

OPERA AND GENDER EQUITY SUMMIT ISSUES PAPER

Introduction

An opportunity for positive change

The [New Opera Workshop \(NOW2019\)](#)¹ in April 2019 proved to be a catalyst to incite action for positive reform of Australia's opera ecology. At a public forum within the conference, and in response to it, female creators expressed frustrations at the structural nature of sexism and other exclusionary forces underpinning many of the norms, expectations and practices of opera. Alison Croggon's [Opera and the invisibility of women](#) outlined some of these concerns.²

In May, a united [call to action for cultural leadership and systemic change in opera](#) was published by Sally Blackwood, Liza Lim, Peggy Polias and Bree van Reyk.³ They invited the opera sector to join the conversation and actively support gender equity, diversity and the championing of a multiplicity of voices. They identified key areas for opera in Australia to evolve and lead the way with diversity on the stage, in creative teams, and on panels (see Appendix A). The call to action had almost 200 co-signatories by the end of October 2019.

The Opera and Gender Equity Summit, to be held on 2 December 2019, convened by the Australia Council in partnership with the Australian Music Centre and APRA AMCOS, is an opportunity for greater discussion of the issues and challenges and development of an action plan for positive change to take Australian opera forward into the future.

This paper provides some broader context and a summary of the key issues, research and discussion to date, including links for further background reading. The issues described are:

- the gender imbalance in programming and commissioning work
- the gender imbalance in leading creative teams
- the need for gender parity on boards and leadership teams
- the representation of gender-based violence in opera
- safe workplaces and inclusive spaces
- developing opera audiences.

Context

The National Opera Review

A [National Opera Review](#) was undertaken from 2014–2016. While it did not tackle the issues of gender or cultural diversity in the opera ecology, it noted that opera is rapidly evolving and that there is a need for greater innovation, new and distinctly Australian works and a broader cross section of attendees.

The new funding framework for major performing arts companies

October 2019 saw the most significant change in 20 years to the funding framework for major performing arts companies in Australia when arts and cultural ministers agreed to replace the Major Performing Arts (MPA) Framework with the new [National Performing Arts Partnership Framework](#). This followed a [national consultation](#) that identified a number of opportunities to strengthen the framework, including increased diversity with greater gender, cultural and First Nations representation and leadership.

The new National Performing Arts Partnership Framework provides:

- a clear approach to prioritising outcomes for the Australian performing arts sector, audiences and communities, such as growing First Nations arts
- a pathway to expand the number of funded companies through a two stage invitation and assessment process
- stability of funding through 4 + 4 year contracts, balanced with flexibility so governments can jointly respond to changing priorities
- increased transparency and accountability through enhanced reporting
- a new approach to rewarding artistic and organisational excellence.

There are currently five opera companies supported through the framework: Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, the State Opera of SA, Victorian Opera, and Western Australian Opera.

There are also a number of small to medium Australian opera companies which are receiving significant national and international recognition for artistic excellence.

Gender representation in Australian theatre

Australian theatre had a similarly galvanising moment around gender disparity when Neil Armfield announced Belvoir St Theatre's 2009 season that comprised shows written and directed almost exclusively by men. In that year, only 24% of works programmed by the eight MPA theatre companies were written by women and only 24% were directed by women. Almost nine in ten productions (86%) had at least one man in the leading creative roles of writer or director.

However, the balance has shifted over the past ten years. In 2019, women comprise 47% of playwrights and 58% of directors at the MPA theatre companies, and for the first time, more productions have at least one woman in a leading creative role (67%) than at least one man (60%).⁴

Gender across the Australian music industry

The [Skipping a Beat](#)⁵ report, [Australian Women Screen Composers](#)⁶ report, and Triple J's [By the Numbers](#)⁷ investigation all highlighted that women are under-represented across the Australian music industry, including on boards, in awards, on radio and screen and in festival line-ups. Even less representation is afforded to minority groups of women such as First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse women, women with disabilities, and those identifying as LGBTQI.⁸

The *Skipping a Beat* report recommended collection of more and better data on the music industry, establishment of a gender equality industry advocacy body, the use of gender equality criteria in deciding public funding outcomes, an increase of women in decision making structures, and addressing gender bias by prioritising inclusivity and representation as core industry values (for example through funding and training programs).

