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Artistic Collaboration in Challenging Times: Chamber Music in Queensland, 1901–1950

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The concept of sustainability is often connected with environmental and socio-economic debates, but it is just as central to cultural developments. Historical studies of music-making within a local context often reveal that any ‘good idea’ needs both initiators and supporters, and also patrons and advocates. For example, the story of chamber music in early Queensland is bound up with contextual factors such as organisational and physical infrastructure and, more importantly, the contributions of leaders whose long-term vision encouraged audiences to participate. While important beginnings appeared during the colonial decades, changing circumstances required new approaches to sustaining chamber music traditions in the post-Federation era.

Several larger choral-orchestral organisations became institutionalised icons of Queensland culture, and have been extensively researched.¹ In comparison, the practice of chamber music — that is, serious instrumental music for small ensembles — is less prominent and thus a less studied aspect of the state’s history. The existence of chamber music concert societies, semi-permanent ensembles, the advent of radio broadcasting and also official sponsorship were significant factors supporting chamber music’s survival and growth, despite periods of economic hardship and wartime. This article examines how the collaborative genre of chamber music achieved sustainability — seemingly against the odds.

Musical Dynasties and International Influences

An important local feature is how particular families provided inter-generational chamber music expertise.² The Jefferies family string quartet, prominent from 1891 until the 1930s, was a mainstay of many concert-giving organisations. When the father, Richard Thomas, retired around 1910, eldest daughter Arena (Mrs Muller) transferred to viola, while Vada became the principal violinist. Mary was the permanent cellist, while two other siblings, pianist Etheldreda and violist brother Felix, also performed occasionally. Pianist Henrietta Willmore performed until the early 1920s (at age 80!), but was by then more focused on women’s political causes. Her daughter, Beatrice Mallalieu, also appeared as a chamber music cellist. Berlin-born violinist Hermann Rosendorff performed regularly until at least 1911, after which

he was primarily active as musical director of His Majesty's Theatre. His pianist daughter, Fanny (Mrs Turbayne), continued the family tradition, though latterly mostly as a composer.

The members of the Sleath family were prominent Brisbane musical retailers and instrument-makers for over a century. Eldest son Alfred Henry ('Harry') was a versatile player, providing whichever part was needed — usually cello or viola, and sometimes even violin. He also convened a string quartet that broadcast regularly in the early 1930s.³ Another significant musical dynasty was the Benvenuti family from Padua, Italy, led by violinist patriarch Antonio. The eldest son, Luigi, was a prominent double bass player, whose brothers Victor and Italo played piano and wind instruments respectively — all were active into the early 1900s.⁴

German colonist-musicians were also prominent up to the 1890s, but this connection dissipated amidst pre-war tensions. Violinists Rosendorff, Stahl and Kahn, violist Göttling and cellist Vollmar — all designated by the German title 'Herr' — were variously active until the early 1910s. Other European violinists included Dutchman Franz Diebels, who performed in concerts before and during World War I, and also Bohemian-born and Viennese-trained Ludwig D'Hage, who was based in Rockhampton for a quarter-century from 1887. D'Hage also appeared in Brisbane concerts, first with the touring Austrian Band in 1881 and again in 1922 (mentioned later).

These recently migrated musicians supported both domestic and public chamber music. In addition, various Australian-born musicians benefited from overseas studies. Pianist Percy Brier studied at Trinity College in London, and upon returning to Brisbane in 1906 partnered regularly with the Jefferies sisters, and also with violinist Eric Hayne. The latter had pursued that other well-travelled route for aspiring musicians, to Germany, and returned in 1915 after seven years abroad, which included a period in the United States playing with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Hayne also performed with other recently returned musicians, including Winifred Burston from Caboolture who studied in both Germany and the United States. Another concert partner was Arthur Benjamin, who studied at London's Royal College of Music, but soon after returning to post-war Brisbane was appointed to the recently founded New South Wales State Conservatorium, as was Winifred Burston.

Chamber music requires close-knit working relationships to be established among groups of up to four or five performers — as demonstrated here, in the case of Queensland. These can emanate either from within families, or through friendships or professional partnerships.

Organisations supporting chamber music

Notwithstanding individual efforts, sustainability results from organisational support, appropriate infrastructure and successful marketing. By 1900, the term 'chamber music' was the customary event designation, whereas previously the conventional nomenclature was 'popular concerts', even though large doses of 'serious' repertoire were included. The opening of Brisbane's Albert Hall in 1901 now offered a more commodious inner-city venue, directly adjacent to Albert Street Wesleyan Church, which during the 1890s had proved amenable to chamber music.

A Brisbane Quartette Society, comprising Luigi Benvenuti, Herr Göttling and Herr Stahl, appeared in 1902 to foster music of ‘high-class character’.⁵ Although a four-concert subscription series in the Albert Hall was planned, this did not materialise beyond the inaugural event. It was commented that ‘the time for [midweek] afternoon recitals . . . has not arrived just yet’ but the initiative was ‘congratulated upon attempting to turn the taste of the leisured in that direction’.⁶ The programming choices of Haydn and Beethoven were presumably unproblematic, as the Jefferies Quartet had succeeded with similar repertoire when ‘between three and four hundred persons found seats in the newly-opened Albert Hall’ and heard their ‘precision and expression’.⁷

The early 1900s saw chamber music profiled within various student concerts, including those presented by Jefferies, Willmore and Rosendorff.⁸ Solo recitals also included chamber works, such as the debut of newcomer J. L. Philips in 1904,⁹ notable for the inclusion of works by Mendelssohn, Rheinberger, Gade and Hummel. While those composers featured prominently in earlier decades, critics also validated works ‘new to Brisbane audiences’ being performed, such as when Miss Hume-Black performed quintets by Weber and Reissiger in 1901.¹⁰

Concurrently with these developments, the Musicians’ Association of Queensland was formed in 1905 in response to suggestions regarding ‘the desirability of assembling musicians, both amateur and professional, to meet for social intercourse’.¹¹ It was not intended as a trade union,¹² but rather as a collegial forum with monthly lectures alongside ‘musical selections’. At its height, membership rose to 150, including a large student contingent. During its four-year existence, chamber music featured only intermittently — which was somewhat surprising as these audiences had a high quotient of musical knowledge. Several recently composed works were performed, such as Dvořák’s Piano Quartet Opus 87, which was ‘the most interesting feature’ of the March 1908 meeting,¹³ and similarly in June 1909 the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio, which had ‘never been before played in Queensland’.¹⁴ As expected, the Jefferies family and Willmore contributed, but string quartets were rare. Instead, duo sonatas by the recently deceased Brahms and Grieg, and trios by Beethoven and Gade, were heard. Lectures relevant to chamber music included Brier’s ‘How to play accompaniments’ and Sleath’s talk on ‘Violin construction’.

