

# ABC Orchestras and Bands

## First Night

In the early years of radio, most musical broadcasts were performed live, which meant that there was a very important role for studio bands and orchestras. On 1 July 1932, the first night that the Australian Broadcasting Commission was heard on radio, the National Broadcasting Symphony Orchestra, co-conducted by E.J. Roberts and W. Arundel Orchard, played music by Weber, Elgar, Handel and Liszt, in a live broadcast on national relay. In Melbourne, William James, conducting the ABC Concert Orchestra, presented excerpts from Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*.

## First Orchestras

Small studio orchestras which numbered 20 permanent players in Sydney and 15 in Melbourne were inherited by the Australian Broadcasting Commission from its predecessor the Australian Broadcasting Company, with smaller groups in other state capitals specializing in lighter repertoire. In its first year the ABC expanded the Sydney and Melbourne groups to 24 players each and in 1933 Bernard Heinze, who was to become the ABC's first Music Adviser, conducted a Brahms-Wagner Festival using the ABC studio groups as a core ensemble.

Conductor Sir Hamilton Harty's visit in 1934 created great interest in ABC music-making and two years later, larger studio broadcasting orchestras were set up in each state, ranging in size from just 11 in Hobart to 45 in Sydney. With music-loving General Manager Charles Moses and Federal Controller of Music William James working together with Heinze, these core groups of permanent musicians were often augmented in size for public performances and Malcolm Sargent, George Szell and Georg Schnéevoigt made multiple pre-War ABC tours to conduct them. Other pre-War visiting artists for the ABC included Arthur Rubinstein, Lotte Lehmann, Bronislaw Huberman Ezio Pinza, Elizabeth Rethberg, Artur Schnabel, the Comedy Harmonists, Bronislaw Huberman and Richard Tauber.

## Symphony Orchestras

There had always been the desire for the ABC to run its own large Symphony Orchestras, but due to financial considerations and the onset of World War II, the first full-time symphony orchestra was not established until 1946 when, following recommendations from conductor Eugene Ormandy, partnerships began to be established between the ABC and state and local governments throughout the country.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra became the first ABC symphony orchestra, performing its inaugural concert at the Sydney Town Hall in January 1946 with Percy Code conducting and pianist Lili Kraus as soloist.

Within four years there were ABC symphony orchestras in Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia, all of them working in that immediate post-War period with the biggest names in world music, including conductors Otto Klemperer, Rafael Kubelik and John Barbiroli, pianists Claudio Arrau and Solomon, violinist Isaac Stern and soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. Meanwhile, the ABC's first resident conductors included Eugene Goossens (SSO), Alceo Galliera (VSO), Henry Krips (SASO), Rudolf Pekarek (WASO), John Farnsworth Hall (QSO) and Kenneth Murison Bourn (TSO).

From then until the end of the century, the Orchestras increased in size and became cultural icons in their home states, giving public concerts, touring to regional areas, recording extensively, and from 1965, making international tours.

Probably the most influential of all the ABC conductors was Sir Bernard Heinze, whose Young People's Concerts and celebrated 'Walk Through the Orchestra' introduced two generations of schoolchildren to the wonders of orchestral music. Sir Eugene Goossens's massive impact as Chief Conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra between 1947 and 1956 reverberated around the nation, while visiting artists for the ABC subsequently included Lorin Maazel, Mstislav Rostropovich, Igor Stravinsky, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Daniel Barenboim, Jacqueline du Pré and Alfred Brendel.

Resident conductors who made a lasting impression after Goossens included Willem van Otterloo (MSO and SSO), Hiroyuki Iwaki (MSO) and Stuart Challender (SSO). The latter was Australian-born, as were Patrick Thomas (QSO 1973-1977) and Sir Charles Mackerras (SSO 1982-1985).

Meanwhile, Federal Music Director John Hopkins's annual series of Prom concerts in the 1960s and early 1970s led to a revival of interest in Australian composition, and attracted many younger audiences to ABC concerts.

