A Culture of Confidence

2026 Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address

Professor Benjamin Northey

1. What are we inviting them into?

Thank you, everyone. It's a privilege to deliver this year's Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address. Over the past month, I've conducted eleven performances across five programs in three cities and two countries. So it's a particular pleasure to be here with you all at home in Melbourne.

On one of my many recent flights, a child sitting beside me with her dad noticed the score on my lap. She was about seven or eight years old, bright as a button and clearly not shy.

> "What's that?"
>
> "Music."

She looked at the page.

> "Why are there so many lines?"
>
> "Each line belongs to a different instrument. I'm a conductor of orchestras, so I need to see what everyone's playing."
>
> "All at once?"
>
> "All at once."
>
> "Can you hear it in your head?"
>
> "Some of it. But it's much better when the orchestra's there."
>
> "What does it sound like?"

“Sometimes eighty musicians are playing together, and you can feel the sound right through your body. Then one person plays something very quietly, and everyone in the room is listening to that one little sound.”

“Is it all old music?”

“Some of it’s very old. But people are writing new music all the time. This piece here is written by a composer called Vanessa Perica who lives in Melbourne. There are people here in Australia like Vanessa making music nobody has ever heard before.”

She raised her eyebrows at that.

“Can it be funny?”

“Very funny.”

“Scary?”

“Absolutely.”

“Can it sound like a wombat?”

We spent a little time considering that. We talked about what instrument might be best for a wombat.

I suggested the tuba. She wasn’t convinced.

Then she looked back at the score.

“Could I do that?”

And a moment later, turning excitedly to her dad:

“Can we go?”

I love those questions.

There is curiosity there. The possibility of a first encounter with something that might become part of a person’s life.

We kept on talking. And if I’m honest, it was a pretty long flight after that.

But the conversation left me with a question of my own.

What are we inviting that child into?

Art music in many formats offers an encounter with an extraordinary inheritance: works from other centuries and other places, brought to life by artists whose skill and imagination can make them feel as immediate as anything we experience.

That is something to treasure. I've devoted much of my life to it. I love it and I believe in it.

And I want that child to encounter something else as well.

The discovery that people here are making music now. That the country she is growing up in has stories, sounds and artists worth listening to. That someone who learnt an instrument in a school like hers might one day be on that stage — or writing the music being played — possibly even about wombats.

I want her to feel that this is a culture she can enter, and perhaps contribute to.

The Peggy Glanville-Hicks Address offers an opportunity to recognise what is working in our musical life — and ask what we might do differently. To remind us of the power and impact of our choices.

Our major musical institutions have played an important role in developing Australian music and artists. We have built a musical culture of remarkable depth, expertise and imagination.

I believe those achievements give us an opportunity to be even more ambitious about our contribution to Australian life.

How might we bring the music and artists we develop here more prominently into the stories we tell, the experiences we offer, and the invitations we extend to audiences?

Could that help more Australians — including that child — find a lasting connection with music?

And through those connections, help build a more musical Australia?

What would a more confident Australian musical culture look like?

2. A connected musical life

This year has taken me from all-Australian programs and premieres to regional tours, televised concerts, international engagements and working with young musicians.

Moving between those settings, I'm struck by how connected they all are.

The questions that come up in teaching stay with me in rehearsal. Working with young musicians makes me think about the opportunities they'll need next in a changing world. Taking music to different communities reminds me how much there is to discover about the people we play for.

Being based here in Australia means I can keep returning to those relationships and see what grows from them.

I've benefited enormously from people doing that for me: inviting me back, giving me more responsibility, taking an interest in what I might become.

No single opportunity created my career. The accumulation did.

Increasingly, I find myself asking how I can extend that confidence to others — and what the expertise we have developed might make possible beyond our profession.

Internally we often explain the value of our arts organisations through the language of artistic excellence.

I understand why. I know how much work those words represent: years of learning, exacting auditions, preparation, rehearsal, and the daily effort to listen and respond at the highest level.

That commitment is fundamental to what we do.

