

When a nervous David Kemp, Commonwealth Minister for the Arts, released James Strong's report into Australia's symphony orchestras, there were the predictable howls of outrage from the usual suspects, including my old mate Alexander Downer.

While I didn't contribute to the cacophony, like lots of South Australians I have no wish see the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra diminished, especially while orchestras in the eastern states are allowed to thrive. I am not a regular member of the ASO's audience but I don't go to the Velodrome at Gepps Cross either. I'm happy that some of my fellow South Australians can go the ASO and I'm happy that some have a place where they can ride their bikes in circles. I just think we need to be mindful of the "user pays" principle because a lot of working Australian men and women are helping to fund art forms and sporting facilities they don't use.

Among the complaints that followed the release of the Strong Report, some fascinating claims were made. For instance, Gary France, Head of the School of Music at the Australian National University, claimed that the implementation of the Strong Report would "... affect everybody...every Australian".

I'm not so sure. In 2000-1, for instance, the Australian Bureau of Statistics records that 990, 907 people attended a paid, school or free symphony orchestra concert. On the other hand, 3.8 million people attended a popular music performance. That's 8.8% of all Australians who went to the symphony and 25.4% who went to a popular music performance. If the ABS is right, Gary France's claim that every Australian will be affected by the Strong Report is a big stretch.

Fact: more people go to contemporary popular music gigs than go to classical music concerts. However uncomfortable it might be, we can't ignore the inherent inequity of arts subsidies. Seats at orchestral concerts, the opera and the dance are heavily subsidised by the public purse. In contrast, seats at REM's concert at the Adelaide Entertainment Centre were not subsidised, nor were tickets to the recent Neil Diamond concert at Adelaide Oval.

However hard the arts mandarins try to spin it, the fact is that the lion's share of performing arts funding finds its way to the orchestras, the opera and dance companies. I know this at first hand. Between 1994 and 1996, notwithstanding our political differences, the then Arts Minister, Di Laidlaw, engaged me to help develop some policies for the contemporary popular music industry in South Australia. To her credit, Laidlaw accepted the proposition that as one of the most accessed and accessible art forms, contemporary music ought to be at the funding table. As I drew up my chair to represent the sector, it's fair to say that I was not exactly a welcome guest. It wasn't meant personally. There is never enough arts funding to go around and the ASO, the Adelaide Chamber Orchestra and the Australian String Quartet, among others, saw contemporary music as just another hungry mouth at a sparse table.

I want to see a strong, vibrant symphony orchestra in South Australia but I don't want it to be at the expense of the folkies, the jazz players, the country music community,

the blues fraternity and rock-and-rollers. However, I fear this will happen as the fine music lobby moves into self-protection mode. In general, the supporters of what used to be referred to as the 'high' arts are educated, politically savvy and noisy in the genteel sort of way that governments of both persuasions are more likely to respond to.

A few months ago I was lucky enough to see the Eagles at the Entertainment Centre. As the crowd snaked its way along aisles and between rows, it occurred to me that the tickets represented a big outlay for a lot of people there. These people pay their taxes and some of their tax dollars go to fund the arts. And so they should as I shudder to think of our society without the arts. But someone needs to explain to me why, in our democracy, one person's cultural experience is subsidised and another's is not.

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