The Musicians’ Association achieved success with monthly public events, vice-regal patronage and even parliamentarians serving as president. Its noble attempt to bridge the amateur–professional divide was thwarted by the perennial challenge of sourcing sufficient committee workers, resulting in its disbandment in mid-1909.¹⁵ Established in 1885, the Brisbane Liedertafel was another musical assembling point, and not only for those of German descent — though its concerts had social as well as artistic aims: Rosendorff’s performance of Schubert’s G Minor Quartet was criticised as being ‘somewhat too long for a concert of this character’.¹⁶ When a sister organisation formed in Toowoomba in 1902, some Brisbane-based musicians supported the venture with a ‘highly artistic’ concert.¹⁷

While these separate developments had varying success, finding an appropriate balance of venue, scheduling, repertoire choice, program structure and, importantly, organisational support ultimately determined whether even short-term sustainability was achieved.

First Chamber Music Society

The late 1900s saw Percy Brier and the Jefferies sisters also establishing an organisational basis for chamber music. Initially, the return of Vada and Mary after two years' absence was celebrated by the Jefferies Quartet's re-emergence in April 1906 with the local première of Dvořák's recently composed 'Negro' ('American') Quartet.¹⁸ The first Brier-Jefferies concert, however, was in 1907, at the South Brisbane Technical College Hall. Alongside the customary showcase solos, two major trios by Beethoven ('Ghost') and Arensky were performed, with the latter becoming a repeat favourite. As before, the distinction of a 'high-class concert of chamber music' met 'with popular approbation from the large audience'.¹⁹ A similarly constructed program, presented in 1909 at Albert Hall in the presence of Governor and Lady Chelmsford, featured Rheinberger's Piano Quartet and Gade's 'Noveletten'. The artists received 'well deserved applause' for what was 'in every sense a commendable performance'.²⁰

These musicians now confidently established the Chamber Music Society, inaugurated in September 1910 before an invited audience, in the New Church Hall, Ann Street. With Sleath replacing father Jefferies as violist, the 'altogether admirable' ensemble augmented to include second violist Percy Brier and others, producing an 'excellent interpretation' of Gade's Octet.²¹ The Society's alternative venue was London Bank Chambers, a building where several musicians maintained teaching studios. The regular artists occasionally were joined by Rosendorff and Henrietta Willmore, and programs featured string quartets by Beethoven, Haydn and Dvořák, and piano-based works by Schumann, Arensky and Gade. Less familiar repertoire included Goetz's Piano Quintet, featuring Beatrice Willmore on double bass, and for the first time in twenty years, the Brahms G minor Piano Quartet, which now became that composer's most frequently heard work in Brisbane.

A rarely heard Mendelssohn Quartet 'left little to be desired',²² while the sonata repertoire diversified with the versatile Sleath performing both the Strauss Cello Sonata, Dvořák's Sonatine for violin, and Percy Brier's newly composed 'Serenade' for viola. Of particular interest was Vada Jefferies' performance of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata. While admittedly this 'great classic' had frequently been presented by various violinists, the sonata was a family tradition, commencing with Richard Thomas's debut Brisbane recital in 1872, and continued by elder sister Arena's 1891 performance. On each occasion, a Jefferies violinist was partnered by Mrs Willmore, whose skills excited the 'warmest feelings of admiration of the brilliant gifts' she displayed alongside long-standing colleagues.²³ Despite considerable success, the Chamber Music Society did not survive beyond 1911. Percy Brier's memoirs posit a reason, in noting that Vada Jefferies, while clearly a fine musician, was somewhat sensitive to criticism. On hearing of the perception that she and her associates were rather dominating the situation, she sometimes retreated from public engagements.²⁴

A recurring theme of this era was chamber music's educational value. Already in the 1880s, R. T. Jefferies had offered ensemble playing classes for pianists, which recently expanded to quartet playing.²⁵ Similarly, Brier enlarged his fledgling studio in 1907 by engaging two string players 'for the practice of concerted music', with the intention of meeting 'the long felt want of chamber music in Brisbane'.²⁶ A series of *Brisbane Courier* articles appearing from 1913 noted only 'a small amount

of chamber music is made in our homes today’, despite the growing popularity of musical studies.²⁷ Similarly, a Brisbane Women’s Club lecture-recital by Victor Galway in 1914 asserted that greater involvement in domestic ensembles would have a ‘beneficial and wide-reaching influence for the best in art’.²⁸ During 1915, large excerpts from Cobbett’s book *The Music Student* were published, as were detailed reports of international events, including the London première of Schoenberg’s expressionist sextet *Transfigured Night*.²⁹ Awareness of chamber music’s significance within the artistic ecosystem was certainly being fostered, even if live performances were still rare, owing to local realities.

