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PRIORITY THEMES & FUTURE DIRECTIONS
ARTISTS AND ARTS ORGANISATIONS
Opera Australia (OA) is the national flagship opera company. As one of the major performing arts companies based in Sydney, we appreciate the cultural vitality of the city and the opportunity to attract audiences and deepen our engagement with communities in Western Sydney and regional NSW. However we also see Sydney as a thriving cultural hub within a global community, and recognise the opportunity to grow international audiences, produce co-productions and undertake creative exchange; not limited to the Asia-pacific region but on the world stage.

However in order to support and nurture a thriving arts culture, the creative industries must also strive for artistic excellence, there can be no growth without this. We believe this is fundamental and is a key priority that needs to be reflected in the vision of the policy.

STATE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS
The cultural organisations of Sydney and greater NSW are recognised leaders of arts and culture. However, the organisations they partner and present with also drive their visitation and programming which should be acknowledged in the policy. Opera Australia is a resident company at the Sydney Opera House, one of Sydney’s key cultural venues. This long-term partnership has evolved over many years and enabled national and international visitors to enjoy Australia’s renowned opera performers since its opening, and celebrated most recently at its 40th anniversary celebrations. Presenting world-class Australian opera at the Sydney Opera House has attracted over 195,000 visitors in 2013.

PEOPLE ENRICH AND SHAPE THE ARTS
ABORIGINAL ARTS AND CULTURE
OA is actively working in partnership with Indigenous communities, to tell their unique stories through opera. The company has recently worked with Yarrabah, a remote North Queensland Indigenous community, to celebrate its unique cultural stories and traditions. The community was seeking a moment of reflection: to put together the story of their past with dignity, and articulate their aspirations and vision for their future as a community.

The all singing, all dancing production featured some 60 community members performing alongside professional Indigenous performers and supported by a ten piece band. Performed twice, the show attracted approximately 4,000 people and was later broadcast on NITV SBS.

Building on the success of this initiative, the company’s touring arm Oz Opera will be returning to Yarrabah during its 2014 regional tour to continue the community’s engagement with the company.

In recognition of the success of this initiative, Yarrabah! The Musical won the national Coates Hire Community Event of the Year at the Australian Events Awards in 2013.
The opportunity to secure further support towards Indigenous community projects, developed over time through a meaningful engagement process, would foster the creative potential of both Indigenous communities and NSW arts organisations. These shared creative experiences would offer tailored professional development opportunities, deepen community engagement, and increase attendance.

**CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY**

As the national opera company, OA is committed to engaging the widest audience possible, in as many venues as possible. We recognise the increasing diversification of the Australian population over recent decades, and the importance of engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

Stemming from the company’s community partnership program, the Western Sydney Community Choirs project was developed in partnership with several local councils across greater Western Sydney. Establishing new community choirs, and working with existing community choirs over twelve months to collectively perform in a free concert at the Sydney Opera House to over 1,800 people. The success of this pilot project inspired the transfer of the model to Melbourne in 2013 and the Gold Coast in 2014.

OA has also incorporated international and local performers from CALD backgrounds to perform with the company, such as: Jimin Park (Korean) in *La bohème*; Hyeseoung Kwon (Korean) in the *Ring Cycle*; Yangehoon Lee (Korean) in *Tosca*; Hiromi Omura (Japanese) in *Madama Butterfly*; and Ariya Sawadvong (Thai-American) in *Carmen* for Opera on Sydney Harbour. Whilst attendance by CALD audiences is not formally tracked, anecdotal observations confirm people of traditionally non-English speaking backgrounds attend in higher numbers to these productions.

Although we recognise the value and importance in presenting reflective programming, we also believe there are avenues of opportunity to address real and perceived barriers to attendance to the company’s core programming. By securing modest targeted support to address these barriers, companies may benefit from an increase in attendance from CALD audiences. Initiatives may include offering surtitles in different languages (ie Arabic), offering transport into the city from outer lying suburbs and building on the company’s strategic marketing to CALD communities.

**ARTS AND DISABILITY**

OA’s mission is to present opera that excites audiences and sustains and develops the art form. In doing so, it enriches the cultural life of all Australians, striving to include those that would ordinarily be excluded, such members of the community with a disability. As Australia’s largest performing arts company, OA seeks to ensure the fullest participation of people with disabilities in the artistic life of the community.

In 2010 Oz Opera, the touring arm of the company, launched its first shadow-interpreted performance. Developed over its ten year relationship with Deaf Children Australia the program was developed to bring Auslan interpretation of performances to centre stage with the introduction of shadow interpretation.

In a shadow-interpreted performance, Auslan interpreters are fully immersed and directed into the action, literally 'shadowing' the cast on stage, rather than taking up a position to the side. They dress in costume, and use signs, facial expression and movement to convey the storyline. Not only does this benefit the children for whom the performance is intended, it also enables their families, peers, teachers and friends to experience the art form with them; it encourages a deeper engagement and appreciation which can spark an enthusiasm and passion for the arts that can continue throughout their lives. Since launching the program, audience numbers to Auslan performances has increased by 30%.
By bringing this style of performance to a wider audience Oz Opera is leading the way and firmly believes in the value of taking this style of performance to the Deaf Community, with plans to extend the program to NSW in 2014 which would not be possible without the support of the Commonwealth Bank.

