

Ban the Talkies!

Sound Film and the Musicians' Union of Australia 1927–1932

Bronwen Arthur

When you patronise the Squawkies
I mean Talkie picture shows
You pay your cash to hear a lot
Of Yanks talk through their nose;
And when you hear "canned" music,
Speak up! Don't be afraid
To say, "I want the real thing
And by Australians played."¹

Penned in 1929 by one 'Silly Billy', this anonymous contribution to the official journal of the Musicians' Union of Australia, *The Professional Musician*, indicates a significant degree of discontent on the part of the writer regarding the new talking films. It highlights a dissatisfaction with talkie technology itself, but also with the related issues of mechanical music and the monopoly of American production companies, and it promotes the desirability of employing Australian musicians in preference to foreigners. Despite being clothed in lightweight doggerel, these were issues the Musicians' Union was treating seriously and, assuming 'Billy' was a musician, he and his Union had cause to be concerned about the new technology.

The unemployment rate in Australia during the 1930s Depression years peaked at 30% in the second quarter of 1932, having hovered between 5 and 10% for most of the 1920s before climbing steeply in late 1929.² The profound social consequences of such widespread unemployment among breadwinners are well documented, but the statistics for musicians present a still bleaker picture. By mid 1930 the Musicians' Union declared that 80% of professional musicians in Australia were unemployed,³ however, this disaster was attributable not to the Depression, but rather almost solely to the arrival of talking pictures in Australia in December

¹ *The Professional Musician* 2.3 (1929): 17.

² *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia* (Melbourne: Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1933). It is widely accepted that official unemployment figures underestimated the true situation.

³ Letter from the General Secretary of the Musicians' Union of Australia to the Secretary of the Cape Musicians' Association, South Africa, 5 May 1930. Source material related to the MUA is drawn from the Federal and NSW District Collections held at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University. Unless otherwise specified, all letters are from the General Secretary of the Musicians' Union of Australia, Cecil Trevelyan.

1928. Of the Union's estimated 4,000 musicians without work,⁴ most never found re-employment in the movie or live theatre pits, and the Depression ensured that employment anywhere was impossible to find for many years.

Musicians were loud in their criticisms of talking films because of the threat to employment, but they were not alone in speaking out strongly. The new entertainment drew censure from various parts of the community which perceived it as less 'worthy' than its silent predecessor, the quality and sophistication of which had steadily increased over the previous three decades. Objections were made on both artistic and cultural grounds: talkies were criticised for their initial low technological standards, and for the overwhelmingly Hollywood origin of these films, which now fed American accents and values to the British Australian audiences. Opinions such as these were seized upon by the group most directly affected, the Musicians' Union of Australia, which used them in its efforts to marshal public support for the musicians against what it saw as the greatest evil of all: the displacement of musicians by 'mechanical music' from the majority of movie theatres across the country.

The Musicians' Union estimated in 1927 that 95% of the 5000 members on its books were employed in picture theatres.⁵ This figure is probably an off-the-cuff estimate rather than the result of a detailed audit of members, but can still be taken to imply that, leading up to the unanticipated end of the era of the 'silents', a very large majority of members were employed by the movie theatre industry. At this time the Union was the strongest it had ever been. It claimed that all city and large-town professional performing musicians were members, and its strength was largely due the popularity and growth of the lucrative film industry. In 1927 a Royal Commission examining the moving picture industry in Australia reported that there was £25 million invested in film production, distribution and, predominantly, exhibition in the country.⁶ This included some 1,250 silent movie theatres at which the yearly attendance was approximately 110 million; the average Australian went to 'the flicks' eighteen times a year, or once every three weeks, and musicians were required at every session in every theatre. Live music was central to the presentations, which came to feature overtures and other musical items as well as vaudeville acts in addition to the advertised films. The figures supplied to the Royal Commission also suggest a steadily expanding industry, and one sufficiently optimistic about its future to encourage significant investment from managements who became increasingly lavish in their efforts to woo audiences away from their competitors.