The *Australian Women Screen Composers* report recommended engaging men in equity initiatives, creating networking and partnership opportunities, spotlighting female role models, helping girls engage with music technology, and ongoing research on women and music-making.

Over the four years that Triple J has tracked the gender gap in Australian music, there has been improvement on every measure. The diversity of acts represented on major Australian festival line-ups has improved significantly, including the first festival achieving gender parity – 50% of acts on the Falls Festival's 2018–19 line-up featured at least one woman.

Dr Catherine Strong from RMIT noted that one of the key outcomes of the *Australian Women Screen Composers* research was that there was a fundamental mismatch between how male participants saw the industry compared to women:

*'The men were much more likely to see it as a meritocracy, while women were more inclined to see gender bias. Bringing about change is going to be that much harder if it is only women who even see that there is a problem. Engaging men in this issue and asking them to think about how their actions and attitudes make a difference to women in the industry is key to overcoming gender disparity.'*⁹

In response to the research, APRA AMCOS [announced a raft of new initiatives](#) including membership targets, participation measures and a mentoring program.

Broader conversations and societal change

The conversation about inclusion and equality in opera is also occurring internationally. It is part of important broader conversations taking place, in the cultural and creative sectors and across society, about the need to address sexual harassment, discrimination and safe working environments in the era of movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp.

The conversation is also occurring in an Australia that is increasingly diverse,¹⁰ where there is increasing appetite for art from diverse perspectives, and where there is increasing discussion of identity, representation and privilege.¹¹

Issues: opera and gender equity

The gender imbalance in programming and commissioning work

While gender representation in music courses at tertiary institutions is quite even,¹² women make up only 27% of the composing population based on [Australian Music Centre represented artists](#) and 22% of [APRA writer members](#).

While these statistics already demonstrate a gender imbalance, there is far greater under-representation when it comes to women's work being commissioned and played by opera companies and orchestras. Even small differences in the rate of performance compound yearly and can have an enormous impact over the course of a career.¹³

There are structural barriers facing female composers worldwide.

- Until 2016 the New York Metropolitan Opera had programmed only one opera by a woman in its 136-year history and that was in 1903.¹⁴
- [Statistics compiled by the Women in Music project](#) found that of 1445 classical music concerts programmed in 2018–19 by a sample of major global orchestras, only 5% included at least one work by a woman. Of the 3524 musical works performed at those concerts, only 2.3% were by women.¹⁵
- In 2015, in the program for the Amazing Women Concert Series, Associate Professor Vanessa Tomlinson reported that performance of works by female composers hovers between 1% (opera), 3% (orchestras) and 10% (new music).
- Dr Sally Macarthur's analysis of concert programming of contemporary Australian new music in 2013 showed 11% of works programmed by the New Music Network were by women compared to 35% in 1995.¹⁶
- The Victorian Women's Trust's 2016 [Equal Arts](#) study reported that 12% of contemporary Australian works commissioned and performed are by women and that this percentage is possibly the work of a handful of composers such as Elena Kats-Chernin.¹⁷
- In 2018, 20% of the Australian music programmed by MPA companies was composed by women but none was programmed in opera companies.¹⁸
- Across the MPA orchestra's programs in 2019, only 2% of the 644 advertised works are by women. Of these 15 works, only 7 are by Australian women.¹⁹

Given programming tends to favour historical works, it can be challenging for any contemporary Australian composer to have their work played by major opera and orchestra companies. Globally, only around 10% of productions presented by the world's major opera companies are written by living composers.²⁰ In the Australian context, the National Opera Review noted an increased narrowing of the repertoire presented in the major Australian companies in the 2009–2015 period.²¹

Reasons given for the low percentage of women's composition being played include fewer women composers, women writing shorter works, audience unfamiliarity with their work/lack of exposure, an assumption that music by women is lower quality, and that the decision-makers and gate keepers are mainly men.²²

Strategies proposed include 50/50 commissioning, quotas, teaching more women's music in the curricula, mentoring, funding categories for female composers, and music scholars and critics challenging the tradition of effacing women's music.²³

Internationally, many organisations have introduced gender parity programming targets, including the [Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music & Dance](#) and at least 45 international music festivals and conferences through [Britain's Performing Right Society Foundation's International Keychange initiative](#). In 2016, the Sydney Conservatorium established the [Composing Women](#) program to increase the number of women composers.