This breakthrough program has recently been acknowledged by being awarded the 2013 Creative Partnerships Australia Victorian Award for Arts Access, an example of how innovation, partnership and a modest investment can have a significant impact.

CREATIVE AGEING

It has been reported people aged 65 and over have a lower arts attendance rate of all age groups, however OA has enjoyed significant and ongoing patronage from this demographic.

Older audience members often enjoy afternoon matinee performances, although opportunities to expand arts audiences in this demographic may be achieved by targeted programs such as offering accessible and subsidised transport solutions.

Given the long history of patronage by many audience members over 65, the company offers an avenue to deepen their engagement with the company through its volunteering program which provides integral ancillary support to the organisation through administrative assistance, conducting Opera Centre tours, and supporting Insight events.

REGIONAL NSW

Oz Opera has been the touring arm of Opera Australia since 1996, bringing great opera to Australians regardless of where they live. Engagement and accessibility – geographic, artistic and financial – are its central tenets, as is the development of new audiences.

Oz Opera performs all operas in English, rather than the original language they were composed in, with the objective of eliminating the need to have prior knowledge of the storyline or of opera as an art form. Oz Opera also builds high quality, flexible sets designed to be easily installed in both purpose-built venues and unconventional spaces.

In response to communities overwhelming interest to engage with the company beyond its brief time in their community, the company has developed two new community engagement initiatives to be launched in 2014; the regional children’s choruses and regional student scholarship.

The children’s choruses will offer children in local communities to perform on stage with the company in The Magic Flute regional tour. By leveraging Oz Opera’s existing tour, with a small team travelling ahead of the tour to prepare the children’s chorus prior to the company’s arrival, this relatively small investment can have a significant impact on the regional touring experience. This program will be legacy building: a children’s chorus in the regional towns visited will give Oz Opera, the local community and other performing arts companies a solid platform to build on in the future.

The Oz Opera Student Scholarship will be a once-in a lifetime opportunity for students living in regional or remote areas who are interested in music and opera. Ten senior secondary students in each town will have the opportunity to audition and undertake a masterclass with Children’s Chorus Master. Four of these very talented students will then be selected from across the states and towns that the Oz Opera Regional Tour visits and they will travel to Sydney to spend a week with Opera Australia under the guidance of Oz Opera staff.

These programs are being developed by Opera Australia to enhance the experience of regional touring. This is a reconceptualisation of the touring experience beyond the traditional ‘taking arts to the regions’ model.
PHYSICAL CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE
Sydney is home to 11 of the 28 major performing arts companies and many iconic cultural institutions and venues, although the limited number of permanent performance spaces can be problematic. While investment in maintaining cultural infrastructure remains a priority, investment into temporary infrastructure would also provide an opportunity to take advantage of public spaces along the city’s cultural promenade, and provide an opportunity to stage significant outdoor public access events. To date the company has invested in the development and staging of Handa Opera on Sydney Harbour (HOSH), which involves creating a movable arts precinct at Mrs Macquarie’s Chair, attracting over 37,000 people in 2013.

OA encourages the NSW government to continue to work across tiers of government to open up the use of public spaces, and invest in both permanent and temporary cultural infrastructure, optimizing not only the cultural ribbon but also developing opportunities for production and presentation of arts and cultural work outside of the “signature promenade” such as Western Sydney.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES
OA is committed to embracing new technologies, and capitalising on their adaptability to both engage and reach a broad audience beyond the theatre stage in our capital cities. Digital technologies have enabled the company to record and broadcast live events to broad audiences nationally and internationally on small and big screens, across the airwaves as well as virtually in real-time. Further to this the company continues to explore the development of distinctly Australian stories to develop exclusively for multi-platform delivery.

GOVERNMENT FUNDING PROGRAMS
OA welcomes the NSW government’s intention to strategically target its support, and reduce red tape, streamline application and reporting processes, and open up the potential to access avenues of support across Government portfolios. We also believe harmonising reporting and application requirements with the Australia Council to address application deadlines and outcome advice will ease pressures on planning national regional tours.

We do however encourage the NSW State Government to continue to maintain investment in the intrinsic value of arts education. OA strongly believes increasing access to high quality performing arts experiences at an early age will build cultural literacy and encourage a further appreciation of the arts in its many forms beyond school.

OA currently undertakes significant state-wide schools tours, with over 350 performances reaching over 70,000 primary school children throughout Victoria and NSW.

At a time when the national arts curriculum has been adopted by all states and territories; and the national schools funding reforms are verging on implementation it would be disappointing to discontinue investing in the creative development and arts appreciation of our children and future audiences.

Income diversification is a strategic priority of the company. Leveraging government investment to attract philanthropic and private sponsorship support has also become increasingly important in ensuring the company’s ongoing sustainability. Innovative patron programs have been developed to forge a meaningful connection with the company, and we hope will inspire a long-term commitment to our work.

Programs such as the Creative Partnerships funding program that OA recently secured support for are an important opportunity to build capacity within the sector.