The Great War and Its Aftermath

Wartime did not see a total cessation of chamber music — in fact, it was sometimes profiled in patriotic events. A benefit concert ‘rich in classical beauty’, including movements by Dvořák, Schumann and Brahms, was presented for the Red Cross Society before ‘a crowded and appreciative audience’ in 1915.³⁰ The previous year, several musical evenings presented by H. J. King likewise featured piano quartets by Brahms, Schumann and Mozart, with Sleath & Son providing an Erard grand piano.³¹ The next overseas sojourn by Vada Jefferies — surprisingly at the war’s height in 1917 — also did not adversely affect local string resources, as this permitted Eric Hayne to feature.³² Hayne also willingly presented new Australian music, including Brier’s recently composed ‘Bush idyll’, whose ‘good performance’ adorned the Queensland Railways Patriotic Fund’s 1918 concert.³³

With Winifred Burston, in October 1918 Hayne presented a demanding recital ‘with a feeling of enthusiasm’, featuring the local première of Fauré’s G minor Violin Sonata, and also that by Brahms in D minor, also likely to have been a novelty.³⁴ In partnership with Arthur Benjamin, Hayne’s successful recital of Franck and Grieg sonatas was of ‘such brilliant and charming character as to fairly sweep a large audience off its feet’.³⁵ They also premièred Benjamin’s own Violin Sonata, composed in a German prisoner of war camp.³⁶ The Liedertafel, meanwhile, had continued its concerts, with a name change in 1916 to the Apollo Club — another instance of anti-German sentiment. At the instigation of then deputy conductor Percy Brier, chamber music was introduced the following year, filling the instrumental gap left by the club’s now-disbanded orchestra. Highlights included a Mendelssohn trio and Beethoven’s Spring Sonata, where Brier and Hayne contributed ‘extraordinarily fine playing’.³⁷

As in the previous decade, chamber music during the 1910s appears to have survived through a series of one-off events, either independently presented or under the auspices of a broadly based organisation. Again, as before, the new decade witnessed the establishment of a tailor-made concert series and organisation, which provided a focal point for chamber music devotees.

Brisbane Chamber Music Society

Post-war optimism was evident in the establishment of two organisations in 1921: the Music Teachers Association of Queensland (see below) and a second iteration of the [Brisbane] Chamber Music Society. The latter organisation’s self-confidence imbued its inaugural concert, with ‘two classics’, a Beethoven Opus 18 Quartet played by the Jefferies ensemble and, with E. R. B. Jordan, the Dvořák Piano

Quintet. Innovation was provided through a specially composed work, Percy Brier's Sonata in G minor, which the composer performed with Eric Hayne to 'sustained applause'.³⁸ Its auspicious launch notwithstanding, the season highlight was the guest appearance of the Verbrugghen Quartet, led by its namesake, the foundation director of the Sydney Conservatorium. Their two concerts included some familiar Mozart, Beethoven and Dvořák, and the likely local premières of both Debussy's Quartet and Schubert's 'Death and the Maiden'. The last of these henceforth became a Jefferies Quartet standard, demonstrating the long-standing benefits that visiting artists sometimes provide.

The Society's inaugural series concluded with a reprise of the Arensky Trio, featuring the debut of the youngest Jefferies sister, pianist Annie Etheldreda, and also the local première of Frank Bridge's Fantasy in F minor, to which they would also often return. Press commentary included the significant observation that there was 'no dearth of interest' in the 'delicate, subtle music designed for the pleasure of those who possess an educated taste'.³⁹ Public support included its approximately 160 subscribers, various prominent musicians as committee members and vice-presidents, and also Henri Verbrugghen himself, as president and guest artist.

The Brisbane Chamber Music Society presented four more seasons of diverse repertoire before it ceased operations at the end of 1925. The 'official' Jefferies Quartet comprised Vada and Mary as regulars, Gwen de Grant as violist, and various second violinists including Edith Larwell. They presented nearly equal numbers of string quartets (Haydn, Dvořák, Bridge), piano quartets (Mozart, Dvořák, Rheinberger, Fauré), piano quintets (Schumann, Dvořák, Elgar, Dunhill) and piano trios (Mozart, Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven, Saint-Saëns). Perhaps in response to local mutterings, Brier felt obliged to state that 'other quartet parties will be heartily welcomed, and provided the artistic standard is good, will be included in future programmes'.⁴⁰

While the string contingent was relatively stable, the pianist roster included notables such as Henrietta Willmore (in her farewell season), Percy Brier, E. R. B. Jordan and Erich John, and also emerging artists Adeline Colledge and Mabel Zillman. Hayne continued to appear mostly in duo sonatas, including unfamiliar works by living composers such as Holbrooke and Dohnányi. He also presented Beethoven and Mozart standards, and in 1924 a reprise of the Brier Sonata. Other highlights were a British program almost entirely consisting of living composers⁴¹ and approximately ten Queensland premières, including some locally compositions. The variety and depth of Society's five season offerings were quite remarkable.

Only twice more did visiting musicians appear. In 1922, the Cyril Monk Austral Quartet — which included former Rockhampton resident Ludwig d'Hage — travelled from Sydney. The event achieved accolades for 'enterprise', which was 'amply rewarded by the very excellent audience'.⁴² Despite such success, Brier complained that the Society 'sadly needed wealthy patrons' as it could not afford to invite the New South Wales State Conservatorium String Quartet in 1925.⁴³ Instead, the 'brilliant cellist from Sydney' Bryce Carter appeared and, although the Society was 'doing great work for the musical uplift of Brisbane', it needed 'far greater support' since that concert's audience was 'disgracefully small'.⁴⁴

At this point, a temporary leadership vacuum ensued, with Percy Brier's absence interstate during 1926, and Vada Jefferies concurrently being overseas on yet another two-year study tour. When she subsequently reappeared in company with

‘Brisbane’s finest exponents of chamber music’, it was noted that ‘concerts of such a high standard are not heard frequently enough’.⁴⁵ The demise of the Brisbane Chamber Music Society might therefore be attributed either to the temporary loss of its key drivers, or to the phenomenon of the novelty wearing off, before bearing fruit in the form of external funding or other support. The late 1920s cultural landscape was also rather more crowded, with increased offerings affecting audience patterns.

