

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
House of Representatives
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This submission is made on behalf of the Australian Fine Music Network, a collection of Australian community radio stations that are committed to supporting fine / classical /quality music experiences through

- broadcast,
- community participation
- the promotion of Australian musicians and their music
- the development of young musicians
- the involvement of local arts and music communities

The stations in this collection are 2MBS (Sydney), 3MBS (Melbourne), 4MBS (Brisbane), 5MBS (Adelaide) and ArtSound (Canberra). There are more than 100 other community radio stations across the country which dedicate airtime to a range of classical and other quality music genres.

Executive Summary

There are five community stations which broadcast classical and other quality music. They serve a unique need not covered by other broadcasters and do so with zero to minimal assistance by way of Commonwealth Government grants. These stations' operations are funded largely by listener subscription and sponsorship and survive because they fulfil listener needs and expectations. They generate the majority of their programs internally and also contribute networked material. They are at the forefront of education of interested listeners. They record and broadcast local performers and performances and encourage Australian artists and composers. They are at the cutting edge of innovation and are keen to move to digital broadcasting platforms when they are available. The high cost of digital conversion is a likely inhibitor to early moves into digital technology and the stations believe that they will need to both the FM and digital platforms for many years after the changeover.

Preamble:

Community radio has provided a testing ground and developmental vehicle for new technology and innovative programming. Now that new technology offers both threats and opportunities for community broadcasting, it is critical that the government strategically support the sector. Australia has the most developed community broadcasting sector in the

world. To build on this achievement, the government can provide a framework for further development.

The fine music stations were the first licensed FM stations in Australia. They successfully pioneered the use of the 88-108 MHz FM band before other sectors had focussed on the medium. They were the first stations licensed to address a niche audience's listening needs. They were also the first to encourage listeners to participate in their operations.

Digital radio has the potential to transform the radio experience for listeners and broadcasters with more services, new features and better sound. It provides community radio with an important opportunity to better serve its diverse audiences and further enhance the participatory and community strengthening role it plays in contemporary Australia.

Within community radio, there is a network of specialist fine music radio stations – MBS stations in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide and Artsound in Canberra. They are operated by enthusiastic volunteers absolutely committed to the recording and broadcasting of a wide range of quality music forms, including classical, jazz and related genres. The stations are committed to supporting the musicians in their local communities. All stations are constitutionally committed to involving local people in their operations and choice of programs.

Digital radio will allow for new, innovative and specialist services with which fine music community stations will be able to meet the specific requirements of their audiences.

The objectives of the stations are to support quality music broadcasting and the musical community in which each of them operate. There are specific characteristics of digital broadcasting that meet the objectives of fine music community broadcasters better than analogue transmission. These include higher quality audio transmission and reception and the potential for the transmission of data relating to music composers and performers. This is central to the fine music listening experience and has been successfully trialled by 3MBS at the digital radio trials in Melbourne.

1. The scope and role of Australian community broadcasting across radio, television, the internet and other broadcasting technologies;

Scope: Across most of Australia, the Fine Music Network presents a range of quality music programs to listeners who are not served by other media. This includes the commercial, national and internet streaming listeners. There are fulltime stations in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Canberra. There is also fine music played on more than 100 community stations across the country.¹

All of the fine music stations broadcast on the FM band because of the technical benefits for people interested in listening to high quality recorded music. Many of the stations also operate streaming services through their websites. This allows listeners around the world to listen to the Australian musicians that are promoted by their local stations.

There are approximately 1000 volunteers who contribute their time to the stations within the network. Each of the five stations in the network has volunteers who regularly record local

¹ CBOOnline Database. Question 15. October 2005

musical performances for broadcast on their stations. Each station records an average of 100 performances every year.

“Fine Music” traditionally includes early music, baroque, classical, romantic and contemporary classical. The term also includes opera, operetta and jazz. Most stations also broadcast folk music, world music, blues and ‘roots’ music, ‘Broadway’ musicals and instrumental specials. This program spectrum covers western art music, its derivatives and origins.

Stations in the network support young musicians through a National Young Performers Award that offers significant prizes for the winner. The stations also encourage Australian composers through a national composer’s competition.

Stations also operate education programs for young people as well as others interested in learning more about fine music and broadcasting.