Two factors indicative of the film market's vitality in this boom economic period were the large-scale building programmes undertaken from the middle of the decade by the leading cinema chains, and the number and status of the musicians employed within their theatres. Diane Collins' research into the city picture theatres built in the late 1920s⁷ paints a picture of remarkable profligacy among exhibitors as they sought to outdo each other in the grandeur and extravagance of their buildings and fittings. She details that the price tag for the construction of Sydney's State Theatre in 1928 was a jaw-dropping £1 million, and that the standard expenditure for the two leading chains, Hoyts and Union Theatres, on new city theatres of the

⁴ Letter to the secretary of the Cape Musicians' Association, 5 May 1930, detailing the desperate situation in Australia in response to enquiries from the Cape Town union.

⁵ Minutes of MUA Federal Conference 1927: 19.

⁶ Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Moving Picture Industry in Australia* (Canberra: 1928) 63. Allegations of unfair trading practices by American distributors provided the impetus for the Royal Commission, and the impending sound film revolution received virtually no attention from either commissioners or witnesses. The American industry was similarly unprepared.

⁷ Diane Collins, 'The 1920s Picture Palace', in *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends. Essays in Australian Cultural History*, ed. Susan Dermody, John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska (Victoria: Kibble Books, 1982) 60-75.

period was £300,000; such theatres included the Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane Regents, the Melbourne Capitol, the Brisbane Wintergarden and Tivoli, and the Melbourne State. In this luxurious fantasy world the ushers were dressed in elaborate uniforms, chandeliers supplied brilliant lighting, the audience could relax into plush seats gazing at, in some cases, 'atmospherics'—balconies and trellises, imitation windows, birds and plants, and moving clouds in blue-painted ceilings—and the managements were willing to pay for music to match. For the opening of the Regent Theatre in Sydney in 1928, Hoyts' manager F.W. Thring negotiated with the MUA to use thirty imported Italian musicians as a stage act while an Australian orchestra of about twenty-five (plus eight Italians) worked in the pit, on the condition that the Union could supply musicians of a high enough standard.⁸ Such an arrangement provided a touch of European 'class', kept the Union (mostly) happy by employing Australians, and gave the audience some of the best symphonic music available in the city.

Rates of pay varied, but for a week of twelve performances wages of £14 and £16 were not exceptional,⁹ and some high profile leaders and conductors received in excess of this. While other cinemas were without the resources to match the magnificence of their city counterparts, a survey by the MUA in July 1927¹⁰ shows that suburban cinemas usually still employed a band of 5–10 musicians for evening performances (a pianist, occasionally joined by an instrumentalist or two, was considered sufficient for the once or twice weekly matinees), and often paid the players above the award wage of £5 for six three-hour performances per week. Given that the average wage at the time was approximately £5,¹¹ and that musicians who were employed for evening performances only were free to accept other engagements or to teach during the day, it was lucrative work even for those not of star status. With the pictures paying such high wages and offering apparent job security, it is not surprising that in 1928 both the Fuller-Gonzalez and the Melba-Williamson Grand Opera companies discovered that the high-quality picture theatre musicians they needed were reluctant to leave their ordinary theatre jobs for seasonal employment, despite the greater prestige associated with playing for opera. Opera repertoire demanded very capable musicians, but it was competition from cinema employers that forced wages up to almost twice the award rate of £6 16s.¹²

The long-term security of employment generated by silent films was misleading, although apparently the entire industry believed in it. The above-mentioned 1927 Royal Commission, purporting to be a thorough examination of the workings of the moving picture world, barely acknowledged the talkies that within two years would transform the industry and render the majority of its musicians jobless. Comprehensive statistics are not available, but the severity and speed of the change in employment prospects for musicians is clearly observable. By April 1930, as talkie equipment was only just being installed in regional centres such as Broken Hill, the Union's Melbourne representatives reported that the four main city theatres were employ-

⁸ Minutes of a compulsory conference before the Federal Industrial Commissioner, Sydney, 6–7 March 1928.