Visiting Artists and the Music Teachers’ Association of Queensland

Despite some positive developments, the mid-1920s saw some lost opportunities for chamber music. The opening with great fanfare in April 1926 of the first radio station, 4QG, featured numerous soloists, an orchestra and choir, but few serious instrumental works. The following year, a week-long ‘Brisbane Music Week’, which featured ‘Choral, Orchestral and Band’ ensembles, was acclaimed a great success for its sponsor, the newly constituted greater Brisbane City Council. However, while Eric Hayne was ‘one of the most accomplished violinists in Australia’, he was under-utilised, and although ‘the city contains some skilful players of chamber music’ no such repertoire was featured.⁴⁶ Hayne was, however, invited to write an article on chamber music for the festival program.

In the absence of dedicated organisational structures, the following years saw some refocusing of chamber music initiatives. The Jefferies Quartet sponsored biennial concerts in the Albert Hall, sometimes themed according to composer centenaries, such as Beethoven’s in 1927 and Schubert’s the following year. This inspired the ensemble to expand beyond the early Beethoven Opus 18 quartets to one of the Rasumovsky Opus 59 works, and for Schubert, ‘Death and the Maiden’. These were respectively described as evincing ‘remarkable unity of feeling’⁴⁷ and ‘a beautiful performance’.⁴⁸

Visiting ensembles were still relatively rare, but increased as the Australian Broadcasting Commission took leadership of national concert promotion from the mid-1930s (see below). Until then, touring artists appeared under their own auspices, as they had since the 1860s. A prominent example is the internationally renowned Cherniavsky Trio, which performed together from 1901 until disbanding in 1934. The trio toured Australia regularly, including five Brisbane seasons between 1914 and 1928. On the last occasion, its Exhibition Hall performance — which was hailed as ‘one of the best concerts ever heard in Brisbane’ — featured the Beethoven A major Cello Sonata, the Franck Violin Sonata and the Tchaikovsky Trio.⁴⁹ This ensemble evidently sustained audience interest in both programs featuring only major works, or in crowd-pleasing showpiece anthologies, which they also presented.

To fill the void left by the Chamber Music Society’s demise, other organisations now promoted concerts. Formed in 1921, the objectives of the Music Teachers’ Association of Queensland (MTAQ) included support for various forms of music-making in addition to core educational aims. Particularly under the leadership of Percy Brier, who served as president at various times from 1928, the MTAQ presented mixed programs that included some chamber music. The promotion of four-event series in both 1929 and 1930 is significant, particularly since it was noted there had been ‘a good deal of complaining at the neglect of music in its highest branches by the people of Brisbane’. Though the inaugural chamber music

program ‘was not wholly true to type’ (i.e. larger ensembles such as quartets), Scott MacCallum and Hilda Woolmer’s Beethoven Violin Sonata Opus 96 was ‘very interestingly played’.⁵⁰ Other highlights were Vada Jefferies and Adeline Colledge in the local première of John Ireland’s Violin Sonata, when they ‘thoroughly entered into the feeling’ of this ‘mystical work’, composed in 1917.⁵¹ The Jefferies Quartet performed Eugene Goossens’s ‘Three Songs with Quartet’ with singer Eunice Cochrane, which apparently tested the audience’s endurance, but was complemented by a ‘finished performance’ of ‘Death and the Maiden’.⁵²

The 1930 season was more appropriately labelled ‘Four Sonata Concerts’, in which the solo piano dominated, although it included Eric Hayne performing Franck, and Mary Jefferies and Jack Ellis in the Rachmaninoff Cello Sonata, ‘a great treat’ with both playing ‘admirably’.⁵³ Few larger works appeared, but the Jefferies-Brier team gave what was probably the local première of the Brahms C minor Trio. That year’s annual Teachers’ Conference also featured a chamber concert, in which Raff’s ‘Die schöne Müllerin’ Quartet was ‘perfectly given’, alongside Hayne and Archie Day in Arthur Benjamin’s ‘gorgeous’ Violin Sonata which was ‘rendered brilliantly’.⁵⁴

Austral Choir and the ABC in the 1930s

Another entrepreneurial organisation was the Austral Choir. Under the direction of E. R. B. Jordan from 1913 until it was subsumed into an expanded Queensland State and Municipal Choir in 1936, this organisation became known for much more than purely choral music. For example, their 1931 Austral Music Week focused on the visiting Sydney String Quartet. Comprising advanced Conservatorium students, this ensemble presented works including the ‘Maori’ Quartet and ‘Gaelic Sketches’ by violinist-composer Alfred Hill, who accompanied them as mentor. As well as a Beethoven ‘Rasumovksy’ quartet, they performed Debussy — which, despite Verbrugghen’s local première a decade earlier, was apparently still ‘comparatively unknown’.⁵⁵ This ensemble returned in 1935, receiving extensive exposure through broadcasts and public recitals, when Debussy was again performed with ‘irresistible elastic spirit’, as was Wolf’s ‘Italian Serenade’.⁵⁶ Another delayed local première of a classic was Schubert’s String Quintet, which the visitors presented with local cellist Mary Jefferies, while Hilda Woolmer partnered with one of the violinists in the Debussy Sonata.⁵⁷ It is indeed interesting that the Sydney Conservatorium had successfully sponsored several chamber groups that were welcomed by Brisbane audiences across nearly two decades. On the latter occasion, George White and Ernest Llewellyn participated as ensemble members, each of whom would later lead the Queensland State String Quartet (see below).

