

'Preparing to Exhibit': Frederick Cowen in the Public Press Preceding Melbourne's Centennial International Exhibition, 1888–89

Jennifer Royle

Melbourne's most ambitious celebratory event of the nineteenth century, the 1888 Centennial International Exhibition, celebrated not only one hundred years since white settlement in Australia but also the self-conscious assertion that the colony had reached a significant stage on the path to full industrial and artistic development. Indeed, the act of displaying progress in the form of an International Exhibition was to comment on the perceived strengthening of Australia's position within the Western world. The *Argus*, on 31 July 1888, (the eve of the Exhibition) wrote:

The International Exhibition appears to be permanently adopted as the fit and proper mode of celebrating the centenary of great national events. The occasion of the Philadelphia Exhibition was the centenary of the declaration of the independence of the United States; the French are about to commemorate the outbreak of that world's earthquake—their Revolution; and we are in the current when we call attention to the Centenary of the birth of Australia in the same fashion.¹

For music historians, the Centennial International Exhibition is important for its orchestral and choral concert series directed by English conductor and composer, Sir Frederick Cowen. Born January 1852, Cowen had shown talent in composition from the age of six and was a piano concerto soloist in his early teens. At the age of thirteen he received further training in Leipzig and in 1867 studied conducting at the Stern Conservatorium in Berlin. On his return to London in 1868 he composed a symphony and a concerto both of which received performances. Although better known for his compositions, by the 1880s he had obtained considerable experience as a conductor and prior to his Australian visit, had conducted several concerts for the London Philharmonic Society, a position he took up permanently on his return to England in 1889.²

¹ *Argus* 30 July 1888: 7.

² A. J. Fuller-Maitland, "Cowen, Sir Frederick Hymen," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* 1904 ed.

To engage the services of such a notable musician, the Australian authorities were willing to pay an enormous price. Endorsed by Exhibition Commissioner, George Leavis Allan, and Exhibition Vice President and Treasurer, Sir Frederick Sargood, Cowen's demand of £5000 was met on the condition he remained Musical Director for the duration of the Exhibition. Accompanying Cowen were fifteen professional English instrumentalists whose role was to support the locally formed Centennial Orchestra. Local instrumentalists were recruited by Alberto Zelman and George Peake. With Cowen's additional players, the Centennial Orchestra numbered seventy-three.³

The Centennial International Exhibition opened on 1 August 1888 and continued until 9 March 1889. The total attendance figures amounted to 2,003,593. During this time Cowen directed 263 concerts—211 were orchestral, thirty were partly choral, and the remaining twenty-two were popular concerts, consisting of operatic excerpts and ballads. Attendance figures for the Exhibition concerts amounted to 467,299 which was, according to the *Official Record*, twenty-four per cent of the total attendance.⁴

The organisation of such a long series of concerts has sometimes been used as a natural starting point for the history of orchestral music in Australia. It has been stated that the effect of Cowen's higher musical standards 'swayed the public mind' and that after 1888 'music ceased to be treated as a diversion.'⁵ Yet the largely positive response to these concerts can readily be linked to Cowen's reception into the colony before the actual Exhibition opening. The Exhibition Commissioners and the public press leant heavily on the central theme of cultural progress to justify Cowen's presence in the colony, and kept the public well-informed of his engagement, arrival and activities during the months prior to the Exhibition opening, generating widespread expectations and desires. According to a report in the *Official Record*, the Exhibition Commissioners 'anticipated that not only would [the] concerts be a source of pleasure to those visiting the Exhibitions, but that the stimulation of a love of good music for its own sake, and the consequent elevation of the public taste would amply repay the expenditure that would necessarily be incurred.'⁶ Rather than Cowen's success in the colony being solely the result of public enthusiasm for orchestral music, the story of the Exhibition concerts may have been substantially prescribed well before the Exhibition opening. This article will therefore focus on a range of press reports relating to Cowen directly preceding the Exhibition's opening ceremony, and will also consider how his presence in the colony related to the official aims of the Exhibition.