⁹ The Sydney Capitol was 'paying many of the orchestra as much as £16 10s. a week' (personal letter to Trevelyan's friend Arthur Neate in New Zealand, 28 May 1928), and a circular letter to District Secretaries, 15 July 1929, reports the Regent in Melbourne paying more than £13 10s. to some orchestral players. The Award rate for 12 performances was £8.

¹⁰ Evidence obtained July 1927 for Conductors regarding pay and time worked.

¹¹ This figure is for males, as at 31 Dec. 1927. *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1928. The basic wage at this time was £4 8s.

¹² A case before the Conciliation Commissioner, 15, 20 Mar. 1928, involved the clarinet player Mr Clymie, who insisted he was promised £14, and thought he ought to be paid £2 2s. for each of eight weekly performances, while J.C. Williamson Ltd. insisted that £12 was reasonable. The matter was complicated by the management also wanting to use Italian players already under contract, and was therefore (the MUA claimed) trying to renege on its agreement with Mr Clymie.

ing significantly reduced numbers of musicians, and not one of the Melbourne suburban theatres, which numbered sixty in the Hoyts chain alone, offered live music.¹³

In a letter written in late 1930 the MUA's General Secretary provided one of the more detailed summaries, contrasting the situation in Melbourne then with that 'prior to the introduction of mechanical music with pictures—say two years ago' when there were 'about 500 musicians employed six nights per week in picture shows.'¹⁴ He stated that between 15 and 20 musicians were now employed in each of the State, Capitol, Regent and Palais theatres, and 10 or fewer in the Athenaeum and Victory.¹⁵ Sydney is described as 'practically the same.' Statistics were also given for other major towns and cities: 'Adelaide—about 15 working out of 324; Brisbane—about 30 working out of 580; Kalgoorlie—none working out of 45; Launceston—5 working out of 50; Hobart—6 working out of 95'. The most telling is the list of towns which, at the time of the letter, had no musicians employed in picture theatres: Albury, Geelong, Ballarat, Newcastle, Toowoomba, Maryborough, Bundaberg, Mackay, Townsville, Cairns. Most of these towns would have had very little to offer by way of opportunities for alternative musical employment, especially with the general economic situation limiting the number of students able to afford to take lessons. According to the General Secretary, 'All these branches had many working prior to the introduction of Mechanical Music.'

Initially cinema musicians had watched developments with a wary eye. However, they found little cause for concern because of the low standard of the technology, and were happy to dismiss talkies as new-fangled toys destined to quickly lose their fascination. The first commercially available systems supplying mechanical music with films were based on a gramophone-style set-up through which recorded music was amplified, apparently with rather poor quality reproduction, often with a complete lack of synchronisation with the screen action, and with no associated dialogue. The most widely used of the early gadgets was the Panatrope, and such was the enthusiasm for technology that many theatres dispensed with their musicians immediately and installed it, occasionally promising to reinstate live music when the machinery was paid for. This action was taken despite the obvious shortcomings of the technology which offered nothing to the film experience except novelty. One contributor to *The Professional Musician* expressed the widespread opinion that it was merely a fad, 'Unless mechanical music for picture theatre accompaniment is greatly improved, it is my opinion that it is a passing novelty. I believe, also, that the public will soon tire of canned music.'¹⁶

However, dissatisfaction extended beyond simple technological issues, which in any case were swiftly being addressed by film-makers, thanks to the lucrative returns available to those able to offer a product more impressive than their competitors'. Concern was also expressed about the artistic validity of the new product, the possible effects on the public, and effect of the absence of live musicians. The MUA's General Secretary wrote to the management of Parkdale Pictures:

This Panatrope business is not only a menace to musicians who rely upon picture playing for their income...but it is a still more serious menace to the Art of Music, insofar as the Panatrope in itself is nothing other than a gramophone amplified, and the amplification distorts the music out of all semblance to real music, and tends to lower the public taste and appreciation of good music.¹⁷

¹³ Letter to the Broken Hill District Secretary, 1 Apr. 1930.

¹⁴ Letter to C. Crofts, Trades Hall, Melbourne, 11 Dec. 1930, with details of the General Secretary's intended presentation at an Arbitration Court hearing.