As part of a restructure of the ABC into a corporation, the ABC Concerts department began in 1984 and for the next decade it served as Head Office for the orchestras, as the orchestras began to assemble their own local managements with the intention of moving toward greater autonomy. By 1996 the Sydney Symphony Orchestra had taken the first steps toward divestment from the ABC, and soon all six orchestras had become



wholly-owned subsidiaries of the ABC, and ultimately independent companies. Total divestment took effect on 1 January 2007.

During that period of divestment, the six state orchestras continued to flourish, performing more than 700 concerts annually, attracting audiences in excess of a million people, and maintaining their association with ABC Radio and ABC Classics. They also diversified their musical interests, performing with international artists as eclectic as Nigel Kennedy, Shirley Bassey, Luciano Pavarotti, Kiss, Lalo Schifrin, Chick Corea and Herbie Hancock, as well as more traditional 'classical' musicians.

## Military Band

In October 1933 the ABC began assembling a band of 40 players from all the States to form a military band. It met together for the first time on November 21, 1933 and the following month Captain H. E. Adkins, Director of the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall, London, visited Australia to conduct this all-Australian Military Band on a four-month tour of every state.

Stephen Yorke, Bandmaster in the Gloucestershire Regiment, then joined the ABC staff to become the first permanent director of the Band. Its role during wartime was to play in concerts to raise funds for the War effort and to promote patriotism, but by the end of the War its future looked grim. However, a special allocation from the ABC's consolidated revenue provided sufficient funds to keep it going until 1951, when it was disbanded following a sentimental reunion tour with Adkins. Stephen Yorke had been the conductor for its entire history.

## Wireless Choruses

ABC Wireless Choruses, usually numbering 16 singers, were established in all state capitals in 1936. Working for an extraordinarily diverse range of programs and appearing regularly with both the dance bands and the orchestras alike, their repertoire ranged from light entertainment through to the great classics. After the War, they were renamed the ABC Singers but only those in Melbourne and Adelaide survived a purge of ABC vocal groups in 1953. The ABC Melbourne Singers specialized in lighter repertoire and their appearances on the popular Village Glee Club allowed them to continue until the beginning of the 1960s. The Adelaide Singers, on the other hand, flourished until 1976, giving fine performances of 'serious' and contemporary repertoire under inspired leaders such as Norman Chinner, Patrick Thomas and James Christiansen.

## Dance Bands

Dance music was an important part of ABC programming in the 1930s and the bands that performed live in the studios delivered the best of contemporary music, although jazz was frowned upon in the early days.

The very first ABC Dance Band, based in Melbourne and inherited from the Australian Broadcasting Company, was led by Cecil Fraser until 1934. Harry Bloom's Tango Band, also based in Melbourne was another popular ensemble on-air and on-tour.

A major step forward was achieved at the beginning of 1935 when brilliant bandleader Jim Davidson was snared by the ABC from the Palais Royal circuit, to lead his own ABC Dance Band, playing music popularized in America by bands such as Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw and Tommy Dorsey. By 1938, the band was a major recording act, with Jim Davidson himself featured on the cover of a number of British music magazines. The band did national tours with guest artists such as Tex Morton and Bob Dyer. When Davidson joined the AIF Entertainment Unit during the war, the band was taken over by its trumpeter, Jim Gussey, who continued its success.

Other popular ABC ensembles during the 1940s and 1950s were led by Clive Amadio, Fred Hartley and Jay Wilbur.

When television began, there was an additional role for the ABC Dance Bands, playing for a variety of programs, as well as touring and performing concerts. In 1969 (the year Jim Gussey retired), Brian May began the transformation of Frank Thorne's old ABC Melbourne Dance Band into the ABC Melbourne Show Band. It adapted brilliantly to television and modern popular forms, and was responsible for the themes for 'Countdown' and 'Rush'. In 1982, however, the era of the ABC Dance and Show Bands ended, leaving only the symphony orchestras to continue the grand tradition of in-house ABC music-making.

