Let me turn now to a few common themes or narratives that serve to explain aspects of knowing, doing and being in our work as musicians. Musicians, as contemporary artists, have a role beyond making their work, because being a musician is inherently social. Connecting with others is part of how we do what we do. Which is why it is so strange that one of our most cherished myths is the idea that the future of our art form rests upon individual talent development.[28] This idea has a huge impact at the level of being: we might be making better musicians, but are we making better people?[29] Specialisation for musicians often narrows their thinking[30] and fosters a set of values in which there is no loyalty to any community beyond the community of peers.[31]. Silo-based or single-minded thinking often perpetuates significant career challenges in what is already a very difficult environment.[32]

We know that many musicians still graduate with very limited ways of thinking about themselves, and their work, including their potential social role.[33]

Stories of sustainable careers, or sustainable artistic practice, however, unfold not out of one or two key decisions, but rather an ongoing process of continually making decisions based upon “factors over which [we] have no control and...actions [we] have initiated [ourselves].”[34] A sustainable view of success shifts the goalposts from talent development and peer recognition alone, towards a view of talent that combines ability, adaptability, connection and community.

Excellence and mastery are vital components of an artist’s craft. But on their own, they are limited ways of knowing. Mastery is a stepping stone to something else, not an end point.[35]. The reality is that we need to be much more flexible in what we are prepared to know about, and what we are prepared to do in terms of expressing that knowledge beyond making the music itself.

This may require both new learning, and unlearning. The spaces into which we are prepared to venture in order to apply what we know may be unknown territories. In this process, we may end up becoming very different musicians.[36]

So if explicit displays of knowledge aren’t the answer, then what about doing? Can we make a case for our value through our individual activities? This depends a great deal upon how interested are other people in what we do. When we ask our community what they think of public funding for the arts their responses are somewhat humbling. While the majority of Australians participate or engage with the arts, a declining number of people feel the arts should be publicly funded.[37]

Although many people felt that affordability was not a barrier to their participation in arts experiences, time, money and opportunity cost were significant factors for those Australians who did not participate in the arts. Diversity is an issue here, and abroad in the UK and the USA. In Australia, fewer people from culturally diverse backgrounds engage with the arts, with cost a contributing factor for almost half of this group.[38] Basically, the more you experience the arts (which depends a lot on whether you can afford it or not), the more you value it.

Surveys of arts engagement, however, often neatly avoid addressing the artist’s value to society – the focus is almost entirely on the arts experience. This reflects a user-pays understanding of creative activity, where the onus is very much on the creators themselves to work out how to sustain their professional development and adult responsibilities.

If we're talking about doing an activity, that seems fair enough. But we're not just talking about making something. It is a mistake to treat artistic works as products and products alone, to not see the work as the outcome of much longer, deeper processes that require a workforce of multi-skilled, and usually multi-talented, people. This story of our work – the idea that people matter, that people's imagination makes life interesting and beautiful – is one of the most uplifting aspects of our collective story.

Article 27 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human rights reminds us of the importance of this aspect of our work.

We are preserving ours', and others' human right "to participate in the cultural life of the community, [and] to enjoy the arts." [39] But this message doesn't have the level of cut-through that we might think. Perhaps this is because what stands in our way – a very dominant, economic view of value – is so pervasive that it makes it almost impossible for people to appreciate creativity if it can't be measured in dollar terms.

The market-driven ideology that is used as the justification for many of the negative perceptions of experimental arts-related activity and cuts to public arts funding is sometimes obscured as we lurch from crisis to crisis. A market-based view of creative work tells a very limited story about its impact, just as it also reflects a poor understanding of creativity, and offers us a limited paradigm for being. In this regard, the new music sector, and all of us, are not alone.