¹⁵ The Palais and the Victory were both in St Kilda, and therefore were the only cinemas still employing musicians that were not in the city centre.

¹⁶ *The Professional Musician* 1.3 (1928) : 6.

A theatre organist from Washington, quoted in *The Professional Musician*, was convinced that talkies could not compete because 'the human touch, added to the silent drama by the musicians in the pit, serves to make pictures realistic.'¹⁸

Today it is easy to assume the superiority of sound films over silent, and to explain any resistance to the introduction of the mechanised sound track either in economic or employment terms, or as stemming from the initially poor quality of the reproduction. This assumption is not necessarily correct, however. Musical accompaniment for film had certainly originated principally to mask mechanical noise and provide entertainment during reel changes, and had played an important role establishing as 'respectable' an entertainment that had its origins in nomadic tent shows. Over a period of thirty years, however, it had evolved to be an intrinsic and sophisticated element in the silent film experience, and was considered essential to the effective dramatic presentation of the on-screen story. The experience of live accompaniment, tailored to match the dramatic moments of a film, draws in an audience and involves them in a manner quite different from that achieved even by current hi-fi technology; it provides a strong sense of involvement in the action, and draws the music itself further into the foreground of the viewing experience. 'The human touch' did indeed bring the pictures alive, and contemporary critics had a valid artistic point.

Once film producers achieved synchronised soundtracks containing dialogue, however, live musicians had little chance of shifting the weight of public opinion back in their favour; it was an advance they could not hope to match, and only the cinemas that sought prestige were interested in keeping their orchestras. Despite this, speaking screen characters did cause other concerns to become even more pronounced. The standard of the technology initially remained poor, with New York critics being reported in Australia as being 'more or less sarcastic and amused' with the first attempt at a talking feature film, and declaring that 'sometimes the voices do sound funny, especially a woman's.'¹⁹ For Australian critics, the voices brought problems of their own:

There is much truth in the criticism that 'talkies are all noise and crime,' but their voice production is rather worse than their vice production. It is remarkable that the public will stand such large doses of the prevalent slang and accent accentuated to a British ear, especially in the reproduction of the singing and speaking of the modern American girl.²⁰

The critic goes on to state that 'sound is hastening the Americanisation, especially in regard speech, of the Australian people,' a tendency that was clearly unwelcome to the writer. A letter to the editor of the *Evening News* suggested that 'English pictures, with pleasing voices and accent, are a welcome relief after most American talkies.'²¹

These views were not uncommon, and are indicative of a middle-class attitude that still looked firmly towards England as the source of all worthwhile cultural products. Such anti-American attitudes were not inspired by any sudden increase in the percentage of films of American origin on the market, rather that the origin of the film was found to be far more obvious, and therefore undesirable, now that it could be heard. A medium which combined

¹⁷ 15 May 1929.

¹⁸ *The Professional Musician* 1:3 (1928) : 6.

¹⁹ *The Professional Musician* 1:3 (1928) : 8.

²⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald* 19 Apr. 1930 : 1. Presents the findings of the recently released report of the Commonwealth Film Censorship Board.

²¹ Signed 'A Picture Patron', *Evening News* 13 Feb. 1930.

sound and image was found to transfer not only language and accent, but also cultural values, with far more potency and immediacy than had been possible through moving image alone. Another, more general complaint about talkies concerned their detrimental effect on 'the nerves,' inspiring the same writer to the *Evening News* to conclude that '[p]atrons would also welcome occasional silent films, which are most restful.'²² Talking film technology did come to dominate the industry, however, and Australia's silent film industry, which was flourishing before the first World War but declined during the 1920s in the face of Hollywood's increasing domination of Australian distribution and exhibition, struggled from its weak base to make the required transition to sound.²³

