

Robin Usher's Diary
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Date: 25/11/2008
Words: 689
Source: AGE
Publication: The Age
Section: Metro
Page: 20

Garrett under fire

FEDERAL Arts Minister Peter Garrett continues to come under fire over his abrupt decision to abolish the Australian National Academy of Music at the end of the year.

Last week's equally hasty announcement that it will be replaced by the Australian Institute of Music Performance at Melbourne University also appears to have few supporters.

The academy's former deputy chairman, Michael Bertram, says he has a sense of "outright despair" at Garrett's decision to "peremptorily destroy" what the academy had set out to achieve.

This year's academy students have joined with those who planned to study there in 2009 in writing to Garrett describing his decision as "condescending and lacking in substance". More than 80 signatories were also critical of the minister's failure to consult the academy's students or faculty members.

The letter, which was also sent to all Canberra MPs, describes music facilities at the university and the Victorian College of the Arts, which are being combined, as "overstretched and overcrowded". It says the academy has a practice-room ratio of one room to two students and describes this as a key ingredient to the high results achieved by the students.

Meanwhile, the university has announced that the closing date for students wishing to transfer from the academy next year has been extended to December 8. It emphasises that any applicant will be treated as an individual and all efforts will be made to meet any needs.

It has also been decided that the new institute will be located at Southbank at the VCA at the merged Melbourne School of Music as part of a long-term aim to build a new conservatorium with easy access to the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra.

The university's pro vice-chancellor, Professor Warren Bebbington, compares the new school with New York's Julliard and London's Guildhall schools. A planning advisory group is also being established involving leading figures in

music and music education from around Australia to discuss issues such as the student transfer. The new head of the merged music school will be appointed in the next few weeks.

Chamber needs support

THE Melbourne Chamber Orchestra has launched a fund-raising drive to support its first season in the Melbourne Recital Centre. The transfer from the BMW Edge in Federation Square has been made more difficult by the decision by Arts Victoria to reduce its support next year.

Formerly known as the Australia Pro Arts Orchestra, the MCO is offering seven concerts in the Elisabeth Murdoch Hall, culminating in November with the visit by its patron, Sir Neville Marriner.

The founder of London's Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields will conduct two programs over four concerts. Other guests throughout the year include baritone Peter Coleman-Wright (March 29), pianist Ian Munro (April 26) and oboist Diana Doherty (May 24). But costs are higher in the new venue and the general manager, Esther Benjamin, says this, combined with the reduced support, "has made it harder than we could ever have conceived".

It had originally been planned to hold 14 concerts in 2009 but this has been reduced to nine, with only the two Marriner programs being repeated.

Australia Pro Arte was formed in 1990 but changed its operating philosophy in 2006, moving away from a close liaison with the Melbourne Symphony to model itself on the Academy of StMartin-in-the-Fields with violinist William Hennessy as artistic director. For more information, phone 9650 3365, or go to mco.org.au.

MSO gets military beat

A MILITARY field drum modelled on a 19th century original has been donated to the Melbourne Symphony and will be used in performances of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* at Hamer Hall next month. The 1931 rope-tensioned drum was donated by amateur percussionist John Marsh, who will play it in the concerts from December 11 to 13. He says he wants to ensure it is used and knows the MSO will care for it and play it for many years.

In the concerts, he will perform the long drum roll at the end of the fourth movement, which Berlioz wrote especially for this type of instrument. Orchestra percussionist John Arcaro says the drum has its original rope, leather straps and natural skins. "It produces a unique and authentic military sound."

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