But when we speak to someone who has never been to a concert, how much does the word “excellence” actually tell them?

I’ve heard people say, “You have to hear this.” I’m still yet to hear anyone say, “You have to come — the standards are exceptionally high.”

Excellence is essential. But excellence alone is not a cultural vision.

We have to decide what all that excellence is for.

What might they hear? What might surprise them? Why might the experience matter enough for them to come again? Will they feel connected? Will they feel that this musical life belongs to them?

The child on the plane wanted to know whether music could be funny, whether it could be frightening, whether she could take part.

Those are wonderful questions for a musical institution to answer.

Most Australians already know that music matters. They know which song they want played at their wedding. They know the music that reminds them of someone they’ve lost. They’ve felt what happens when a crowd starts singing together.

Our performing arts organisations have an extraordinary capacity to enrich that relationship.

That capacity is one of the great achievements of Australian musical life. It has been built over generations, through the dedication of artists, educators, institutions and the communities that support them.

As musicians and artists, we have worked extraordinarily hard to become this good at what we do.

The question is: what do we want to make possible with that ability?

3. Inheriting and creating

Our National Cultural Policy is called Revive. After the pandemic, revival was necessary. But the title invites a question: revive what — and towards what future? How do we balance preserving our cultural inheritance with creating what future generations will inherit?

Our major performing arts organisations care for an extraordinary inheritance. Performing that music is itself creative work. A performance of Beethoven here, shaped by Australian musicians' imagination and experience, is part of Australian cultural life.

But inheritance is also something we add to.

The music we now regard as indispensable was once unfamiliar. Someone had to believe in it, advocate for it and give people opportunities to hear it again.

That responsibility comes to us with the scores.

We are already preserving and creating. But are we giving the music created here enough prominence to become part of people's lives — and part of this nation's story?

When we speak about musical tradition, how often do we include our own?

Even beginning in the 1940s and 1950s — a small part of this continent's much longer musical history — we encounter Margaret Sutherland and Peggy Glanville-Hicks, creating distinctive music and opportunities for others.

Then Peter Sculthorpe, inviting us to hear this country's landscapes differently. Anne Boyd, engaging deeply with the musical cultures of Asia. Liza Lim and ELISION, opening new possibilities through adventurous collaboration.

And, in this century, Deborah Cheetham Fraillon's Pecan Summer, bringing a First Nations story to the operatic stage and creating opportunities for Indigenous singers to tell it.

How often do we help audiences hear these as threads in a continuing story?

We make those connections across centuries of European music. We could bring the same curiosity and care to the music created here.

Australian music has a past as well as a future. Both deserve a place in our audiences' lives.

This needn't mean equal proportions in every concert. A short Australian work can be central to a program. An Australian performer can transform our experience of familiar repertoire.

What matters is the weight we give those contributions — and whether we make them part of the reason to listen. Part of the invitation.

4. What our choices communicate

Over more than two and a half decades of working in performing arts organisations, I've come to understand something of the complexity of artistic planning: the aspirations, financial pressures, expectations of audiences and the responsibility of keeping major institutions successful.

I've also become interested in what those decisions communicate about what we value.

Consider two international tours by an orchestra I know very well.

In 2014, the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra toured Europe under Sir Andrew Davis, performing in some of its most prestigious venues and festivals.

The repertoire was drawn overwhelmingly from the great European tradition. There was Australian music, including Percy Grainger's The Warriors, which I had the privilege of co-conducting at the Edinburgh Festival, but the featured conductor and soloists were international artists.

Here was an Australian orchestra demonstrating that it could perform the great European repertoire at the highest international level. That was an achievement to be proud of.

Eleven years later, the MSO returned to Europe and the UK, bringing another important dimension of its artistic identity to the international stage.

Under Jaime Martín, the orchestra performed Margaret Sutherland's Haunted Hills at the BBC Proms. At the Edinburgh International Festival, William Barton performed the world premiere of Deborah Cheetham Fraillon's Treaty.

The great international repertoire was still there. But the orchestra was also bringing something distinctive from Australia to the world.