One attempt at an Australian feature film around this time was the McDonagh sisters' *The Cheaters*, and it demonstrates one of the harsher results of the Musicians' Union of Australia's hard-line policy against talking films. In early 1929 the Union imposed an outright ban on members' involvement in the creation, reproduction, arrangement or selection of material for mechanical music.²⁴ *The Cheaters* was produced originally as a silent film at precisely the time it was guaranteed to become immediately obsolete. It was reworked as a talkie but the makers had difficulty finding an orchestra to record their sound track because of the ban, despite the number of musicians out of work.²⁵ As Union officials observed in response to newspaper reports criticising this extreme stance, the McDonaghs were only offering to employ sixteen musicians for about a fortnight, 'and their efforts would be injurious to their fellows throughout the Commonwealth as well as throughout the world.'²⁶ Should sound film production become established in Australia, the Union anticipated there would most likely be only two studios operating, employing a total of sixty musicians on casual rates: 'What a wonderful Australian industry to build up when we have had between 5000 and 6000 working!'²⁷ The Union obviously remained convinced that it could stem the tide of the talkies and draw people back to silent films with live, quality musical accompaniment, despite all indications to the contrary.

In January 1929, one of the most successful campaigns waged to galvanise public opinion against mechanical music took place at Hobart's Theatre Royal, where a Panatrope had been installed not to accompany film but rather a play, *The Trial of Mary Dugan*. This caused the Theatrical and Amusement Employees to strike in support of the displaced musicians, the theatre was picketed and some 35,000 leaflets distributed to patrons and those living in the area.²⁸ The public agreed that a Panatrope was not an adequate replacement for live music, and the season closed in three weeks instead of the projected eight, reportedly having had only 20% houses. The MUA claimed a noteworthy victory. In Melbourne the campaign received significant publicity sympathetic to the musicians' cause, and several film managers there were quoted in the

²² Signed 'A Picture Patron', *Evening News* 13 Feb. 1930.

²³ This process of gradual domination by the American industry is recorded in most Australian film histories. A good critical examination of it is found in John Tulloch's *Australian Cinema: Industry, Narrative and Meaning* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1982) 51-57.

²⁴ Minutes of Federal Conference 1928. The motion read: 'It shall be the duty of every member to: Refuse to operate or assist in the manipulation of, or arranging music or selecting records for any mechanical instrument which may have the effect of replacing musicians in houses of amusement.'

²⁵ When the matter came to public notice, the Union did observe that the McDonaghs were not offering their work to unemployed musicians, seeking rather a fully employed cinema orchestra. It acknowledged, however, that its stance would have been unaltered had unemployed musicians been involved. Letter from General Secretary, *SMH* 17 Mar. 1930.

²⁶ *SMH* 17 Feb. 1930.

²⁷ *SMH* 17 Feb. 1930.

²⁸ Letter to the Secretary of the Auckland Musicians' Union, 24 Jan. 1929, also *Sun* [Melbourne] 25 July 1929; *SMH* 25 July 1929. Around this time there was a strong push to amalgamate the three theatrical unions—Theatrical and Amusement Employees' Association, Actors' Federation and the Musicians' Union—into

press denying any intention of using mechanical music in their theatres. Techniques similar to those used in Hobart, intended to generate public boycotts, were used in other centres. The Union even committed itself financially to building up orchestras in some theatres, working in co-operation with the managements and incorporating an advertising campaign which highlighted 'the deficiency of "canned" music and the advantages of the human orchestra in conjunction with the best of films.'²⁹ For example, it organised for the Olympic Theatre at Sydney's Bondi Junction to boost its orchestra from eight up to twenty members and assisted with advertising, and similar proposals were made at other venues looking for an edge over their competition. The Union's goal was to provide the public with the opportunity to compare sound with silent for themselves, the belief being that the superior artistic value of live music, and the combination of quality silent films and a good orchestra, would win back popular support.