Melbourne had seen other organised music festivals, especially during the 1880 International Exhibition for which the Victorian Exhibition Building was designed. The 1888 Exhibition differed, however, in that it made both music and art symbols of progress, refinement and the

³ Peter Game, *The Music Sellers* (Melbourne: The Hawthorn Press, 1976) 83–85. George Leavis Allan, (1826–1897), founder of the Melbourne music warehouse, Allan and Co., was a member of Fine Art Committee and the Ceremonial Committee for the Exhibition. His son, George Clarke Allan, (1860–1934), is believed to have first suggested the engagement of Cowen.

⁴ *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition, Melbourne, 1888–1889* (Melbourne: Executive Commissioners, 1890) 303.

⁵ Thérèse Radic, "Some Historical Aspects of Musical Associations in Melbourne, 1888–1915," PhD diss., U Melbourne, 1978, 47.

⁶ *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition*, 259.

maturation of public taste. To foster appreciation for orchestral music and fine arts within the general public was to demonstrate to the world that the nation was ready for its next stage of development. As one daily newspaper commented:

The slowness of artistic as compared with the industrial development involves no disparagement to the colony, and no slur upon those who attempt to render the best works of European musicians or who endeavour to carry out the principles of the most famous schools of art. It is the law of history and of evolution. The tree must come to a certain age before it can carry the full burden of its fruit: the man must establish himself in life before he has time for mental culture; and so the nation must come to some maturity before it can develop an art of literature that is distinctively its own.⁷

Press coverage of the arrival of Cowen and his group of instrumentalists from England amplified this theory of cultural evolution, not only to international visitors but to the Australian public as well. Almost every day the public received information about Cowen and the progress made by the musicians of the Centennial Exhibition. With Cowen came the guarantee of "first-class" concerts. The press thoroughly supported these assurances, unanimously championing Cowen as being superior in matters of musical direction to those locally available. Even *Table-Talk*, considered by visiting French critic, Oscar Comettant the 'most daring and characteristic of colonial atmosphere,'⁸ wrote the following of Cowen's musical direction:

After hearing Mr. Cowen's Exhibition Orchestra, I am perfectly satisfied that the talented conductor is not alone not overpaid—but that £5,000 is quite inadequate for his ten months' services. The Australian public have never before heard anything equal to the orchestration produced under Mr. Cowen's baton...He appears to you as a real "master" or rather as a most exacting schoolmaster, who will not allow the slightest mistake to pass without correction.⁹

Similarly, on the opening day of the Exhibition, the *Age* newspaper informed readers that 'a new era in music commences from to-day, and the concerts to be given during the next six months daily, and sometimes even more frequently, may be expected to contribute greatly to the enlightenment of the public as to what is excellent, and to the advance of general musical culture.'¹⁰ The impact of such a statement, where one is told of a "new era" and of the presence of indisputable excellence, would have been widespread. According to a circulation report printed on 19 June 1888, the *Age* newspaper was selling 76,484 copies per day.¹¹ This made it

⁷ *Argus* 2 Aug. 1888: 7.

⁸ Oscar Comettant, *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines*, trans. Judith Armstrong (Melbourne: Rigby Press, 1980) 221.

⁹ *Table-Talk* 27 July 1888: 1.

¹⁰ *Age* 1 Aug. 1888: 13.

¹¹ *Age* 19 June 1888: 5.

the most widely read newspaper in Victoria and, according to Comettant, the 'organ of the working classes.'¹² Furthermore, press commentary and reviews of the musical preparations for the Exhibition held considerable authority. Melbourne theatre critics during the 1880s were, according to Ken Stewart, more informed and influential than their Sydney counterparts and reflected a 'serious intellectual commitment to guidance of public taste, an informed awareness of dramatic convention and recent experiment.'¹³ Preliminary studies into the role of the Melbourne's music press reveal that music critics were also aware of their position within wider issues of public instruction and political and national concerns for cultural advancement.¹⁴ Such issues shaped much of the contemporary discourse surrounding the Centennial Exhibition, itself a mammoth educational display showcasing imperial certainty and colonial progress. By placing Cowen so prominently within the framework of perceived "high culture," critics endorsed the Exhibition's educative design to engender widespread artistic appreciation.