I think that represents an important expansion of what an Australian orchestra can offer the world.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra's Deutsche Grammophon recording under Simone Young, pairing Mahler's Second Symphony with William Barton's Of the Earth, offers another compelling example of bringing something distinctive from this place to the international stage.

We can see this confidence in Australian theatre very clearly. In the playwright S. Shakthidharan's Counting and Cracking, the story of a family across Sri Lanka and Australia is central to Belvoir's invitation to audiences. What the work reveals about this country is part of the reason to come.

Kip Williams's The Picture of Dorian Gray demonstrates another possibility: Australian artists bringing such distinctive imagination to an inherited classic that their interpretation becomes an international event.

Both show what becomes possible when we place confidence in the artists working here — in the stories they have to tell, and in what they can bring to the stories we already know.

There is no need to choose between being connected to this place and being ambitious about our place in the world. One serves the other.

The more deeply our work connects with life here, and the more imagination we bring to it, the more distinctive a contribution we can make internationally. Relevance at home can be a source of possibility abroad.

In music, when we program a new or less familiar Australian work, how often does it become a central reason to attend?

Sometimes the familiar symphony, international soloist or established name carries the promotional campaign, while the Australian work receives much less attention.

I understand why. Marketing teams have tickets to sell, and familiarity offers reassurance.

I've sometimes been surprised when a concert featuring Australian artists and music attracts less critical attention than one with a predominantly international focus. Yet if we present something as peripheral, we should hardly be surprised when audiences come to regard it that way.

There's a difference between including a work and genuinely championing it.

If Australian music is sometimes difficult to sell, we should be curious about why. How have we introduced it? What reasons have we given people to care? Have we allowed enough time for familiarity to grow? Do we really believe in it?

These are questions for artistic leadership, performers and institutions as a whole.

Marketing teams can help people discover why a work matters. But it's important that the conviction behind that invitation is shared across the organisation.

5. Music in the present tense

I've had the privilege of conducting more than a hundred premieres of Australian music, and some of my most rewarding experiences have been with works that speak directly to the society in which we live.

Deborah Cheetham-Fraillon's Eumeralla: A War Requiem for Peace is an enormous work, comparable in scale and ambition to Benjamin Britten's War Requiem. It confronts the history of the Eumeralla Resistance War on Gunditjmara Country in western Victoria.

Its musical language is both beautiful and violent, taking us through conflict and suffering towards the possibility of reconciliation.

One of the most moving moments I have experienced on the podium was when the Dhungala Children's Choir joined the massed chorus, singing of forgiveness. It was profoundly powerful.

With First Nations soloists and artwork projected above the performers, the experience of that work brought people together around a difficult and painful history.

Then, in October 2023, we performed it again with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra — on the evening Australians voted against an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

The performance had been planned long before the referendum date was announced.

Deborah spoke to the audience that evening. She was visibly shattered by what had happened, and by the significance of performing this particular work at that moment.

Here was a major Australian musical work, created from our own history, speaking directly to a defining moment in our national life.

Eumeralla demonstrates the capacity of our composers to engage with contemporary life on a grand artistic scale.

Australia's musical identity draws on many cultures and traditions, reflecting the diversity of contemporary Australian life.

There is no single Australian story, or sound, that our institutions must somehow represent. There is an abundance of experience to encounter.

Of course, a work doesn't become compelling simply because it is Australian. It must succeed as music. Nor does a listener need to recognise their own story to be moved by someone else's.

But these encounters give us opportunities to understand the place we live in — and one another — through music. They demonstrate immediate relevance.

We spend much of our professional lives bringing the music of other times and places into the present.

We also have the opportunity to give the present a significant musical voice.

6. Confidence and cultural ownership

My life in music is a product of the opportunities I had to learn and play music in Australia. I also spent four years living and studying conducting in Finland, a nation of five million people and a global musical powerhouse. There I encountered a relationship with musical life that stayed with me.

What struck me was a sense of cultural ownership.