But the technology improved quickly and it soon became apparent that the talkies were resistant to such tactics. Unsuccessful at persuading the public to boycott talkies, the Union's strategies turned political, seeking to protect old jobs rather than recognising their redundancy and looking for new opportunities. The MUA had been making representations to parliamentarians for legislative protection from mid 1929, demanding tariff protection such as had been granted to other industries. Recommendations to both the outgoing Nationalist/Country Coalition Government and the incoming Labor Government included: a 1/- entertainment tax on each ticket; a tax on all musical records sold for use in houses of public entertainment; a tax 'equivalent to the cost of an orchestra' on theatres where only 'canned' music was played,³⁰ thereby providing financial incentive for the re-employment of orchestras; and an income tax on distributors to address the complaint that most of the profits from the industry were channelled back to the United States without benefit to Australia. One of the less realistic propositions, given that the soundtrack now included the dialogue and was physically part of the film, was for the importation of mechanical music for films to be either banned or taxed prohibitively; films could then be imported minus their soundtrack, and the music added here by Australian musicians.³¹ The Coalition Bruce Government deemed these suggestions 'impracticable,'³² it was no doubt reluctant to institute increased charges for a hugely popular entertainment when facing an election in an unstable political climate. Labor was more sympathetic and, through lobbying, the MUA was granted a round table conference of industry representatives with the recently victorious Prime Minister Mr Scullin.³³ He was supportive of their predicament, but the parliamentary sub-committee appointed to investigate³⁴ was unable to develop any positive policies to aid musicians. While an entertainment tax was introduced in 1929 in NSW,³⁵ it made no distinction between houses with live and 'canned' music. It was therefore probably of negative value to musicians, and was blamed for the subsequent closure of several dramatic theatres where musicians had still been employed.

One Big Union, reported in detail in *The Professional Musician* 2:1 (1929) and the Minutes of Federal Conference, Nov 1928.

²⁹ Detailed in a circular letter to Branch Secretaries, 21 June 1929.

³⁰ Letter to the Prime Minister, Mr Scullin, 28 Nov. 1929.

³¹ These suggestions are outlined in a series of letters from the General Secretary to various members of Parliament, including the Prime Minister and the Minister for Trade and Custom, dispatched regularly from July 1929.

³² Letter from the Prime Minister's Department to the General Secretary, 17 Aug. 1929.

³³ Letter from the Prime Minister's Department to the General Secretary, 20 Nov. 1929.

³⁴ Members were Attorney-General Frank Brennan, Senator J. Daly and Asst. Minister for Customs Frank Forde.

³⁵ NSW Entertainments Tax (Management) Act, 1929.

In an effort to 'help its own' on a more practical level, the Union organised several series of concerts of popular orchestral music in both Melbourne and Sydney, intended as fund-raisers for out-of-work musicians. Presented as the Victorian Professional Orchestra and the Professional Symphony Orchestra, these orchestral concerts were greeted enthusiastically by the press, and the large audience attendance was used as supporting evidence by those renewing the call for the establishment of full-time professional orchestras in both cities.³⁶ However, although the concerts raised money when organised on a charity basis—conductor, soloists and sometimes front-of-house staff were asked to donate their services for the benefit of unemployed musicians—the proceeds were not sufficient to pay musicians full rates for rehearsals and concert. The scheme was not, therefore, viable as an ongoing business enterprise.

Eventually, in pursuing its policy of accepting reduced numbers in employment in an effort to maintain existing wage levels, the Union was forced to make concessions to cinema managements. These were generally individual arrangements with employers, agreed to because the Union was keen to avoid appearing in the Arbitration Court; the reality of the overall unemployment level and economic situation meant musicians risked significant reductions in award conditions, as had already occurred in other industries.³⁷ One of the major concessions granted was to allow musicians to work in more than one theatre for a single wage, something proprietors were keen to obtain as those theatres which had retained musicians were only using them for a few minutes in each session. Another was to allow the same orchestra to work both in the pit and as a stage act when required; the Union had previously insisted that two separate orchestras be employed. In mid 1930 members also voted to remove the rule preventing them from being associated with mechanical music in any form,³⁸ and eventually a rate for making gramophone and sound film recordings was negotiated into the Award. The alterations constituted a final acknowledgment that talkies were a permanent fixture in the music industry.