Other novel departures within the Austral Choir’s recitals included the Brahms Sextet Opus 18, where the Jefferies Quartet was joined by Frieda and Marie Muller. With the exception of his violin sonatas and the G minor Quartet, Brahms had not yet been frequently heard — it was noted that although locals were ‘chary of listening to Brahms’, the audience was ‘deeply impressed’.⁵⁸ Other novelties were Schubert’s E flat Piano Trio and Frank Bridge’s ‘Miniatures’ for the same combination, while the newly formed Metropolitan Quartet of Scott MacCallum, Edith Larwill, Gwen de Grant and Max Muller had ‘commendable success’ with Schumann’s A minor Quartet.⁵⁹

The Jefferies Quartet independently sponsored a 1932 Haydn anniversary concert, celebrating his status as ‘the father of chamber music’. The Austral Choir and Percy Brier likewise curated concerts for the 1933 Brahms Centenary, where that composer’s local familiarity was enhanced through reprises of the Sextet and several piano-based works. This was acknowledged as ‘greatly daring’ and a ‘supreme test of popular appreciation’,⁶⁰ but ‘full justice was done to the memory of a great exponent of chamber music’.⁶¹ The Muller Quartet performed works by Mozart and Haydn several times, but a rare highlight must surely have been Percy Grainger’s visit of 1934, when Cyril Scott’s Piano Quintet was used to demonstrate ‘gliding intervals’.⁶²

Another major development of the 1930s was the establishment of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC). Visiting ensembles were particularly featured, such as the Spivakovsky-Kurtz trio then based at Melbourne University, which gave a series of twelve broadcast recitals during 1935.⁶³ However, for some locals it appears radio opportunities were much less frequent. The Jefferies Quartet presented the famous Borodin ‘Nocturne’ and a Mendelssohn Scherzo in 1933, while two years later Archie Day’s Classic Ensemble was broadcast. As the ABC expanded into national concert promotion, international ensembles took the limelight — particularly the Budapest Quartet, which appeared twice: in 1935 and 1937. Due to the medium’s novelty, studio concerts often included an invited audience, the members of which savoured ‘the very essence of chamber music, as it has not been heard here before’.⁶⁴ Both performers and audience also demonstrated considerable stamina, as within a single sitting, four quartets including the first ‘Rasumovsky’, Wolf’s ‘Serenade’, Schubert’s ‘Quartettsatz’ and a Mozart quartet were heard. In the first of three public recitals, the ‘novelty’ of Bartók’s first quartet was welcomed, with the reviewer noting that even Beethoven’s late works ‘must have presented similarly perplexities’.⁶⁵

Although the decade began optimistically, with new series, additional ensembles and a rapid succession of composer anniversaries, it closed with foreboding. Even the Budapest Quartet’s stunning success did not produce in Queensland ‘the direct musical value and the reflected community value of chamber music’,⁶⁶ which apparently occurred in southern capitals. Although new groups such as the Muller Quartet had emerged, none was taking a leadership role. It was suggested this could again be provided by Vada Jefferies, but her organisational efforts now focused on the Brisbane String Orchestra.⁶⁷ An editorial comment of 1937 asserted that ‘chamber music in Brisbane seems to have died a natural death’,⁶⁸ despite the impetus provided by visiting ensembles. In connection with the campaign for the founding of a Queensland Conservatorium, the comparative strength of various larger ensembles was noted as a positive sign, but it was observed that ‘a revival of chamber music is due’.⁶⁹ Once again, the end of another decade coincided with impressions of a lack of coherence amongst chamber music devotees, but this time with the advent of the ABC a major cultural organisation was in the ascendant — although its primary concerns lay elsewhere.

Wartime Cultural Investment

Given the wartime challenges of the early 1940s, and the ABC’s steady growth as both broadcaster and concert promoter, the active sponsorship of chamber music by

two levels of government was courageously entrepreneurial. Both the Queensland State String Quartet and the Civic Chamber Music Concerts set national precedents, though only the latter survived beyond mid-century. The Brisbane City Council announced in April 1943 that its Music Advisory committee had recommended 'to conduct a series of chamber music concerts in the Lord Mayor's Reception Room'.⁷⁰ Committee chair Alderman Roberts was justly proud that Brisbane was 'giving a lead to other capital cities'.⁷¹ The venture achieved good audiences, support as 'one of the most significant aspects of our musical development' and 'a recognition of the fact that people need good music just as much as good roads'.⁷² The medium-sized venue was not ideal, however, being regularly overcrowded and forcing some to listen from the corridor.⁷³

The monthly program format included two major chamber works interspersed with solo vocal or piano items. At the inaugural concert, the Brisbane (Concert) Trio performed, led by pianist Hilda Woolmer. This ensemble featured regularly until the end of the 1950s, with cellists Norma Howley and Julie van der Klei, and a succession of violinists including Greta McLelland, Nell Bailey, Ruth Micheli, and two leading players from the Queensland Symphony Orchestra (QSO), Cecil Berry and Donald Scotts. Other long-standing trios, each including a well-known local pianist, were the Melodia Trio with Rees Morgan, and John Ellis's Cecilian Trio — both of which teamed up with the Mullers — violinist Max and cellist Marie. Several other trios existed intermittently, possibly in response to the much expanded performance opportunities. String quartets were less common, though Harry Hutchins led a group in the mid-1940s. The Moreton Quartet included Beatrice McCullough, Anne Baker and Marie Muller on piano, viola and cello respectively, and alternately violinists Vera Hartshorn and Joyce Abrahams. Later in the decade, ensembles arose from the non-string sections of the QSO, namely the Amadeus Trio and Quintet led by clarinetist George Lancaster.

The varied repertoire was mostly piano based, but inclusion of less common works was always welcomed. Among others, audiences heard trios by Gade, John Ireland and Paul Graener, with their 'mixed tonality, thematic boldness and rhythmic verve',⁷⁴ Friedrich Kiel — where 'new ground was broken'⁷⁵ — and Pitfield, which had 'more modernity than profundity',⁷⁶ and works by Borodin, Moeran, Edward Schütt, Turina, Weber and Richard Walthew, among others. As the years passed, parameters of the series expanded to include some solo piano sonatas, and also chamber choirs — such as the ABC's Brisbane Singers under Robert Dalley-Scarlett.

Space does not permit further discussion of this activity, but the statistics speak for themselves: over the first eight years to 1950, more than forty local instrumentalists enjoyed professional opportunities through the Civic Chamber Music concerts, and for many it was more than an annual occurrence. Due to their monthly regularity, and additional opportunities under others' auspices or on broadcasts, several ensembles built a significant identity. Already by 1950, the longer term impact of official sponsorship was noted:

probably nowhere more than in the chamber music field has the value of the City Council's support of music-making been shown. Brisbane, largely through the interest engendered and the opportunities offered for public appearance, now boasts at least half-a-dozen chamber music groups all engaged in the study and

Queensland State String Quartet in rehearsal. From left: Ernest Llewellyn, Hepzibah Menuhin (guest artist), David Powell, Harold Taberner, Don Howley.