Finnish composers, performers and orchestras seemed to belong to the people. Their achievements were part of a shared cultural life, reaching beyond the profession.

As a young conductor, I found that very encouraging. Although conductors like me are generally quite receptive to the idea that conductors are important.

But what stayed with me was the sense that music mattered to people who weren't making it.

I've seen this firsthand through my work as Chief Conductor in Christchurch, New Zealand. People don't have to read a score to feel proud of an orchestra. They don't have to understand how a piece is put together to feel that it says something about the place they come from.

In Australia, we understand this perfectly well in sport. Nobody asks you to demonstrate a cover drive before you're allowed to say, "We won the Ashes" — or swim a lap of butterfly before you can say, "We won gold.

That little word — "we" — carries a great deal.

It says: I have a stake in this. These people represent something I feel part of. Their achievement belongs, in some small way, to me too.

In Finland, I sensed that kind of connection around musical life.

It had been cultivated over time, through education, public investment and opportunities for people to encounter the work of their own artists. Finland's history and funding system are different from ours. We cannot simply transplant the model.

But we can ask what would help more Australians feel that same sense of connection to music.

We have built extraordinary musical expertise in this country. How widely do people feel they have a share in it?

An audience's affection for an artist can grow over years. Someone they first heard as a young soloist returns with a deeper voice of their own. A composer's unfamiliar music becomes something they look forward to. People follow a career, remember a performance, bring a friend.

Gradually, "that orchestra" becomes "our orchestra". "Those artists" become "our artists".

That sense of belonging can make room for disagreement too. People should be able to say, “I didn’t understand that piece,” and still feel that the concert hall is theirs to return to.

For me, that is a deeper measure of cultural confidence: people feeling entitled to take an interest, to have an opinion, and to come back.

I want more Australians to feel that they have a place in our musical life before they know very much about it.

Once someone feels, “This is ours,” there is a reason to become curious about what we might do next.

7. Consequential cultural choices

One of the things I’ve learnt from working closely with arts organisations is how many people contribute to their artistic direction.

Boards, executives, artistic teams, conductors and performing musicians bring different responsibilities and perspectives. Decisions emerge from conversations between them, shaped by artistic aspirations, practical pressures and the need to earn one another’s trust.

I know these conversations can be difficult. I’ve been part of them. I’ve also been incredibly proud of the outcomes of so many of those conversations and what they have made possible.

And I’ve benefited enormously from people being willing to place their confidence in me.

From the different places I work within this musical life, I’ve become interested in a shared question: what do our decisions, when taken together, encourage Australians to believe is possible here?

Think about this. Behind every musician on our major stages sits an extraordinary ecosystem of teachers, schools, youth music programs, conservatoria, community ensembles, development programs and mentors. A huge investment.

Within our institutions, when we decide whom to champion, whose judgement to trust and who is ready for greater responsibility, we help shape what people believe that whole musical culture is capable of producing.

That influence belongs to more of us than we might initially think.

As a conductor, I can ask myself whose music I advocate for, who I recommend, and what I communicate through the enthusiasm — or hesitation — with which I introduce a new work.

Within an orchestra or opera company, musicians' confidence in an artist can be decisive. So can the willingness of an artistic team to make a case, or a board to support a choice whose value will take time to become apparent.

We have different powers in these conversations. But we all contribute to the climate in which decisions become possible.

Senior artistic leadership appointments are a particularly visible example.

These are complex decisions. The relationship between an arts organisation and its artistic leader depends on trust that cannot simply be declared from above.

International experience and reputation can offer valuable evidence. Artists from elsewhere can bring fresh perspectives and become passionate advocates for Australian musical life.

But we should also ask ourselves how we recognise artistic authority in post-colonial Australia.

How much weight do we give our own experience of an artist's work? What changes in our judgement when recognition comes from elsewhere? And how willing are we to give artists the responsibility through which their leadership can grow?

Those questions are worth asking wherever we sit in the organisation.

The story of Australian music is written by our choices.

A single appointment cannot bear the weight of an entire culture's aspirations. But patterns of decisions over decades can communicate something powerful.

