



Meeting of Cultural Ministers  
via the Australia Council  
mpaconsultation@australiacouncil.gov.au

Monday 19 November 2018

## **Submission: Major Performing Arts Framework Review**

NAVA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important work.

Australia's Major Performing Arts companies make important contributions to the development, performance and enjoyment of heritage and contemporary arts. Given the quantum of funds committed to the MPA Framework over indefinite periods of time, proposed change in this area offers the Meeting of Cultural Ministers your single most impactful policy instrument across all of the arts. Successful change has the capacity to invigorate and inspire the arts across Australia.

The exclusive application and current form of the MPA Framework is unconscionable in Australia's contemporary culture and counter-productive to Australia's arts priorities. Given the many MPA reviews that have informed the Meeting of Cultural Ministers' work over the years, NAVA welcomes the commitment to significant change that premises this Review.

NAVA's submission responds to the questions outlined in the discussion paper, offers recommendations on policy direction, and appends previously published pieces advocating for a more comprehensive approach to industry development policy in the arts – an approach currently precluded by the narrow application of the MPA Framework.

This is a rare moment to institute a set of frameworks that develop Australia's arts ethically, strategically and ambitiously.

### **RESPONSE TO KEY QUESTIONS**

- 1. Would the combination of a formal assessment process with a long-term contractual period offered by the model described above (four year contract + four year extension, subject to KPIs being met) provide an appropriate balance between flexibility, accountability and funding certainty?**
  - a. Alternatively, would this balance be better provided by another model (e.g. full assessment process every four years but with a four-year notice period for any changes to funding levels. Eight-year contract with mid-point review)?**

NAVA welcomes the consultation paper's explicit acknowledgement that Australia's MPA Framework is "on the least interventionist end of the spectrum" by global standards. This acknowledgement is a crucial starting point for committing to real change. NAVA recommends:

- A formal assessment process is mandated
- The term is consistent with long-term contractual periods to be offered to all organisations, and set at a level that is twice the Australia Council’s multi-year funding, currently four years
- The suggestion that a “light touch for companies that have met expectations” is set aside, ensuring that MPAs face the same scrutiny as those multi-year-funded organisations who receive only a small fraction of an MPA’s recurrent funding
- Equity for all multi-year-funded organisations across application, assessment, harmonisation across levels and departments of government etc.

**b. Should governments consider funding companies from other artforms on a multi-partite basis through the same enhanced framework? If so, which artforms should be considered?**

The only policy context in which the MPA Framework may conscionably or strategically be retained is if a long-term contractual period framework of identical terms were also applied to all other artforms. The Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy (VACS) is an already existing set of agreements between state and federal government to which such a framework may readily be transitioned.

**2. What modifications, if any, should be made to the current Framework’s definition of an MPA company (at Appendix 2) when determining the eligibility criteria for being asked to make a submission for multi-partite funding under the enhanced model? For example, should any other financial, artistic, audience, leadership and diversity criteria be incorporated, or should any of the existing criteria be changed?**

The current set of definitions apply to all other multi-year-funded organisations – with the exception of the \$1.6m threshold, which is in fact the only criterion specific to this group of companies. A new set of criteria is needed for the refreshed MPA Framework, and the proposed submission process is welcome. NAVA recommends:

- Continued funding for all MPAs should be contingent on verifiable, measurable performance against First Nations and diversity criteria
- Consultation with Indigenous artists and organisations, Arts Access Australia, Diversity Arts Australia, and other relevant national peak and sector service bodies, should determine these criteria, especially those addressing cultural leadership
- There should be clear consequences for breaching these criteria.

The question of leadership is a particularly fraught one in this context.

Maintaining a long-term contractual framework for MPA companies alone has significant detrimental impacts for the industry confidence and sector cohesion that actually develops cultural leadership and artistic excellence. This detriment is acutely felt by companies who meet each of the stated criteria but are not MPAs. Such companies lack the resources, data and access to high-level decision-makers required to amplify their case, and there is a perception that MPAs are better able to make use of this access to achieve favourable funding outcomes despite breaching these criteria. That perception detracts from the constructive collaboration and mutually respectful relationships that best champion Australia’s arts and culture.