Source: Photograph by Antoine-Kershaw Studios, c. 1946. Reproduced with permission of National Library of Australia — image number 1318581.

performance of major works for their particular ensembles, while audiences consistently fill the hall to capacity.⁷⁷

Queensland State String Quartet

Notwithstanding the considerable efforts of locally based musicians, the formation of the Queensland State String Quartet (QSSQ) in 1944 undoubtedly ranks as the boldest sponsorship of chamber music to date anywhere in Australia. The decision to engage, at the height of the Pacific War, four eminent musicians on full-time salaries to present annually around 300 school concerts plus professional recitals is nothing short of extraordinary. The venture's significance was captured in an editorial:

The decision of State Cabinet to sponsor the formation of a string quartet to foster music in schools is the most imaginative and progressive move in education made in Queensland for many years. It cannot be too strongly commended. It gives a lead to the rest of Australia.⁷⁸

The QSSQ was established under the auspices of the Department of Education (then Public Instruction), whose director-general, L. D. Edwards, was particularly culturally minded in his educational philosophy.

The ensemble, consisting of Ernest Llewellyn, Harold Taberner, David Powell and Don Howley, triumphantly presented its debut recital in August 1944. Predictions of wider cultural trajectories were made: 'the State Government has

started something which may lead to much greater things — a State conservatorium and a State symphony orchestra'.⁷⁹ The ensemble's brief was to present three one-hour school concerts daily, and occasional evening recitals sponsored by the Board of Adult Education. On a monthly basis, the schedule alternated between metropolitan circuits and regional tours, which saw the QSSQ playing throughout the state. Llewellyn's notes demonstrate that educational aims were uppermost: a 'show and tell' approach offered insights into instruments, composers and repertoire within 'sampler' programs comprising various single movements. He observed that students showed 'remarkable musical intelligence', quickly absorbing the similarities between choral part-singing and instrumental idioms.⁸⁰ The logistical demands of touring — even between Brisbane schools where vehicular access was problematic — let alone the performance schedule, would test the resilience of any musician today. By Christmas 1945, the Quartet had visited over 400 schools, while annual audiences — including adults — were estimated at 100,000.⁸¹

The QSSQ's evening recital series, with free admission, were presented mostly in Brisbane's Albert Hall, and in regional venues while on tour. The link between the cultural and educational branches of the ensemble's work was noted in 1947: 'many of the capacity audience ... were teenagers undoubtedly because of the splendid pioneering work that has been done over a considerable period by this quartet in recitals at State schools'.⁸² Critical acclaim was also forthcoming from interstate. The ensemble's 1945 Sydney performance was described by Neville Cardus as a 'rare privilege',⁸³ while its 'fine playing' was congratulated in that year's Melbourne Mozart Festival.⁸⁴ Similarly, when the Quartet undertook a six-week New Zealand tour, comprising twenty-three concerts and nine broadcasts plus school programs, its work was considered 'equal to the world's best'.⁸⁵ The QSSQ also quickly became a community resource, performing the quartet part in Vaughan Williams's 'Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis' with the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra.⁸⁶ Llewellyn also commented on strategic issues such as establishment of a conservatorium, and frequently mentioned Brisbane's need for a medium-sized concert hall.

Following the first ensemble's resignation in late 1948, probably due to burnout, the government curiously invited applications (but only from males!) for the next QSSQ through newspaper advertisements.⁸⁷ Only in July 1949 did a second QSSQ convene, comprising George White, Donald Scotts, Eric Challen and Ernest Greaves.⁸⁸ It existed for three years, after which the initiative lapsed permanently. Although funds were announced in late 1953 for the conservatorium initiative 'and the String Quartet', the priority was clearly now the larger entity.⁸⁹

When comparing the two QSSQ memberships, a common heritage is evident through several of the players having been student members of the Sydney String Quartet that previously had visited Queensland (see above), but except for cellist Don Howley, none of the players was formerly a Queensland resident. The first ensemble was entrepreneurial through touring and recordings, and worked with eminent artists such as pianist Hepzibah Menuhin. A programming innovation introduced in 1947 was the offering of a shortened version of evening recitals, on the day following, for lunchtime audiences. The second QSSQ collaborated extensively with guest artists, notably harpist Una Morgan, pianists Enith Clarke, Ron Grainer, Frank Hutchens, Alan McCristal and Christine Whyte, and cellist Anton Sorgato, which considerably expanded their programming options.

The QSSQ's programming was remarkably adventurous. While local audiences were accustomed to occasionally hearing Debussy, Bartók, Benjamin or Holbrooke, some standard repertoire still remained unexplored. About ten Haydn quartets (including the later works), all but two of Mozart's ten mature quartets and a nearly complete Beethoven cycle were performed by the QSSQ. German romantics were unevenly represented, with only one or two works by Mendelssohn, Schubert, Dvořák and Schumann, but Brahms finally came into his own. French composers also featured, particularly Debussy, Ravel, Fauré and Franck. Additionally, works by Bartók, Dohnányi, Hindemith, Sibelius, Smetana, Szymanowski and Tchaikovsky were performed, and from the English school, Bax, Bridge, Elgar, Finzi, and Armstrong Gibbs. The QSSQ also had to its credit Australian premières of quartets by William Walton and Benjamin Frankel, both shortly after their composition, and also a local work written by George English, who was one of the prime movers for the ensemble's establishment.⁹⁰

Other Developments

Another body supporting chamber music was the Queensland chapter of the Guild of Australian Composers. Established in 1941, it presented regular concerts, primarily of members' works, including some with significant chamber music associations. Both Fanny Turbayne's string quartet and violinist Scott McCallum's piano trio were heard at the inaugural concert.⁹¹ Guild-sponsored competitions sometimes engendered a prizewinning chamber work, such as Will Donald's 'Curlews' for voice, oboe and string quartet.⁹² Others who attempted the quartet medium were Muriel King, Linda Bowman and Reginald Boys, while Percy Brier and Rees Morgan wrote for trio combinations with piano, winds or strings. Later through the 1950s, however, solo and choral items tended to dominate Guild concerts.