Another prominent issue in the Union's reaction was its attitude towards foreign musicians in Australia, although here the implications of its effect on Australian cultural life were more far-reaching, and therefore harder to quantify. In addition to its attempts to limit job losses, the Union's other chief tactic for member protection was to limit the number of potential employees by effectively banning overseas players. There had been a long-established tendency to discourage managements from importing foreign players into Australia, although for many years there was no official policy that prevented them joining the Union once here; the only deterrent was that a foreigner's joining fee was twenty guineas compared with an Australian's five. From the early 1920s the Union had been resisting entrepreneurs' plans to import entire orchestras with their shows, such as the above-mentioned Italian orchestra which Hoyts brought out on contract in 1928 to be used at the State Theatre and then in their other prestigious cinemas as they opened.³⁹ Instead, employers were encouraged to bring just a few key players to supplement the Australian musicians available, and also to require that the visiting musicians leave the country when their contracts expired, thus preventing them taking jobs that were

³⁶ The call for such an orchestra had been made regularly from different parts of the community for many years. The MUA recognised the possibilities of a national broadcaster to this end, and approached first the Post-Master General and then the new Australian Broadcasting Company with a relatively unrestrained proposal for a full symphony orchestra and various jazz and dance ensembles. Minutes of Federal Conference, Nov. 1928 : 30; letter to Stuart Doyle, Chairman, Australian Broadcasting Company, 14 June 1929.

³⁷ Circular letter for Federal Council, 19 July 1930, which quotes the instance of the shearers having just had their award reduced by 20% when they appeared in the Arbitration Court.

³⁸ Circular letter to Federal Council 4 Apr. 1930. Several members of the Union's executive were strongly against the proposed change, advocating the ideal of opposing all mechanical music rather than acknowledging the practical reality.

³⁹ The Union was only prepared to accept the need for imported players when it agreed that local players

considered to rightfully belong to Australians. A proposition to bring over a complete ensemble was invariably attacked with considerable force by the Union, which mustered support from parliamentarians on both sides of the house, and also from the Australian Natives Association and similar patriotic groups. More often than not the entrepreneur was defeated.⁴⁰ One exception to this automatic rejection was the American jazz bands, whose 'combinations' were recognised as being superior to Australian groups, and therefore were seen to raise the profile of and increase the public's desire for jazz, thus increasing job opportunities for Australians. The Union permitted them to come, but only until such time as Australian groups had reached a similar level of experience in the jazz style. The standard argument was that it could supply Australian musicians of the same calibre as their imported counterparts, and imports were therefore unnecessary and unwelcome, and only pandered to and reinforced the assumed audience preference for anything that was not home-grown.

For non-Australian British musicians the rules were slightly different, and were designed only to prevent musicians arriving to work under contract. The standard five guinea joining fee applied where the applicant had been a non-working resident in Australia for six months, otherwise it leapt to the foreigner's twenty. This discrimination created a certain amount of discontent when it became known at Home, and there were suggestions in the English press of retaliation; the Australian response was to argue that it was highly unlikely that Australian musicians would be brought into England under contract, but that it was a common occurrence here for non-Australians to be imported and guaranteed work, thus placing them at a considerable advantage over their Australian comrades.⁴¹

However, it was not until June 1929,⁴² when musicians were suddenly faced with alarming rates of unemployment, that a resolution was incorporated in the rules which had the consequence of effectively banning new foreign members from the Union. Although the Union was not legally allowed to have an outright prohibition, all applications for membership from non-British citizens had to be submitted to the Federal Executive, and were put to a national vote. It was a cumbersome and lengthy process, and it seems very few foreign musicians were admitted under the scheme. The rationale was stated quite openly: '[N]ormally we have admitted foreigners freely, but since the advent of the "Talkies" and mechanical music employment of musicians has dwindled by some hundreds per cent.'⁴³ This justification is from a letter rejecting the application of one Lazar Sverdloff, whose case illustrates just how determined the Union was to protect its own. Sverdloff, aged 42 in 1943, was a Russian-born Jew living in Germany until he fled to Australia probably early in 1934, living first for six months in Perth where family members had been resident for many years, before moving to Melbourne.⁴⁴ His application stated that he had been leader of the Berlin Philharmonic and of the State Opera

were not available (on occasion a bass clarinet or enough French horns) or when foreigners were being employed in addition to the usual number of Australian musicians. Such an agreement was reached with Hoyts; most of the Italians formed a stage band, with just a few supplementing the Australians in the pit under Italian conductor Signor Kost.