Working to tip the scales

As part of its 2020 program the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra (ASO) is running [She Speaks](#), a day of performances and discussion celebrating female composers past, present and future, '*where female voices centre stage are not the exception, but the rule.*' The ASO has women in key governance roles including Chair Kate Gould, and a 60/40 gender balance in its board in favour of women.

The gender imbalance in leading creative teams

Opera Australia was [criticised for gender inequality in its 2018 season](#), with women in 18.4% of creative roles and only 5.9% of the leading creative team roles of composer, conductor and director.²⁴ 2019 was significantly better, with women in 15% of leading creative team roles in its main stage productions, plus the premiere of [Whiteley](#), a new opera by Elena Kats-Chernin.²⁵

Looking at **the proportion of women in leading creative team roles** (composer, conductor, director) **in each of the MPA opera companies' 2020 programs** (mainstage productions, including original directors, concert performances and recitals excluded):

- Opera Australia – 10% of a total of 50 leading creative team roles (5 women)
- State Opera of South Australia – 7% of a total 15 leading creative team roles (1 woman)
- Western Australia Opera – 17% of a total 6 of leading creative team roles (1 woman)
- Opera Queensland – 23% of a total of 13 leading creative team roles (3 women)
- Victorian Opera – 44% of a total of 18 leading creative team roles (8 women).²⁶

Other creative roles such as librettist, set designer, lighting designer and sound designer also tend to be dominated by men. Costume designer is the exception.

The situation is similar in the UK where the 2018–19 seasons for the Royal Opera House, English National Opera, Welsh National Opera, Glyndebourne, Opera North and Scottish Opera combined included women in the following roles across all mainstage productions:

- 22% of directors
- 9.7% of conductors
- 8.9% of librettists
- 12% of lighting designers
- 1% of composers.²⁷

Working to tip the scales

Out of seven productions in **Victorian Opera**'s 2020 season, three have conductors who are women. Victorian Opera also has women in two key governance roles, CEO (Elizabeth Hill-Cooper) and Chair (Genevieve Overell), as well as a 60/40 gender balance in its board in favour of women.

The **Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra (TSO)** runs a course to inspire and engage women conductors, the [Louise Crossley Conducting Workshop](#), where participants rehearse orchestral repertoire with pianists under the direction of conductor Elena Schwarz. The TSO's CEO is Caroline Sharpen.

[SWAP'ra \(Supporting Women and Parents in Opera\)](#) is a UK organisation established in 2018 to redress unconscious gender bias and to provide a platform to effect positive change for women and parents in opera. SWAP'ra aims to facilitate industry-wide culture change and encourage organisations to update their working practices and achieve a more inclusive environment. Their strategies include a proposal for advance rehearsal scheduling, being trialled by Opera Holland Park and a handful of smaller organisations.²⁸

There is now a gender balance or close to it across Australian orchestras, resulting from the implementation of blind auditions with candidates auditioning from behind a screen.²⁹ The impact of blind auditions demonstrates the power of unconscious gender bias: US research has shown that even when the screen is only used for the preliminary round, this step alone makes it 50% more likely that a woman will advance to the finals. The screen has also been demonstrated to be the source of a surge in the number of women being offered positions.³⁰

Increasing gender parity on boards and leadership teams

MPA opera companies have been working to increase gender parity on their boards and in their leadership teams. Looking at the five opera companies together, women comprise the following roles:

- 67% of CEOs/Executive Directors
- 50% of board members (excluding CEOs/Executive Directors).³¹

Victorian Opera and State Opera of SA currently have more women on their boards than men (60/40 balance) and Western Australian Opera has a 50/50 balance. The same three companies all have female CEOs/Executive Directors. Opera Australia and Opera Queensland have not yet achieved gender parity on their boards.

