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COVID-19; the end of the road for thousands of artist-practitioners?

You could hardly have escaped noticing the reports in the media that 2020 is an *annus horribilis* for the arts industries. The arts have seemingly been hung out to dry by COVID-19 and a national government which appears to find these professions impossible to classify in terms of representing actual jobs. For a variety of reasons, political and otherwise, our arts workers have not been collected up inside the safety net of government financial help in the COVID crisis.

The prognosis for tens of thousands of arts workers - the folks who are part of what is often misleadingly called the 'gig economy' - is indeed dire. It's an employment sector that is worth in excess of 110 billion dollars a year to the economy* and is a vital part of many other industries which plug into it, including tourism.

The performing and other arts are also vital to the emotional health of any nation. Countries cannot function properly without them, and yet some governments, including ours, seem to have placed the sector in the 'too hard basket'. For our performers in particular, as well as other artists, the long-term financial and psychological damage that is being done to individual practitioners as well as the broad societal impact of this sudden downturn sends a shudder down my spine.

Two of my four children are caught up in this. I have a daughter studying cello performance at doctoral level in Florida, USA (a COVID hotspot if ever there was one). For most of her life she has hoped for and planned a career as a professional cellist. She is highly talented and playing the cello professionally has been her chosen vocation from the age of 6. She had very solid career prospects until COVID came along.

My son, Timothy, as some readers may know, is a salaried member of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and former artistic director of Synergy Percussion. Since April, all salaried players of the orchestra have taken a 30% cut to their pay until the end of 2021. But what then? Will public concerts ever

resume at a level in which our performing arts companies are sufficiently viable to pay a permanent staff of artists again?

Timothy is one of a handful of percussionists worldwide who are regarded by their peers as being at the peak of their profession. The late Peter Sculthorpe, in a letter to me written shortly before he died, referred to Timothy as 'a national treasure'. But will the national treasure lose his job at the end of 2021 and have to seek a different career?

This situation resonates poignantly for me. My mother, Phyllis (nee Green), was a promising pianist studying at the Sydney Conservatorium in the late 1920s and early 1930s. She was in her final year when the Depression struck. Her brother, my uncle Harold, who had been paying her Conservatorium fees, lost his job and Phyllis was forced to leave her beloved 'Con' and take up shorthand and typing studies, eventually becoming a secretary to one of the middle managers at Paramount Pictures in Australia. Among other things, she ran the Australian arm of the Bing Crosby Fan Club sending out signed photographs of the idol to many thousands of Australian worshipers. But she rarely touched the piano again and eventually WW II came along and she got married in the middle of it to a Sydney dry cleaner (my father). In the period when I was growing up, I can recall her playing the upright that sat in our lounge room only briefly and only once or twice over a twenty year period.

Little wonder that when musical talent showed up in me, my parents would not encourage it as a career. Music could only be a hobby, not a profession. Who can blame them? What they had witnessed first-hand in the 1930s left scars that were there for the rest of their lives.

But this also played out pretty dramatically for me when I was growing up in the 50s and 60s. Time and again it was impressed on me that music was an unrealistic profession, particularly for a breadwinner; musicians and actors were the first to be thrown out of work in the Depression and that could easily happen again.

But what else could I do? Music was my vocation. Like a religious calling, it felt to me that I had no choice in the matter. Looking back, being encouraged to ignore my talent actually caused me serious ongoing health and emotional problems: failure in most subjects forced me out of high school at 14 (I only passed Music and English as I recall - I got 98% for Music) and, like King

George VI, I had developed a debilitating stammer which took many years to overcome.

Eventually, as a twenty-year-old I was able to take a punt on my own and ignore my parent's advice. I had found the pressure to become a musician too great to bear any longer. I simply had to give it a shot. The rest is history, as they say. I was able to squeeze in a more than satisfactory career as a university professor of music before anything like this current crisis could threaten it.

No such luck for my children or for the several thousand aspiring musicians I helped to train in the music schools I was in charge of. Now, just as my parents had predicted, the Great Depression of the 1930s is happening all over again. It doesn't matter that this time it's caused by a virus; the effect is the same.

In the current situation for performing artists, I'd have to say that ten-fifteen years in the doldrums with little or no income is enough to kill off any career. It's enough to snuff out a meaningful life, too, as it no doubt did in the 1930s. Imagine what it is like for a classical performer who has worked for 20+ years to perfect skills and high-level artistry, and through daily practice to have hard-wired their brain in such a way that their super-impressive skillset is highly valued by society, only to have all of their opportunities to use their skills savagely removed over the span of a few weeks.

And then there's the psychological damage of being told by your government that your profession is not sufficiently valuable to the nation to reward with any form of job-keeper payment.

And yet there is something else that may be the real fact of the matter, which is telling us otherwise: everywhere we turn - radio, television, the internet, live gigs and a multitude of other places - the creative arts are deeply interwoven into our lives. Our society cannot and should not have to make do without them.

But fixing the problem is difficult, perhaps too difficult for the thinking of conservative governments, which tend to regard societies primarily as economies. This leads to a mindset which sees only limited ways of generating and measuring the wealth of a nation.

Compared to the 1930s, however, there are some things that are different now. An obvious difference is the internet and all it can be used for. The other - and this is perhaps the more important - is the high level of expectation that society now places upon the arts industries; a deep co-dependency has developed exponentially over 40 or so years and the internet has tapped into and also generated this transformation in a big way.

People are now used to spending a good deal of their disposable income on the arts. When the Depression of the 1930s hit the world, concerts, for example, were few (certainly in places like Australia) and radio entertainment was only in its infancy. Society's expectation of the arts was quite different and much simpler. Now, society's expectation is to have thriving and diverse arts industries (see earlier reference to the annual contribution to the national economy made by the creative arts).

As for the internet, we now have an incredibly powerful tool to connect us, and artists of various types are becoming adept at exploiting it. Everyone will benefit from this. It is the internet which holds the key to the way the arts will be used to add value to the everyday lives of people. We simply have to develop further our capacity to exploit this resource for the good of the nation as well as our artists. This marriage of arts and internet will have to include large and diverse audiences who will be prepared to pay money to stream the arts into their homes as well as attending less frequent and somewhat modified public concerts and events.

Robert Constable

Over a long career Robert Constable taught at the Sydney Conservatorium and was Professor and Dean and Head of Music at the Universities of Newcastle (Australia), Auckland and Canterbury (New Zealand).

*The Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BCAR) released analysis in 2018 showing cultural and creative activity contributed \$111.7 billion to Australia's economy in 2016-17.