Revenue sources for the Fine Music Network are diverse and encompass sponsorship and donations, local government grants and direct listener subscription with the latter being the principal source of revenue for most stations. A total of more than 12,000 listeners pay annual subscriptions to the stations despite being able to listen at no cost. The stations also publish and distribute magazines that complement their FM broadcasts as well as websites and electronic newsletters.

Most of the stations support local musicians through staging and promotion of concerts. 4MBS’ Festival of Classics has grown to be one of the largest classical music festivals in Australia.- a 10 day musical feast of more than 20 concerts featuring only Australian classical musicians. For over 20 years, ArtSound FM in Canberra has recorded and broadcast the National Folk Festival and is increasingly active in supporting local Lieder Society and Chamber Music concerts

Australia’s major music organisations have negotiated significant promotional arrangements with stations in the network. It is the only targeted way to get their message to people interested in fine music. Unlike the ABC, community stations can sell airtime.

Role: The role of the fine music network stations is to fill the niche left by the Australian Broadcasting Commission when that body reduced its local coverage and spheres of influence to give more prominence to national bodies and events. Stations in the network aid and assist in developing local arts communities by giving prominence to their performances and events, recording and broadcasting performances and arranging concerts, competitions and festivals as resources permit. The Fine Music Network – comprising like stations in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Adelaide – pioneered community broadcasting and new technology. 2MBS and 3MBS were the first licensed stations in Australia on the FM band. The historical role of MBS stations and, more generally, Australian community broadcasting across technology has been experimental, innovative and creative. Community broadcasting takes risks with technologies. It does not need to be accountable to shareholders, only to the listeners who support it. It is not part of a national infrastructure that reports back to Parliamentary estimates committees for its performance.

The participatory nature of community broadcasting encourages people who are enthusiastic and knowledgeable about new technologies to get involved.

2. Content and programming requirements that reflect the character of Australia and its cultural diversity.

Content: Stations in the fine music network broadcast a minimum of 10% of local [Australian] classical music content by performer, or composer. They encourage and emphasise the importance of local talent and launch new local CDs on air and interview participating artists. Most stations exceed the requirement and regularly exceed the 25% quota established for other music genres.

Volunteers from each of the fine music stations record hundreds of local performances each year. The performances are by local musicians, Australian musicians. These are the only recordings made of these performances. Most of the stations in the network have archives of recordings of local performers that stretch back for decades. ArtSound FM also provides professional archiving services to broadcasters, national institutions such as the National Library of Australia and the National Archives, and a range of commercial clients, to stringent NLA archiving standards. A large part of its work has included the preservation of rare ABC tapes that would otherwise have been lost forever.

Programming requirements: As Community stations and as part of the charter of community stations, fine music network stations ascertain the needs of the community served and present locally generated programs [not networked] which reflect those needs.

Cultural diversity: Surveys carried out by the fine music stations show that overwhelmingly, the listeners [subscribers] to the network are of mature years [55 and over], of tertiary education and of either low income [pension supported] or high income [professional / self-funded retirees]. This is a group whose needs are not met by any other media outlet. The fine music stations meet these needs.

Radio has a proven track record of importance for Australian culture. No other broadcasters cover the depth and breadth of diversity in music, and with such an emphasis on the achievements of local musicians through provision of many hours of airtime, than does the community radio sector. We can afford to do this much more cost effectively than the ABC, and certainly at no less quality. Community radio will play an increasingly important role as a mirror of and conduit for, highly-localised cultural and artistic events. This is especially important at a time when there are strong swings towards concentration of the media and centralisation of radio programming. In addition, the impact of numerous internet based radio sources are affecting listening habits.

To encourage local talent, some stations have established high quality music recording studios as part of their ancillary operations for live broadcast and CD mastering for musicians. Voiceover services have been provided by ArtSound for SBS television documentary production.

3. Technological opportunities, including digital, to expand community broadcasting networks.

Technological opportunities: Each station in the network broadcasts in FM using the best equipment and techniques that it can afford. All stations have a very high volunteer staffing level and some are run entirely by volunteers. Volunteers are trained to operate equipment and to work at the cutting edge of technology in digital recording and editing techniques. Lack of funds generally results in very high levels of technical innovation being achieved with minimal resources.