Leadership roles in which men continue to dominate are Chair and Artistic Director. Only one MPA opera company has a woman in the role of Chair (Victorian Opera) and no companies have a woman in the role of Artistic Director. This means that while women have senior executive roles, they largely enable a male Artistic Director's vision.

Representation of gender-based violence in the opera repertoire

Among the top ten operas performed globally, six end with the heroine's death (*La Traviata*, *Carmen*, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Rigoletto*) and only two (*Tosca* and *Don Giovanni*) include any male deaths at all.³²

Works considered masterpieces of the opera art form, which are on high rotation due to their popularity and exceptional music, contain narratives that include violence against women in what have been described as '*casual and glorified ways*' along with '*many other sexism*s'.³³

The [call to action published in ArtsHub](#) cited Australia's disturbingly high rates of violence against women in arguing that:

'A questioning of the systemic acceptance of gender-based violence is something we feel must be emphasised in the discussion of opera moving forward as a relevant art form and in line with cultural and social responsibility in the #metoo era... As creators and curators of opera in contemporary Australia we must constantly interrogate what we are placing on stage and question why we are telling this story, in this way, today.'

The article highlights a trigger warning presented by a female artist at NOW2019 (Laura Bowler in relation to her work-in-progress about rape, *Laura Sings*), as contrasting with male tellings of sexual violence which '*are often glorified as an essential and "appropriate" dramaturgical component of the "love, passion and desire" that are the stock in trade of opera.*'³⁴

Alison Crogan's article highlighted a staging of John Adams' *A Flowering Tree* at NOW2019, an opera based on an Indian folk tale, as emphasising the '*white colonial gaze.*' She wrote that it pointed to the complexities of sexism and racism in opera culture, along with artistic appropriations of women from '*exotic*' cultures such as *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*.³⁵

In a [panel discussion](#) at the [Australian Women in Music Awards](#) in October 2019,³⁶ opera singer Cheryl Barker AO argued that the violence is not glamorised or glorified when the director respects the libretto and music, and that the classics should not be changed.³⁷ Agreeing that the libretto must be respected, Deborah Cheetham AO argued that it comes down to direction:

'If Tosca dies, that must be directed as a tragedy. The moment she jumps should break the heart of the audience...Anything less is just acting out violence against women. I think the Carmens and the Toscas and the [Madama] Butterflies, they will remain...These are masterpieces from a period of time...But how do you treat them so that audiences aren't just going along and seeing Carmen get stabbed at the end and somehow feeling gratified by that...We want horrified. We want heartbroken. Anything less is not true to the craft of the composer.'

Cheetham gave the example of a child being ripped from her mother's arms in her opera *Pecan Summer* – an act which does not glorify Stolen Generations politics, but rather which shows something that happens in Australia; as does violence against women, making Carmen '*as relevant now as it ever was.*'

Theatre and opera director Heather Fairbairn emphasised the question of who is telling the story:

'Is it ok to have that story told by nine men and a costume designer who happens to be female?... What if that story is told by a female director? What if the music is interpreted by a female conductor? If the voices who are telling the stories change, maybe the stories themselves don't necessarily need to be changed.'

Safe workplaces and inclusive spaces

As well as a multiplicity of voices in bringing works to the stage, the [call to action published in ArtsHub](#) called for 'safe inclusive spaces for people with diverse voices and abilities to set the agenda, to lead the conversation, to have a resonant voice.' This includes:

*'...paying attention to how conferences and workshops are organised in terms of who curates and facilitates the sharing of ideas, what spaces are used, what language is employed, who is invited to speak, who is supported and profiled...'*³⁸

It is also vital to ensure that people feel safe in their workplace and comfortable to come forward about incidences of sexual harassment, which are notably high in the arts³⁹ and given debate in the industry about what is appropriate workplace behaviour in the wake of #MeToo.⁴⁰

RMIT's [Australian Women Screen Composers](#) report⁴¹ indicated that there is a difference in what men and women consider sexual harassment. While more than half of both men and women were neutral on whether sexual harassment was common in the industry, 36% of women agreed that it was and 36% of men disagreed.