Yet of all people, across a huge range of professions, we are perhaps the community of people who best understand how knowing and doing through creative activity can enhance our sense of being overall. This isn't a personal assertion: research backs this up. The study of creativity, and creative people, across a huge range of disciplines is a clear indicator of the importance of both understanding and harnessing creativity as the foundation of future societies. [40]

We have also only relatively recently begun to appreciate the range of creativities required for effective problem-solving. [41] And we are yet to agree, and to fully acknowledge through policy and education reform, how these creativities will be developed in current and future generations. [42]

Artists employ diverse creativities in their work and learning that are needed if we are to solve our complex problems, but much of this aspect of our work is often hidden, or we take it for granted. Yet this is where our greatest value lies. Richard Florida, for example, has theorised that a "super-creative core" of people, including artists, scientists, academics, architects and engineers, will find the new forms, products and theories to drive knowledge societies. [43]

It is increasingly noted that businesses need imaginative people in order to remain competitive.[44] But while many have highlighted how lucrative the creative industries can be,[45] I think that musicians and other artists contribute much more than the monetary value of their work. We can teach others new ways of working with knowledge. Being creative requires flexibility of both knowing and doing.

It also reflects an awareness of all three elements of knowing, doing and being, their relationship to each other, and to their combined effect. Appreciating these aspects of being, however, requires us to take time out of our very busy lives. How often do we reflect on the thinking processes behind our artistic works, or experiences, to see their value in broader terms, and how often do we communicate this understanding to others?

Creative work, including creating new music, contributes to our “cultural evolution.”[46] We must undertake this work in the journey towards first tolerating and then thriving in the constant change that dominates our present. I’m going to take a small detour here, and highlight some aspects of my own personal cultural evolution, as reflected in the performance prior to this talk. For each address, I chose to present a different performance item.

Work that has some connection to place has been important to me for sometime; it was also paramount for this event that the performances might showcase some of the themes of the talk. In Perth, I was invited by TURA, with support from The State Library of Western Australia, to present the PGH address for the first time.

Cat Hope and Decibel[47] commissioned a work from emerging Perth-based composer Cissi Tsang.[48] So that event featured a world-premiere of a new work, *The Light that is Waiting*, based upon a graphic score that Cissi created from a photograph of the Pinnacles. The collaborative process was a great reminder of the value of giving permission: permission to try something new, to make new connections and to see what happens. The effortlessness with which this circle of permission giving and receiving unfolded is reflective of the strong artistic community identity in WA, and the high levels of leadership and willingness to make things happen there.

In Sydney, I collaborated with one of my oldest friends, Sydney-based designer and fine artist, Matthew Aberline, together with Maurice Goldberg, fine artist, and Scarlett McGrouther, choreography. Our performance item paired inflatable sculptures and images from Matthew and Maurice’s upcoming exhibition, *Of Beauty Rich and Rare*[49]with exquisite music by Monty Adkins.[50].

Working with artists from beyond the world of music has greatly benefited my musical development because I have had the opportunity to explore art-form processes different to my own. In that space, I have come to appreciate just how much can be gained when we are willing to look beyond our own field. Working with Matthew in particular has enabled me to explore how effective playful and beautiful spaces are for expressing ideas, and for engaging audiences.

The final performance item, presented in Melbourne, was the Australian premiere of an interactive work for clarinet and audio visual system, *Points, Lines, Plane* composed by Carlos Lopez Charles[51] as part of a research residency I undertook at Paris 8 University. Carlos had already composed two pieces for me, and with this work we decided to explore the most democratic form of collaboration we could imagine. This required throwing out many 'standard' approaches to the commissioning process. We got rid of the score.

We developed the melodic materials and discussed system capabilities in tandem, which required me, as an instrumentalist, to begin to understand how a completely different type of music-making system could function – as well as how I could function in relation to it. As the work evolved, our collaborative processes also shifted through conversations, refinement and rehearsal over many months. In comparing this work to previous projects with Carlos, I have been reminded of the value of ongoing collaborations and creative relationships. The collaborative learning[52]from that experience has been really important to me.

These performance items reflect my own story, and also how I understand the themes I've been highlighting tonight through my work. I want now to start to pulling together these various themes and ideas into something more concrete. The continuation of an invisible revolution that has been shaped by people like Peggy Glanville-Hicks, and which is now under the stewardship of all of us.

First, as contemporary artists, I think we must actively acknowledge the idea of complexity in every aspect of our work, and increase our understanding of non-musical theories that will enable us to have a productive higher order conversation about our sector challenges. We might turn to theories of sustainability and cybernetic systems to begin with.