Digital expansion: Each station strongly supports the move to digital radio, and anticipates broadcasting using digital techniques, but needs to find or generate the considerable funds necessary to make the change. It is expected that for many years after the introduction of digital broadcasting, it will be necessary to continue broadcasting in FM analogue to service those listeners who have not bought or cannot afford to buy digital receivers. This poses challenges for community radio because the costs involved in the transition to digital radio transmissions are likely to be considerable. This is in contrast to the use of digital audio techniques at the studio end, which can be very affordable. Moreover, FM has proven to be a very cost effective medium for community radio. With some exceptions, stations have had a great degree of autonomy over their FM equipment, and have managed to maintain the equipment to a high level of reliability, despite low budgets. It is unclear whether this will be feasible in the digital broadcasting era.

Internet streaming / podcasting: This is a developing technology and in time a substantial audience will develop but many listeners/supporters of the fine music network have not had the necessary technical background to access program material in this way. This will change as the current generation of computer literate people move into retirement. The fine music network stations will be implementing Internet Streaming as an early step into “digital multicasting” but need financial support to subsidise the costs of continuous data input into the Internet.

Fine music community stations are keen to secure the benefits that digital radio can offer. The stations are keen to introduce *new ideas and services*: consumers need to be given value above and beyond the price of a radio receiver, sufficient to stimulate their purchase of a digital receiver. The fine music network needs equitable access to the digital spectrum when it is available.

The stations consider new services should include a range of discrete new content offerings – rather than add-ons such as text and other program enhancement features. For example, the BBC has five digital-only channels offering a diverse range of services.

A managed introduction approach allowing for the introduction of unique services would help give effect to the Government’s policy principles relating to increased quality and diversity of services, which are supported in findings identified by the Digital Radio Study Group in its report last year.² The BBC notes that: “...*New services have become the primary selling point for digital radios, proving to have wider consumer appeal than improved sound quality, which was the main message in the early days of DAB.*”³ The need for new services has also been noted in consumer research undertaken in the UK: “*New services are selected by 71% of those who have bought sets as a reason for their purchase; sound quality is selected by 40% of this group.*”⁴

² Report of the Digital Radio Study Group, March 2004, p 5

³ BBC Submission to DCMS Review of DAB Digital Radio, October 2004, at p 10

⁴ Claritas for DRDB, July 2004 quoted on p10 of BBC Submission

Stations in the fine music network, if appropriately supported can provide new services such as kid's classics, light classics, a jazz/world channel, nostalgia services directed towards the aged, and a channel for the serious music lover etc.

As previously mentioned, the stations in the network are streaming with listeners and subscribers overseas enjoying broadcasts of Australian musicians. The stations are also starting to gear up for podcasting .

4. Opportunities and threats to achieving a diverse and robust network of community broadcasters.

Opportunities: The fine music stations are keen to embrace digital broadcasting and move into podcasting and be market leaders in those fields.

As the over 55 demographic increases throughout Australia, it will be of increasing importance to train and usefully employ older citizens in digital and other cutting edge technologies as they increasingly move into retirement.

- The fine music network wants to further encourage and support the performance of quality music forms by Australian performers.

and

- The fine music network wants to further encourage and support the composition of quality music by Australian composers.

Threats: Shortage of funds. In common with all community radio stations, the fine music network stations find that costs continue to rise but the increasingly aged listener / supporter population are on reduced incomes. Most of the administration work of community radio stations is aimed at raising sufficient funds to stay on the air. Government Grants are frequently tied to specific projects such as 'training' which while necessary, generally translates to salaries for trainers.

Funding should be available for general operating expenses [rent electricity etc]. Apart from a small grant available through the Community Broadcasting Foundation which partly subsidises transmission expenses, there are no other operating subsidies available. This is a major defect in the funding process.

It is ironic that the more successful stations become, with expanded premises and increased community involvement in the production and presentation of programmes, the more difficult it can be to sustain day to day operations from a limited revenue pool. Huge volunteer efforts are being diverted to fund raising projects and various ways of generating income. This means that often, full attention to innovative program development and expanding the audience base, is not possible. As stations become more professional, their costs have increased at a faster rate than their revenues...

Paid EFT staffing levels are considerably less than those most radio stations would consider to be essential, and as a result, the potential of community stations to better serve their audiences is often hindered. Staff in these situation are often highly stressed, work long hours with strategic focus taking a back seat. The exploitation of staff in this way would not normally be tolerated in commercial media.

What do we recommend?

1. That Government recognise the role played by community radio as a quality training ground for the industry in general and allocate funding to support day to day operations and strengthen the professional management base of community radio.
2. That funding should be available for providing staff and upgrading staffing levels.