Developing opera audiences

[Live Performance Australia's most recent data](#) showed:

- a 9.5% decline in opera attendance, from 0.41m in 2016 to 0.37m in 2017
- a 21% decline in opera revenue, from \$46.2m in 2016 to \$36.3m in 2017
- a 21% decrease in average opera ticket price, from \$145.80 in 2016 to \$115.42 in 2017 (contributing to the decline in revenue).⁴²

A recent article by Dr Caitlin Vincent, Lecturer in Creative Industries Studies at the University of Melbourne ran with the headline '[Opera is stuck in a racist, sexist past, while many in the audience have moved on](#)', and argued that 'companies need to find a way forward that doesn't alienate either traditionalists or the younger, more socially-minded generation.'

Strategies mentioned include:

- Seattle Opera scheduling [events on diversity and representation](#) alongside *Madame Butterfly*
- Commissioning [new translations](#) or using modernised supertitles
- Diversifying casts and creative teams.⁴³

Innovative new work developing audiences

2020 is the 10th anniversary of Deborah Cheetham AO and Short Black Opera's [*Pecan Summer*](#). Australia's first Indigenous opera, *Pecan Summer* changed the face of opera in Australia when it premiered on-country in Victoria in October 2010. *Pecan Summer* achieved 97% box office at the Art Centre in Melbourne in 2011, bringing 'audiences something they didn't even know they wanted.'⁴⁴

Cat Hope's critically acclaimed new work [*Speechless*](#) premiered at this year's Perth Festival produced by Tura New Music. *Speechless* featured an Indigenous music director, metal singer Karina Utomo as one of four soloists, and a 40 piece community choir and bass orchestra. Like *Pecan Summer*, *Speechless* challenges the boundaries of the art form, and engages with resonant issues of the social and political zeitgeist. According to Hope:

*'New operas should reflect the stories and styles of our time...women and non-binary people are an important part of these stories and styles, which is why the inclusion of our ideas, stories, opinions and creative vision is so important to the operatic canon at this point in time. Our casting needs to reflect this too – who we are and want to be in a better world.'*⁴⁵

Appendix A: List of demands published in the call to action

We demand a national commitment to systemic change:

1. We want diversity to be reflected in all aspects of the opera we experience.
2. We call for a questioning of the systemic acceptance of gender-based violence in opera.
3. We want recognition, respect, advocacy and support for creators who are female, non-binary and from diverse cultural backgrounds.
4. We call for safe and inclusive spaces for people with diverse voices and abilities to set the agenda, to lead the conversation, to have a resonant voice.
5. We want to decolonise the distribution of power so that the stories and creative work of all women and all people with diverse voices resonate equally with that of men.
6. We call for an unprecedented commitment to the programming and commissioning of new Australian opera work with gender and cultural diversity at the forefront.
7. We call for those in leadership to back us and that the act of hearing be prioritised alongside the act of speaking.

Sally Blackwood, Liza Lim, Peggy Polias and Bree van Reyk 2019, '[Opera and the doing of women](#),' *ArtsHub*.

References and links to further reading

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- ¹⁸ Ian Whitney, '[Australian Content in 2018](#).'
- ¹⁹ Ian Whitney, '[Australian Content in 2019](#).'
- ²⁰ Eve Klein 2019, '[HOW Opera – Australian Women in Music Awards Discussion](#),' based on [statistical information from Operabase](#) which tracks global opera productions. 1000 most played titles for the 2018–19 season were surveyed.
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- ²⁵ Alison Crogan 2019, '[Opera and the invisibility of women](#),' *Witness*, 7 May 2019.
- ²⁶ Based on desktop research of company websites, October 2019.
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