**a. How could periodic sector-specific scans inform eligibility decisions?**

Peer-led sector scans supported and resourced by the Australia Council would be an effective way of informing sector development priorities in general and eligibility decisions specifically.

**b. Should individual Australian jurisdictions' demographics (including population) and arts ecologies be taken into account in eligibility decisions? If so, how?**

Yes. The peer-led sector scan should guide this. If the objective is to offer all Australians equitable access to excellent arts experiences, a consideration of the work of all funded organisations and not just MPAs is essential.

- 3. Do you agree that the assessment process should comprise the three tiers listed above? If not, what do you think should be considered in the assessment process?**
- a. How should assessment of these (or other) aspects of a company's submitted strategic intent and proposition inform governments' decisions on funding levels?**
  - b. How, if at all, should peer advice be incorporated into the assessment process?**

Criteria for assessment must align with criteria for eligibility, and therefore our responses to the previous question apply to this question also. Eligibility and assessment should be peer-assessed.

- 4. How long a notice period should companies receive before funding levels are adjusted if KPIs are consistently not met? Should this differ from company to company depending on individual artistic and business models?**
- a. If individual company KPIs are negotiated on the basis of their own strategic intent proposals, how do governments determine which companies must undertake certain activity if there is limited interest in specific types of activity being undertaken within the existing funding envelope (such as regional touring)?**

This is a particularly pressing issue for the several MPA companies who are facing current or long-term solvency issues. Regular assessment with consequences for breaches should be part of each MPA contract. As a last resort and as the ultimate stage of this process, a one-year notice to terminate funding would then be appropriate.

**b. Should reporting on companies' performance be made public in aggregate on an annual basis to increase public understanding of outcomes?**

Yes. Performance should also continue to be made public individually as required of annual reporting.

- 5. How should governments balance the benefits of flexibility (increasing the ability to respond to opportunity and ensure accountability) and certainty of funding (giving companies the confidence to plan for the future and take artistic risks)?**

It will be important that the Framework guide MPAs in distinguishing between commercial opportunities and their obligations under the Framework. Companies should be encouraged to be entrepreneurial in pursuing only those commercial activities that align with their core business and identified values – activities that align with their obligations under the Framework, including the strengthened focus on cultural leadership criteria. Peer assessment may assist MPAs in determining this alignment.

**6. How should governments' multi-partite contracts with companies reflect expectations in relation to diversity, access and creative leadership (including with regard to the development and presentation of Australian works)?**

The considerations and protocols outlined at Question 2 apply here. Targets determined in consultation with recognised sector bodies will need to be met to ensure continued funding.

**7. In undertaking a sector scan of touring activity and considering funding mechanisms, what should governments consider?**

A nationally consistent approach to touring has long been discussed in the performing arts sector. A national touring framework must follow a strategic approach that prioritises the needs of regional, remote and outer-suburban Australia. This touring discussion must broaden to include all artforms, particularly as artform boundaries continue to blur, and regional and suburban venues increasingly present visual artwork in the galleries and foyers of performing arts venues. NAVA recommends:

- A peer-led sector scan supported and resourced by the Australia Council on a quadrennial basis (preceding the contractual term renewal process) to assess touring needs and identify priorities
- Including the VACS organisations in this work
- Avoiding the 'double-dipping' where MPAs are able to obtain National Touring Status or apply for touring funds via Playing Australia, thus displacing the touring needs and priorities of the majority of the sector
- Ensuring that MPAs take their touring responsibilities seriously by presenting the same work on tour as at their resident venue/s or in capital cities, rather than touring a modified version which is perceived as being of lesser quality and value.