A further post-war development was the establishment in Sydney of the Musica Viva (later Society) Players in 1945. Shortly thereafter, this ensemble toured to Brisbane, presenting Haydn's 'Lark' Quartet, Beethoven's 'Archduke' trio and the Franck Piano Quintet with Hepzibah Menuhin at the City Hall, an 'artistic triumph' for all concerned.⁹³ Similar success was achieved the following year with pianist Maureen Jones,⁹⁴ but it appears that Queensland concerts were infrequently presented until a local branch was formed in 1956.⁹⁵

Conclusion

Like many classical music genres, the chamber music repertoire relies upon goodwill from performers and audiences for its survival. In the case of Queensland, and particularly Brisbane, sterling efforts by a core group of performer-organisers during the first half of the twentieth century ensured that devotees could regularly experience chamber music highlights. Repertoire trends and tastes are a moveable feast, as the so-called 'canon' is re-evaluated by each generation, and therefore the menus offered for chamber music lovers differ markedly across various decades. Many once-familiar composers have later vanished, and only selectively been revived — if at all. Surprisingly for Queensland's chamber music tradition, some standard works were accepted long after their composition. Conversely, most performers willingly took up the challenge of unfamiliar repertoire, also championing local composers.

Organisational structures, with or without sponsorship, are essential for chamber music's sustainability. As demonstrated here, few of these worthy early ventures had a long lifespan. Sometimes individuals or ensembles re-emerged after a hiatus, but it seems that survival past the establishment phase was dependent on external or official support. This was probably so with both iterations of the [Brisbane] Chamber Music Society, which soon foundered, while the Civic Chamber Concerts succeeded due to a more secure support base. Even with the advent of a full-time ensemble in the State String Quartet, purely artistic aims were linked to the wider agenda of public education. The self-education of the performers, and by extension their audiences' repertoire knowledge, is another major characteristic of local chamber music initiatives.

Although the early twentieth century saw periods of relative prosperity punctuated by wartime or economic challenges, chamber music appears to have survived regardless. Nevertheless, its fortunes appear to be linked primarily to specific instigators, and the organisations they created, rather than to places, venues or times. An individual's desire to collaborate artistically with his or her peers was the overriding precondition for a sustainable chamber music tradition, in Queensland as much as anywhere else. The fact that official sponsorship did not eventuate until the middle of the century does not detract from the significance of these musical pioneers.

The 1950s started triumphantly for Queensland's music, with several new full-time ensembles, but it was not until Musica Viva consolidated as a truly national organisation in the 1960s that high-calibre chamber music performance acquired permanency — albeit largely on the basis of international visitors. The disbanded State String Quartet spawned an afterglow in the late 1950s, when some QSO players formed the Musica da Camera Society, which lasted until 1972 as a fully local initiative. Those and other stories of chamber music development in Queensland must, however, wait to be told elsewhere.

Endnotes

- 1 Various aspects of Queensland's orchestral music have been documented previously. For example, see Frederick Erickson, 'The bands and orchestras of colonial Queensland', PhD thesis, University of Queensland (1987); Andrew Schultz, 'Brisbane orchestras, 1920 to 1947', PhD thesis, University of Queensland (1981).
- 2 Peter Roennfeldt, 'Music by the few for the many: chamber music in colonial Queensland', *Queensland Review* 1 (2012), 178–89. This article traces the contributions of many musicians whose family members or students continued working in the early twentieth century.
- 3 The Sleath legacy continued through various instruments owned by local musicians, notably when a set of Howard's instruments were donated to the University of Queensland in 1974, which spawned the short-lived Mayne String Quartet. Substantial endowments from the Sleath estate were also made to both that institution and the Queensland Conservatorium in the late 1980s.
- 4 The Benvenuti legacy lived on in later decades, with younger family members Leo and Alice both early members of the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, founded in 1947.
- 5 'Brisbane Quartette Society', *Brisbane Courier* [hereafter cited as *BC*], 12 July 1902, 12.
- 6 'The Brisbane Quartette Society', *BC*, 31 July 1902, 4.