Second, we must also recognise and be able to articulate the ways in which our processes of working advance everyone's cultural evolution. The value of the arts in increasing our understanding about how we can 'be' in relation to a range of issues, beyond just being fearful, needs to be much more widely acknowledged.

A sense of urgency around the need for cultural evolution in our society, however, is inconsistent, and this, for me, is the greatest challenge that arises out of our present circumstances. Lack of funding is a reflection of limited appetite for the kinds of solutions, and benefits, that artists bring to their communities.

Third, we need to reconsider where the opportunities lie, as access to great music, and musicians, becomes ubiquitous. The opportunity I see is for us to position ourselves as champions of our cultural evolution, in order to turn the tide of what is unfolding as a very fear-based, conservative, uncompassionate and nationalistic social agenda in much of the West.

Some of us are already doing this, but I think many more of us need to do this in a conscious way. In this sense we might think of ourselves as messengers of a set of values, rather than masters of a particular instrument or style of writing music. These alternative values, that we bring to every situation as musicians and as creative thinkers, has the potential to encompass diversity, tolerance, possibility, imagination, collaboration and community.

These values must be made explicit in our conversations, through our advocacy and in our performance work – that's where the story telling skills come into play. Music itself may be abstract, but the complexities and skills involved in creative work are not abstract. These are skills that are greatly needed, and part of our role is to bring about a shift in the general level of consciousness about the importance of creativity.

Reframing our specialist musician knowledge as part of broader advocacy for imagination and creativity in general may be a significant challenge, but we provide an important community service in exploring how this can be done.

Hugh Mackay observed that Australians' response to the anxiety generated by our changing social landscape, on the whole, had been to renovate and fortify our homes, due to a collective sense of hopelessness when it came to addressing broader social challenges.[53] Increased home security and tile choices, however, are a convenient distraction to take our focus off much larger problems.

We, as a community are guilty of this too: by continually returning the arts discourse to the need for more money, we also invite the question of whether artists deserve any public money at all. This distracts us from addressing the rather more difficult question of why money, funding and market value have become the standard by which everything – including our own levels of prestige within this community - is measured.

Fourth, we must edit our bank of stories so that only our most effective, connective and inspiring narratives remain. Persisting with the idea that talented artists are special and different, that funding is a mark of success, that audiences are not interested in new music, or the work of living Australian composers, and that we are in competition with major performing arts organisations as well as each other, makes no sense.

Especially at a time when the business model across the sector is in distress.[54] We duplicate forms of concert presentation, marketing and promotion, and organisational structures that other much bigger, much better resourced institutions struggle to make profitable. We persist with a model of concert production in which the graphic designer, the concert venue staff, AV and tech staff, and insurance companies often come away with much larger fees than the performing artists or the composers themselves. In doing this, we perpetuate a cycle of winners and losers in which very, very few of us win.

Are more concerts and events what we really need, or do we actually need more community? Our core audience, and our core community, is right here in this room. The first step in building a more sustainable narrative around community engagement would be for each of us to start acting in ways that reflect the type of community we want to generate around our work. How would the concert experience change if we included support acts, or featured double/triple and quadruple bills?

What else might change if we prioritised connection over getting attention?

Very often, the challenge of getting enough attention - to sell tickets, to sell our show, to get that festival gig, comes at the expense of the other opportunity we have, which is to create connection. We can only create connection when we have a clear understanding of our values, not just our musical capacities. We need to address the issue of community building amongst ourselves in order for people to appreciate what we are offering in ideological and intellectual terms beyond the work itself.

One of the lasting contributions Peggy Glanville-Hicks made to Australian new music, beyond her compositional leadership, was the sense of community she inspired through her advocacy for new music and musicians.[55] The encouragement she provided to other people engaged in new music-making is something we must remember, and to perpetuate through our own actions.

We must be each others' supporters, but how often do we go to each others' concerts? We could do a great deal more to facilitate each other's participation.

How much more inclusive could the concert experience be? Can we make concerts more affordable? Suitable for families, not just child-free adults? Diversity on our stages, in our concert programs, and in the audience, is vital. How well does our work reflect a balanced view of creative activity – in terms of gender balance and generational and cultural diversity?