**8. If a competitive Enhancement Fund were introduced to complement multi-partite funding through a model for an enhanced framework, how often should such funding be allocated (e.g. biannually, yearly, biennially)?**

- a. If additional Australian Government funding were not available to support a competitive Enhancement Fund, what would be the advantages and disadvantages of redirecting a small portion of existing Australian Government core funding for this purpose?**

Past reviews of the MPA Framework have resulted in recommendations for additional funding, despite poor performance and a lack of consequences for poor performance. Past attempts to boost performance by making additional funds available have not been successful. It is counter-productive to the purpose of securing substantial long-term funding against ambitious criteria to expect those companies to innovate only on the basis of additional funding – indeed, [research exposes an inverse relationship between funding and innovation](#). Companies must be responsible for their own innovation. Rather than offer additional funding, or quarantine a portion of their funding for this purpose, this accountability should be a basic expectation that is articulated through eligibility and assessment criteria. NAVA recommends:

- Any proposed additional Enhancement Fund should be open to applications from innovative S2M organisations to partner with MPAs, ensuring that the new thinking and new work is led by the S2M
- Consideration should also be given to the composition of MPA boards to ensure that there is adequate capacity for strategic thinking in the areas of artistic excellence, innovation, experimentation, audience development and industry leadership.

## 9. How, if at all, should venue-related interdependencies be accounted for under the Framework?

The recent political interference in an already peer-assessed Create NSW project round that appropriated funds to compensate an MPA company for venue unavailability is one of the most disappointing ways that MPA prioritisation has ever impacted on independent artists. This is an unconscionable way of obtaining funds, indicating both a lack of cooperative foresight in identifying the issue and avoiding such urgent action, and a lack of respect for the value of those projects that were peer-assessed as successful but rejected against the business needs of the MPA company.

NAVA recommends:

- An analysis of venue-related interdependencies forms part of the MPA Framework – this should include a précis of the business models of relevant capital city venues in relation to their operational and financial reliance on MPAs, as well as MPAs' dependencies on venues
- This analysis of interdependencies should include artistic as well as financial and operational matters, to help identify the extent to which venues are leading or influencing programming decisions
- In identifying these interdependencies, regional venues are recognised as being operated on the basis of strong community engagement
- Key sector bodies and touring service providers with extensive regional expertise such as PAC Australia, Stage Queensland, NARPACA, VAPAC, Regional Arts Victoria, Country Arts SA and Country Arts WA inform this work.

## POLICY DIRECTION

The Meeting of Cultural Ministers is faced with the rare and exciting opportunity to lead a new policy era, overcoming funding frameworks based on honouring inherited arrangements and developing instead a shared vision for our Australian culture. Recognising the impacts on sector confidence and cohesion of both the language and frameworks of such policy, how can we develop a national approach to the arts that sets the current MPAs within their appropriate industry context? How can we ensure that the Ministry for the Arts and the Australia Council are able to make responsible sector development plans via investments that are proportionate to their policy objective and their context?

This review asks us to consider how the MPA Framework can be strengthened. It is not possible to strengthen a framework which is both unconscionable in Australia's contemporary culture and counter-productive to Australia's arts priorities. We need to be able to identify those national priorities comprehensively, without the constraint of stabilising the operations of a small group of companies. We need to be able to recognise the current MPA companies anew as individual entities and not a homogenous bloc, understanding the value of their sector contributions as well as the quality of their work. And we need to be able to do this in a way that takes in the entire arts sector, planning responsibly for the future of the arts in Australia.

The only way to strengthen the MPA Framework is to extend its application across all artforms by replacing it with a policy of long-term investment that facilitates sector-led industry development.

To strengthen Australia's arts, NAVA recommends:

- The establishment of an **Artistic Investment Framework** of long-term multi-partite government funding relationships extended across all artforms
- A long-term contractual period is offered to all Artistic Investment Framework companies, set at twice the contractual term offered by the Australia Council's organisations program –

currently four years, therefore the Artistic Investment Framework's term would be eight years – with appropriate accountability measures as outlined above