- 7 'A successful concert', *BC*, 20 November 1901, 6.
- 8 'Herr Rosendorff's concert', *BC*, 3 December 1903, 6.
- 9 'Mr J. L. Philip's concert', *BC*, 29 April 1904, 6.
- 10 'Miss Hume-Black's concert', *BC*, 15 July 1901, 6.
- 11 'Brisbane Musicians' Association'. *BC*, 26 June 1905, 5.
- 12 The Queensland branch of the Musicians' Union of Australia was founded in 1911.
- 13 'Musicians' Association', *BC*, 10 March 1908, 6.
- 14 'Musicians' Association', *BC*, 12 June 1909, 16.
- 15 'Musicians' Association disbanded', *BC*, 29 July 1909, 6.
- 16 'Brisbane Liedertafel: third grand concert', *BC*, 6 September 1900, 6.
- 17 'Toowoomba and District: Liedertafel Concerto', *BC*, 13 September 1902, 6.
- 18 'Return of the Misses Jefferies', *BC*, 16 January 1906, 2.
- 19 'Misses Jefferies concerto', *BC*, 14 May 1907, 6.
- 20 'Chamber music concert', *BC*, May 1909, 16.
- 21 'Chamber music', *BC*, 21 September 1910, 7.
- 22 'Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 27 September 1911, 7.
- 23 'Music and drama', *BC*, 13 May 1911, 12.
- 24 Percy Brier, *Autobiography of a musician* (Brisbane: Eric Blyth, 1973), p. 90.
- 25 *BC*, 14 January 1904, 2.
- 26 'Social', *BC*, 23 March 1907, 7.
- 27 'Music and musicians: chamber music', *BC*, 25 June 1913, 16.
- 28 'Music and musicians: lecture on chamber music', *BC*, 27 May 1914, 16.
- 29 'The Schoenberg Sextet: some notes by Mr Alfred Kalisch', *BC*, 26 May 1915, 9.
- 30 'Red Cross concert', *BC*, 21 June 1915, 5.
- 31 'Patriotic concert', *BC*, 14 September 1914, 8.
- 32 'Music and drama', *BC*, 24 February 1917, 12.
- 33 'Apollo Club's concert', *BC*, 19 June 1918, 5.
- 34 'Pianoforte and violin recital', *BC*, 19 June 1918, 5.
- 35 'Benjamin-Hayne recital', *BC*, 11 November 1919, 11.
- 36 'Music, drama and pictures', *BC*, 5 July 1919, 12.
- 37 'Music and drama', *BC*, 30 June 1917, 12.
- 38 'Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 24 May 1921, 11.
- 39 'Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 29 November 1921, 3.
- 40 'Brisbane Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 27 March 1922, 9.
- 41 'Brisbane Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 22 September 1922, 15.
- 42 'Brisbane Chamber Music Society', *BC*, 31 July 1922, 9.
- 43 'Chamber music', *BC*, 21 August 1925, 14.
- 44 'Chamber music: a brilliant "cellist"', *BC*, 20 November 1925, 10.
- 45 'Chamber music concert', *BC*, 8 June 1926, 10.
- 46 'Music Week', *BC*, 22 October 1927, 23.
- 47 'Beethoven Commemoration Concerto', *BC*, 28 March 1927, 12.

- 48 'Schubert chamber music', *BC*, 22 November 1928, 17.
- 49 'The Cherniavsky Trio', *BC*, 24 May 1928, 23.
- 50 'Chamber music concert', *BC*, 27 April 1929, 26.
- 51 'Chamber music concert', *BC*, 21 September 1929, 10.
- 52 'Chamber music concert', *BC*, 3 August 1929, 10.
- 53 'Sonata concert', *BC*, 21 June 1930, 2.
- 54 'Music teachers' concert', *BC*, 13 August 1930, 7.
- 55 'Sydney String Quartet', *BC*, 16 July 1931, 15.
- 56 'String quartet recital: Masters of chamber music', *BC*, 4 April 1935, 23.
- 57 'Sydney String Quartet: stirring rendering of Schubert work', *BC*, 18 April 1935, 19.
- 58 'Austral Recital', *BC*, 5 October 1931, 17.
- 59 'Austral Recital', *BC*, 23 May 1932, 11.
- 60 'Austral choir recital', *BC*, 24 April 1933, 13.
- 61 'Chamber music: Brahms's Centenary', *CM*, 5 May 1933, 15.
- 62 'Musical journeys: audience led on strange routes', *CM*, 12 October 1934, 19.
- 63 'Chamber music: Spivakovsky-Kurtz Trio in Brisbane', *CM*, 2 February 1935, 10.
- 64 'Budapest String Quartet: flawless playing of chamber music', *CM*, 27 September 1935, 15.
- 65 'Perfect string playing: Budapest Quartette', *CM*, 30 September 1935, 16.
- 66 H.T.H., 'Music and the drama', *CM*, 21 September 1935, 18.
- 67 H.T.H., 'Music and the stage', *CM*, 30 March 1935, 18.
- 68 H.T.H., 'Music and the drama', *CM*, 27 April 1937, 20.
- 69 H.T.H., 'Music and the drama', *CM*, 26 February 1938, 24.
- 70 'Civic chamber music', *CM*, 1 April 1943, 5.
- 71 'Brisbane's civic concert lead', *CM*, 11 March 1943, 4.
- 72 R[obert] Dalley-Scarlett, 'People need music as much as roads', *CM*, 3 December 1945, 5.
- 73 E.J.R., 'Large crowd at concert', *CM*, 9 September 1946, 4.
- 74 E.B., 'Fine chamber music playing', *CM*, 7 July 1947, 4.
- 75 Ernest Briggs, 'Chamber music well played', *CM*, 3 July 1950, 6./
- 76 Ernest Briggs, 'Trio in fine recital', *CM*, 20 October 1950, 7.
- 77 Frederic Rogers, 'Civic music', *Australian Musical News*, 1 August 1950, 26.
- 78 'They shall have music', *CM*, 12 February 1944, 2.
- 79 'More music', *CM*, 31 August 1944, 2.
- 80 'Pupils know their music', *CM*, 1 September 1944, 2.
- 81 'Quartet resigns', *CM*, 26 October 1948, 1.
- 82 E.B., 'Youth likes quartet', *CM*, 8 July 1947, 4.
- 83 Neville Cardus, 'Rare privilege of hearing string quartet', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 August 1945, 6.
- 84 Unidentified press cutting, possibly *Melbourne Herald Sun*, 26 November 1945.
- 85 'Puzzle to New Zealand', *CM*, 21 June 1948, 4.
- 86 'Musical treat by symphony', *CM*, 11 June 1945, 2.
- 87 'Positions vacant', *CM*, 20 January 1949, 2.

- 88 'State Quartet Begins on July 1', *CM*, 18 May 1949, 3.
- 89 'Music: £16,000', *CM*, 25 September 1953, 5.
- 90 Adrian Thomas, 'From little acorns: the first Queensland State Quartet, 1944–1948', *Australasian Music Research* 8 (2004), 59. This article provides a detailed overview of this first QSSQ's activities and impact.
- 91 H.T.H., 'All the music for this concert was written in Brisbane', *CM*, 3 November 1941, 4.
- 92 "'Fuzzy Angels" set to music', *CM*, 3 October 1943, 2.
- 93 Ernest Briggs, 'Concert to remember', *CM*, 27 October 1949, 4.
- 94 'Applause for string quartet', *CM*, 7 October 1950, 6.
- 95 'Formed new musical society for state', *CM*, 14 March 1956, 9.