⁴⁰ This was true even when there was significant community enthusiasm for the idea, such as for a proposed visit by the Coldstream Guards Band in 1933 sponsored by the Australian Broadcasting Commission, which was considered by supporters to be a magnificent opportunity for Australian musicians to learn from one of the leading British military bands. The Union maintained that it would be taking Australians' jobs and that, given the same resources, it could produce an equivalent band made up of Australian musicians. Letter to the ABC, 5 Sep. 1933.

⁴¹ Letter to E.S. Teale, General Secretary, Musicians' Union (England), 7 Mar. 1928, and a letter from Teale, 4 Mar. 1929; also *The Professional Musician* 2:1 (1929): 10–12.

⁴² Circular letter to Branch Secretaries, 24 June 1929.

⁴³ Letter to Lazar Sverdloff, 1 May 1934.

⁴⁴ Sverdloff had been permitted to join the Musicians of Western Australia Union of Workers, Perth, which

House in Bielefeld, and the conductor of the State Opera House in Dusseldorf 'for many years,' as well as claiming recognition in Europe as a composer.⁴⁵ He had been a member of the Berlin Musicians Union and of a conductors' union, which he had formed; his referees included a Labor member of parliament, and the application was supported by senior members of the MUA hierarchy. Indeed, 'everything in connection with him is in his favour except the fact of his nationality.'⁴⁶ But despite—or perhaps even because of—his obvious musical abilities, the Union stood firm in its opposition to foreign members being admitted. An increasing number of Jewish musicians applied for membership throughout the 1930s but, while they attracted sympathy for their plight, they were made no more welcome because of it:

[W]e are all very sorry for these victims of political and racial strife and view their lot with something akin to horror. At the same time we would be failing in our duty as Australians in general and unionists in particular if we failed to resist to our fullest extent any encroachment on our employment by any of these unfortunate foreigners either singly or in numbers.⁴⁷

The Union perceived its duty was to safeguard employment prospects for Australians, and placed this above any other humanitarian principles. The possibility that musicians such as Sverdloff might have brought with them skills and reputations sufficient to stimulate orchestral music in Australia seems not to have been considered. One wonders what the result might have been had these musicians been encouraged to practise their profession in Australia.

While the Musicians' Union was perhaps short-sighted in its responses to the changing environment, especially in its determination to reinstate orchestras in theatres long after technological developments made this unlikely, the issues were not necessarily straightforward. There was a genuine concern among musicians about the changes taking place in the industry with regard both to employment and to the quality and type of music provided to the public. That the film industry recognised 'something' had been lost when orchestras left theatres was demonstrated in May 1930 when two of the 'palaces' rebuilt their orchestras up to pre-talkie levels⁴⁸ in an effort to remain one step above their suburban competitors in the quality and variety of the entertainment offered. Several of the other concerns expressed retain their resonance today; the desirability of the Americanisation of Australian culture is still discussed, and debate regarding the relationship between recorded music and live performance is equally topical. The effect of the substantial and widespread reduction of the number of instrumentalists in the community is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify. Particularly in smaller towns the picture theatres had represented one of the few sources of regular employment for performing musicians.

Ultimately, musicians must be considered to have been unlucky that such a significant reorganisation of their industry took place in the midst of the Great Depression. While it did not directly create large-scale unemployment among musicians, the economic situation made it far

had a jurisdiction of only 25 miles radius around Perth and was entirely separate from the federal MUA, but he was now seeking to join the federal body.

⁴⁵ Letter from Sverdloff to General Secretary, 3 Oct. 1934.

⁴⁶ Letter to Federal Council, 5 Oct. 1934.

⁴⁷ Letter to Federal Council, 2 Aug. 1938.

⁴⁸ Letter to the Secretary of the Cape Musicians' Association, 5 May 1930, referring to the Capitol, Sydney, and the State, Melbourne.