- The immediate inclusion of VACS into the new Artistic Investment Framework alongside the existing MPA companies and in anticipation of new eligibility and assessment criteria
- A new set of criteria grounds the Artistic Investment Framework's eligibility and ongoing assessment, including First Nations arts, diversity and accessibility, and peer-assessed artistic excellence and sector leadership
- All cultural assumptions underlying these criteria are able to be validated by peers, and policy or investment framework settings that prioritise institutional survival above cultural leadership and artistic excellence are avoided
- Guided by these criteria, every four years a substantial program of peer-led sector scans is supported and resourced by the Australia Council to inform the Artistic Investment Framework's sector development priorities, as well as its eligibility and assessment decisions – in addition, insights from the Australia Council's annual reports and current research such as Making Art Work inform this work
- These quadrennial sector scans incorporate a mapping of venue interdependencies including but not limited to galleries, performing arts centres, public spaces
- An Enhancement Fund is created whose eligibility is limited to those companies not currently part of the Artistic Investment Framework, to stimulate innovation and risk-taking by partnering with Artistic Investment Framework companies
- Through policy and increased investment, the Australia Council is empowered to reassert its role as the key national body that exists to foster the arts across all artforms.

NAVA encourages the Meeting of Cultural Ministers to develop a vision for Australia's arts that's ambitious and fair.



**Esther Anatolitis**  
Executive Director

## APPENDICES

1. Reframing MPA Funding so that the whole sector is in the picture
2. Ending the street fight
3. The National Opera Review and the national psyche

### Reframing MPA funding so that the whole sector is in the picture

[Do you think it's conscionable](#) that 62% of the Australia Council's grants budget goes to 28 performing arts companies in uncontested recurrent funding?

What would make that kind of investment conscionable? What could justify it on strategic or on ethical terms? And what should long-term investment look like if we're to develop the Australian arts sector across all artforms?

The Australia Council is asking important questions about ambition and fairness in its [review of the Major Performing Arts Framework](#). They're holding [a series of discussion forums all over Australia](#), and there's also [an invitation to provide a submission by 26 November](#) with [a consultation paper for context](#).

The paper's overview offers makes some critical observations – sobering ones. While international comparisons show that comparable funding arrangements also tend to remain in place as 'a result of historical legacy rather than structured readjustments to funding', the Australia Council 'is on the least interventionist end of the spectrum and unique in providing funding in rolling contracts (in effect in perpetuity)... without periodic, publicly transparent assessment mechanisms... in response to performance or broader shifts in the arts sector and government expectations'.

In other words, in Australia we've tended to lock up these funds forever and then not ask for a whole lot in return.

I'm heartened to see these assumptions exposed at last – particularly given the outcome of the National Opera Review was [undermined by an array of unchallenged assumptions](#).

It's impossible to develop responsible arts policy under these circumstances; any initiatives for the optimal allocation of the Australia Council's remaining grants budget are dwarfed by the MPA Framework. And then, just a few years ago, when the Australia Council had just launched its most ambitious ever strategic plan, it was immediately undermined by the Brandis Raid – the [most disruptive event](#) the sector has experienced, with repercussions still being felt in public and private funding as well as sector confidence, sector development collaboration and artistic risk-taking.

What was particularly ambitious about Strategic Plan 2014-2019 was its commitment to six-year funding for arts organisations of significant regional, national or international standing. This was an important first step to creating a framework of genuine partnership with the Australia Council, working together to develop a thriving arts ecology.

Unless public investment in the arts is prepared to make long-term commitments across all artforms, it's both unconscionable and counter-productive to sustain a framework for the few.

Like the MPA Framework, the Visual Arts & Crafts Strategy (VACS) is a cooperation of state and federal governments. While the MPA Framework invested \$157.3m in 28 companies in 2017 according

to [the consultation paper](#), [only \\$27.3m](#) went to the nation's 28 leading contemporary arts organisations in 2015/16 from both state and federal governments. Meanwhile, the scaled-down organisational programs at the Australia Council invested [\\$53.4m in 590 organisations](#) last year, of which \$6.4m went to VACS.

The consultation asks us to consider what would “strengthen” the MPA Framework – and the discussion paper offers many starting points for responding to that question, such as industry expectations, accountability, performance assessment, notice periods and consequences for poor performance, and how MPAs are defined.

