Diversity in Australia’s Music:

Themes Past, Present, and for the Future

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CHAPTER TWO

THE POLITICS OF MUSIC IN A NEW SOCIETY:
MUSICAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT DURING
CANBERRA’S FIRST 100 YEARS

PETER CAMPBELL

Such histories of music in Australia as exist, inaccurate and badly written as they are, treat music as if it were no more than a genteel by-product of polite society.¹

With these words, Roger Covell opens his 1967 exploration of music in Australia, ushering in a new generation of dedicated scholarship. Canberra, Australia’s capital city, was founded effectively only in 1913, and thus provides an ideal subject on which to test Covell’s observations about Australia’s musical development. Some of the diverse traditions celebrated in this present volume are also highlighted in this exploration of a very new, planned community. The themes elucidated by Covell are reviewed through the lens of Canberra’s history, a history marked often as much by political necessities as by artistic ones. The individuals, groups and policies that shaped artistic endeavours in Canberra thus show that culture is not a mere consequence of physical development, but a force actively shaping it. Canberra’s story illustrates how music has been adapted to one Australian landscape, enabling us, as Covell hoped, to assess the “extent to which music on the European pattern is surviving and thriving in Australia.”²

Published histories of music organisations have not yet attempted to set Canberra in a wider Australian historical context.³ The city is, as Blanche

² Covell, Australia’s Music, xii.
³ See, for example, Max Booth, Canberra Symphony Orchestra Play On (Canberra: CSO, 2004); Peter Campbell, Canberra Choral Society: A Capital
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