The values that our work communicates should showcase the necessity of creative and imaginative power, how glorious it is en masse, and present the arts as the beating heart of an intellectually and emotionally rich life. We can't keep turning up with half of the experience – the performers and the music, or the part that shows our musical competence – and expect people to fill in the blanks about the broader values that are being communicated through the music.

This is not a marketing issue. We need to take responsibility for the unconscious set of values that are often communicated through the approach we take to our work, and which keep people away from what we do because we fail to recognise that increasingly people want a complete, collective experience even when high art is the centrepiece.

Finally, we also need to recognise how much connection matters to each of us. The net effect on artists as a workforce when we work and think in ways that fail to connect is significant. Instead of the wonderful possibility that creative freedom offers us, we may periodically, or frequently, find ourselves faced with an altogether different reality. Economic studies, for all their limitations, paint a painfully accurate picture of creative life. Many of us are worried about how to manage our already divided energies,[56] lack of resources, and the difficulty of trying to do everything alone.[57] The situation is very similar for artists in the UK and the USA.[58]. Many artists live at or below the poverty line, unable to make a living from their creative work.

Underemployment is widespread.[59] Planning and sustaining a sense of professional development is difficult: managing multiple projects and part-time jobs, or full-time bread and butter jobs may not feel like a clear career pathway.[60] It is very easy to see how we might think that increased funding is the solution to all our problems. But that doesn't account for all the other unhealthy aspects of our creative culture.

Whether you are a musician who thinks of your work in career-related terms, or whether you take a different view of your practice, the reality of combining the demands of making new work with the necessity of making a living means that we are at much greater risk of mental health problems including suicidal ideation, anxiety and depression, substance abuse and relationship difficulties at levels five to ten times higher than the national average.[61].

Our unsustainable work cultures, and persistent narratives that poorly reflect our capacities and highlight our difficulties, are very costly. These deeply concerning statistics about our well-being reflect a level of problem that cannot be solved through relying on the support of our family and friends – because many of us are dealing with unanticipated challenges or problems we have inherited rather than brought upon ourselves. Much greater support, including considerable cultural change, must come from within the creative community itself.

Peggy's letters reveal her powerful understanding of how, particularly as a woman in a male-dominated environment, she needed the support of a network of well-connected male supporters to further her career.[62] At the time in which she was making her name, there was no career pathway without also creating community.

In that sense, Peggy is a particularly inspiring figure. Taking the time to come together is important for communities like ours because so many of us are working in relative isolation. Due to that isolation, I think many of us may underestimate our individual importance in tackling our personal and collective challenges. Sustaining a commitment to our individual creative work, however, develops some powerful survival skills. The type of learning that creative work supports also develops a significant capacity for positive, intentional change – and that is where the pathway to embracing the present can be found.

So know this: the work that you do matters. Reflect on what really gives you a sense of purpose as a musician, or as a music-lover, and reflect on what your current preoccupations are– whatever form they may take - and the way in which you might best contribute to our field. And then let's practice first telling each other, and then telling everyone else, about what these beliefs and values, and artistic vision, allow us in terms of being.

By embracing and telling our own unique stories, and understanding how these stories connect with more widely shared challenges, we empower ourselves to make an enormous difference to our community more broadly. In articulating our processes of sense-making, we help others to make sense of a complicated and uncertain world. We aren't misfits, making irresponsible lifestyle choices, who somehow deserve to suffer as a result of what we do really well.

We are a cohort of people with valuable, needed skills. Sustaining this perspective is an important part of shifting the dialogue about where the artist's value lies. But in order to do this we must be willing to embrace a different culture of thinking and working, not just an alternative set of musical priorities.

Our lived experience as artists depends a great deal upon the quality, and the health, of the creative community around us. So tonight I urge you to start, or to redouble your efforts, in contributing to a culture of being a musician that you find more welcoming, more nurturing and more engaging.

You will find many kindred spirits, myself among them, because continuing this aspect of Peggy Glanville-Hick's legacy is exactly what we need right now. We need each other's spirit, imagination, enthusiasm, and most importantly, we need each other's permission if we are to challenge the myth that the arts are nice, but that they don't really matter: the reality is that the arts, and artists, are needed now more than ever. Thank you for your generosity in being here with me tonight.

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