The real question, however, is much bigger, and it extends well beyond the MPA Framework: it's about the future of the arts in Australia.

Should an MPA-style framework – one that was grounded in ethics and rigour, and with longer-term commitments – be extended to VACS as well as across the entire small-to-medium sector? What role should the Australian Government take – through both the [Ministry for the Arts](#) and [the Australia Council](#) – in fostering sector development? How much more would we need to invest in the arts to make the MPA Framework justifiable as part of a comprehensive strategy? And what would a conscionable arts policy look like – one that its responsible agencies had the capacity as well as the responsibility to manage, rather than being burdened by “historical legacy” over ambitious strategy?

These questions begin to address what will strengthen future of the arts. So let's all contribute – in writing and in person.

Note the locations of the consultation forums, which we're all invited to attend:

- The Melbourne one is [this afternoon – Tuesday 30 October](#) at the National Gallery of Victoria,
- [Hobart is next](#) on Tuesday 6 November, at a venue yet to be confirmed,
- and then it's [Adelaide the next day at the Art Gallery of South Australia](#).
- the Perth forum is [Friday 9 October at the Perth Cultural Centre](#), and then
- [Sydney on Tuesday 13 November](#) at the Museum of Sydney,
- [Darwin the next day](#) at Arts NT,
- and the [Canberra and Brisbane forums](#) have already been held at Gorman Arts Centre and the State Library of Queensland.

It says a lot about the Australia Council's commitment to hearing from a strong diversity of non-performing-arts artists and artswokers that these sessions are being held in contemporary arts spaces. So let's accept that hospitality and participate in numbers. After all, the future of the arts in Australia is in our hands.

[Submissions to the MPA Framework Review close at 5:00pm AEDT Monday 26 November 2018.](#)

*This piece was first published on Arts Hub on 30 October 2018.*



## Ending the street fight: beyond the Major Performing Arts Framework

It would astound most Australians to know that, in the language of dollars alone, our national arts ambitions haven't evolved beyond the plucky desire of a colony to impress its visiting queen.

Financial commitments first made in the 1950s to hastily convened opera, theatre and ballet companies made for a very proper royal visit – and continue to this day.

Meanwhile, Australia's regional and urban centres had already been establishing world class galleries for a hundred years, and Australia's First Peoples had been creating the images and objects that nurture a unique culture for tens of thousands of years.

And yet we still have this situation where 62% of the Australia Council's \$177.1 million budget goes to the Major Performing Arts (MPA) in uncontested recurrent funding – which is currently under review. That's \$109.1 million for 28 companies as of 2016-17, while less than half that sum – \$53.4 million – is granted to 590 small-to-medium organisations as the result of highly competitive funding programs.

That disparity is best expressed in the language of dollars alone because, in a situation where no arts strategy has ever survived political change, no one has ever dared document the unwritten policy that the performing arts are more important than contemporary visual arts. Only \$4.2 million goes to the nation's 28 leading contemporary arts organisations as part of the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy (VACS).

It's often argued that the funds quarantined to the Major Performing Arts are justified by audience development. Not so. That's debunked by the massive audiences of the small-to-mediums: 9.5 million people compared to the MPA's four million and shrinking. As for audience development, how are those majors marketing to reach new audiences? Through millions spent on outdoor advertising, online cookies and in-house journalism, paying former professional journalists to write profiles and reviews – while arts journalism in Australia languishes, leaving little space for the rigorous independent critique that feeds the Australian culture. Quarantined funding; quarantined audiences; quarantined critique.

Don't get me wrong. The majors-independents street fight isn't good for the arts and it's not one I'm interested in fuelling.

After all, I love opera. I love the bold experimentations of Chamber Made, or the rigorous approach of the Present Tense Ensemble. I'm invigorated by the exciting way they combine unexpected objects with moving images and the power of the human voice. That's what opera means in Australia today.

I love music. I love the complex instrumentation of Speak Percussion, or the biotechnical light and sound of SymbioticA. I'm inspired by their global impact, and constantly astounded that their international reputations are far stronger than their Australian recognition. That's what music means in Australia today.