We should be careful that the decisions we make at the top of our musical institutions don't inadvertently undermine confidence in the things we are investing in beneath them.

These are consequential cultural choices.

When an institution backs an artist, that confidence becomes visible. Audiences have a reason to be curious. Other organisations may take notice. A young musician can see a possibility for their own future.

I vividly remember Jeffrey Crellin, the legendary former Principal Oboe of the MSO, giving me my first professional conducting engagements with the Melbourne Chamber Orchestra in the early 2000s. He even gave me a titled position.

That opportunity, and the belief behind it, came at a critical time in my early career. It led directly to a relationship with the MSO that is now approaching 25 years.

I'll never forget what he did for me. That's what confidence looks like when it's put into practice.

Artistic leaders of our institutions, whatever their nationality, should be expected to bring a deep commitment to Australian artists and culture as fundamental to the role.

Those of us who work alongside them have a part to play in turning that commitment into lasting opportunities.

We need to bring the same care to the confidence our decisions create as we bring to the artistic results we hope they will achieve.

8. From premieres to repertoire

One of the most vibrant and prolific parts of our musical life is our extraordinary community of composers. Through their many different voices, they help us hear the Australia we live in.

We have a strong culture of commissioning new work. Every premiere represents an investment of money, imagination and faith in something that doesn't yet exist.

But we should also look at what happens afterwards.

A composer might spend months or years creating a substantial work. We celebrate its premiere, congratulate everyone involved, and move on. A piece with much more to reveal may never be heard again.

There are encouraging models that offer a different approach.

This year I've been conducting performances of Holly Harrison's wonderful new accordion concerto, InsideOut, written for James Crabb.

It was commissioned jointly by four Australian symphony orchestras — Adelaide, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia. The work has received multiple performances across those cities, while radio broadcasts and a filmed presentation through the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra's online offering have extended its reach even further.

Think about what that makes possible.

The composer hears the work develop. Different orchestras and conductors discover different things in the score. Audiences encounter it across the country, and recordings give listeners the chance to return to it.

Sharing the investment gives the music a greater opportunity to establish a life of its own.

That doesn't guarantee a permanent place in the repertoire. But it gives the work a genuine chance.

A premiere creates an event. Repetition creates culture.

Australian works deserve the opportunity to become familiar too.

And that means looking again at music whose premieres are well behind us. Which pieces deserve another hearing? What might a different performer discover? Who has yet to encounter them?

There is artistic discovery in returning to a work, just as there is in presenting something new.

The repertoire we pass on will be shaped by what we choose to return to — and by the music audiences come to regard as their own.

9. A place to begin

Australia is a high-achieving musical nation. We have the expertise, the imagination and the capacity to make an even greater contribution to Australian life.

But that future won't simply emerge because we continue doing excellent work.

The future of music in Australia will not be determined by what we say we value. It will be determined by what we choose to do.

I want us to build a more musical Australia.

A country in which more children learn music in a well-resourced system of music education. More people encounter it. More Australian artists are heard and celebrated. And more Australians feel that the musical life of this country belongs to them.

Let's return to that child on the plane.

What are we inviting her into?

A musical life in which she can encounter the imagination of people from across the world and across centuries — and discover what people here are contributing to it.

Our musical institutions are already making those encounters possible. I'm challenging us to see that work not as something additional to our purpose, but as fundamental to it.

Let's back artists with real responsibility. Let's bring music we believe in back to the stage. Let's draw more deeply on the stories, sounds and experiences of this country. Let's give people reasons to be curious, opportunities to participate and reasons to return.

We cannot know where a first encounter will lead. Perhaps that child will become a musician. Perhaps she will spend a lifetime loving music, and one day bring a child of her own.

We spend much of our lives caring for what we've inherited. But at some point, we become the ancestors.

Let's pass on a musical life that she can feel belongs to her.

So that when she asks, "Could I do that?" there is a place to begin.

And when she turns to her dad and asks, "Can we go?" the answer is yes.

Thank you.