I love the performing arts. I'm deeply impressed by ILBIJERRI Theatre. My mind feels enlarged by the work of pvi collective and Field Theory. Consistently and with sophistication, they ask new questions through work performed in collaboration with audiences. That's what performance means in Australia today.

None of these companies would be eligible for consideration as an MPA. In fact, most of these companies create work in that exciting space that's commonly called 'contemporary arts'. Sound,

light, image, movement, craft, design, live art, new objects, unexpected technologies, sophisticated biologies. Their work is presented in galleries and in public spaces. It's researched and critiqued by academics at centres of excellence and in ARC Linkage Grants, enriching the national understanding of what creative practice means in Australia today.

It's up to artists tell us what art forms are and where they're going. To explode our thinking, question our ethics and foster our communities. To offer platforms for understanding our human potential and our shared future.

This week's Meeting of Cultural Ministers officials have the opportunity to be ambitious. The people who support the Meeting of Cultural Ministers are thinking through a lot of policy matters – including the future for the MPA and VACS.

It's time to evolve. Companies who comprise the diverse MPAs such as the trailblazers at the Belvoir and those adventurous mavericks at Circus Oz will soon be joined by the successful Victorian Opera. VACS could also start to be considered in that long-term funding framework.

If the security of long-term funding is seen as being effective for creating great new work, then let's extend that confidence beyond the Major Performing Arts to where the innovation lies. Rather than quarantining the imported arts of the past, let's quarantine the mindset that creates the adventurous Australian art of the future.

Let's reward the diversity we see on gallery walls and floors – and see how opening that conversation could help us start to see that diversity on our mainstages.

Let's set Australia's contemporary artists a challenge – one based on deep respect. To borrow the failure manifesto, evolve and evolve again.

After all, there's more at stake here than the sustainability of a few dozen arts companies.

The future of the Australia Council itself is at stake if it can't determine an operating model that moves beyond disproportionate support for few companies. The weakening of the entire sector after the past few years' cuts warrants urgent attention via ambitious, expert sector development initiatives. VACS, for example, is a nested set of commitments premised on the interdependency between artists, service organisations, galleries, artist-run initiatives and key events. There's certainly room for improvement – but such work builds on strong foundations.

In the light of the Royal Commission into financial sector misconduct, and the Parliamentary Inquiry into public interest journalism, sector development will mean more than just program and audience. The future of Australia's arts will depend heavily upon high-quality, ethical governance, as well as cultural investigation and meaningful critique by a strengthened independent media.

The consequences of a weakened cultural sector affect everyone – even the quarantined companies. The solution must involve everyone.

Let's mature the national contemporary arts conversation. And if we're still hell bent on impressing any visiting Windsors, Middletons and Markles, then let's show them a confident Australia creating its own unique culture.

*This piece was first published on Arts Hub on 21 May 2018.*

## The National Opera Review and the national psyche

Beyond the scope of the National Opera Review is a critical analysis of the prominence, relevance and influence of the operatic artform on the Australian culture. And yet, when the Review does touch on the Australian culture, its pronouncements are illuminating, belying a characterisation of our culture that would be radically unfamiliar to Indigenous, regional, suburban, remote and culturally diverse Australia – unfamiliar, that is, to the majority of us.

The National Opera Review is several years in the making and was due for release back in March. Its purpose is “to make recommendations aimed at promoting the financial viability, artistic vibrancy and accessibility of Australia’s four Major Opera Companies” Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, State Opera of South Australia, and West Australian Opera. In September 2015, a progress document was released in the form of a discussion paper, and the final report released this week presents 118 recommendations.

While many of the recommendations have impacts beyond opera, the Review’s narrow scope precludes detailed interrogation of such impacts, and the authors have been careful to articulate them well. In doing so, they offer unexpected insights into their cultural assumptions – assumptions that do a great deal to explain the disproportionate prominence given to opera in national arts policy direction given its staggeringly disproportionate funding in relation to shrinking audiences and to the arts more broadly.

The Review’s authors propose in their framing letter to the Minister that “the iconic Sydney Opera House might be a physical manifestation of the role opera plays in the national psyche”. It might be – but it isn’t. To the extent that we can characterise it, the national psyche is complex, curious, anti-elite, anti-entitlement, and unreconciled with its foundational Indigenous culture. Despite more of us attending cultural rather than sporting events across any given year, the majority of Australians aren’t interested in opera, and the majority of visitors to the Sydney Opera House do not attend an opera.

To redress dwindling audiences, we are told, Opera Australia undertook “bold strategic initiatives... in staging long-run musicals and introducing Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour (HOSH), which is now regarded as an integral part of the city’s, and potentially the nation’s, cultural life.” Are we to believe that an opera experience offering Sydneysiders a new view of their harbour is of national significance? This is an unrecognisable image of the Australian culture.

A \$1.2m innovation fund is proposed to encourage productive new collaborations in the digital and festival spaces. Wouldn’t it make more sense to offer those funds to digital and festival specialists whose expertise could then be directed towards any potential fit with opera? Or to look closely at the Australian opera leaders in these fields and support their work, given such excellent work is already being made by Chamber Made Opera, Present Tense and Aphids, for example?

“[O]ne of the strongest recurring themes from public consultations,” notes the Review, “was the need to secure future audiences through education programmes in schools.” If a new generation of Australians is to embrace artistic expression and participation, we need well-integrated and comprehensive arts and education programs – grounded in Indigenous culture and reflective of cultural diversity – rather than acculturation to one artform. Then we can all stand back and beam with pride at the invigoration of the Australian culture.

Astoundingly, the Review also recommends modestly increasing the budget of the Australia Council “to acquire staff with the requisite skills to engage with the Major Opera Companies in the way envisaged,” as well as recommending that there be a dedicated Major Performing Arts board member

on the Australia Council board. Such moves could only serve to entrench further a mandated imposition of opera's prominence, relevance and influence, rather than expecting as taxpayers do that the Australia Council board and staff would remain equally responsible to all artforms and all Australians.

What if every artform were afforded this level of respectful analysis? What if every artform were afforded this level of funding? We are told that opera is expensive, but all artforms would thrive were they invested in with the highest quality in mind. Imagine the impact on the Australian culture if Ilbjerri Theatre were funded to support a full-time, year-round, paid ensemble, with verbatim theatre in schools and theatres across the country. Imagine the grounded, articulate and visionary next generation we would foster. Imagine the impact on the Australian culture if Express Media were funded to support a full-time, year-round, paid Editorial Committee. Many of its alumni dominate the Australian literary scene; such a move would propel our literature in brilliant ways.

Touring is also addressed by the Review, recommending that Opera Australia is funded specifically to tour its productions. Currently, no Australian arts company is funded to tour. Not even touring companies, who apply for precarious project funds to tour shows – and only after having their artistic vibrancy and viability rigorously tested by peers in an industry marketplace. National touring, especially to regional and remote places, is not about cultural imposition; it's a collaboration between artists, producers, venues and local communities. Tours such as *Mother* by Daniel Keene with Noni Hazlehurst have a transformative impact when they tour regional towns because the work is a real and recognisable reflection of our culture, our stories.

Opera is not core to the national psyche – a fact that decades of disproportionate subsidy have been unable to disprove. Giving it yet another \$23m across four years is unconscionable while the institutions that do frame the national psyche, such as the National Library of Australia and National Gallery of Australia, are cutting essential services after forced cuts. In the current funding environment with companies of demonstrable excellence unable to be supported, to increase subsidies to underperforming companies with already quarantined funds is insupportable. Given that this has consistently been the outcome of past such reviews, an increase seems disappointingly inevitable... but at what cost to the Australian culture?

Let's be confident enough to examine opera alongside the full diversity of Australia's creative work, subsidising it on the investment model on which every other artform is fostered. Only then can we truly understand what inspires the Australian psyche.

*This piece was first published at [estheranatolitis.net](http://estheranatolitis.net) on 26 October 2016.*