Prior to the Exhibition opening, performances of Cowen's compositions were paid particular attention by the press, who invariably used them to support Cowen's engagement as musical director of the Exhibition. On the 21 May 1888, Cowen's cantata, *The Rose Maiden*, was performed by the Metropolitan Liedertafel. The cantata was written in 1870 when Cowen was only eighteen years old, a fact that is regarded as highly important by the critics in their reviews. A comparison of reviews from three daily newspapers reveals that each contains the same broad message despite differences in length. The critic for the *Daily Telegraph* wrote:

The musical feast provided for the hearers of "The Rose Maiden" is (to borrow a good metaphor) all dessert and no dinner...In short, the work is "nice" and "pleasing", but not much more. The constant recurrence of 6/8 time becomes tiring, and the rhythms employed are often of a character which must tend to offhandedness and vulgarity in the cleverest composer.¹⁵

From this we would assume that the work was not a good promotion for the anticipated musical events of the Exhibition. Yet further into the review, the critic reflects upon the age of Cowen at the time of composition and manages to turn what seemed negative into positive overtones by telling readers how much development has occurred since:

It would be a mistake for the public to suppose that this cantata represents Mr Cowen as he is. Speaking from personal experiences of the composer and his greater works, we can assure them that the development to be noticed by the time we come to his better symphonies, is surprising. There are, perhaps, only a

¹² Comettant, *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines*, 223.

¹³ Ken Stewart, "The Colonial Literati in Sydney and Melbourne," *Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends. Essays in Australian Cultural History*, ed. Susan Dermody, John Docker and Drusilla Modjeska (Malden, Vic.: Kibble Books, 1982) 181.

¹⁴ Jennifer Royle, "'Guiding Lights' An investigation of Two Melbourne Music Critics and Melbourne Music Criticism from 1870 to 1889." BMus(Hons) diss., U Melbourne, 1995. See in particular Alfred Plumpton's article "Music Critics and Criticism," *Victorian Review* 5 (1881–82): 730, and Henry Keily, "The Tendency of Popular Taste and How to Elevate It," *Victorian Review* 1 (1879–80): 813.

¹⁵ *Daily Telegraph* 22 May 1888. Liedertafel Scrapbook 1874–1891. Melbourne Liedertafel Collection. Box 1.

few composers who could write the "Rose Maiden" at eighteen and, in a man of Mr Cowen's deserved eminence, it is chiefly interesting historically from the fact that he, who has made such strides since, did write it.¹⁶

The slightly shorter review in the *Age* also emphasises this developmental theme but in a less obvious way. Giving the work praise for its 'elegance' and reflection of 'refined taste', the reviewer also comments on a lack of 'depth or feeling' and of the occasional 'monotonous orchestration.' Again this is justified by adding that 'as the production of a youth of eighteen, [the work] gives ample evidence of the talent which has since been so largely developed.'¹⁷ The review in the *Argus*, however, avoids any overt musical judgements but instead provides a detailed synopsis of the poem and brief commentary on the keys and tempo of each section. Yet the end of the review subtly refers to how the Melbourne public are now able to anticipate Cowen's musical development through the performance of this cantata:

It is the graceful composition of a young and warm-hearted musician, and it is well that we should have heard it, so that in the near future we shall be better able to judge of the products of his more mature genius, from larger forces, and under his own personal direction.¹⁸

From these reviews it is evident that all three critics used the performance as a platform for the Exhibition concerts by emphasising the development of Cowen's musical talent. The presentation of an evolutionary or developmental theme with regard to an individual, complemented the ideology that with the Centennial celebrations came the opportunity to declare a "higher" cultural identity. The critics' focus on Cowen's musical development highlights the supposition that time could develop artistic merit, provided talent existed in the first place. Applied on a national level, this differed little from the educational premise of the Exhibition itself. By applying the idea that passing time must necessarily result in creative development, critics appealed to wider perceptions that the colony had developed to a such a degree that it was now time for standards in artistic culture to be raised. The mature and experienced Cowen embodied these sentiments to the public.

No less revealing was Cowen's honorary appearance as the finalist judge at the Juvenile Exhibition which immediately preceded the Centennial Exhibition. The Juvenile Exhibition prompted optimistic national forecasts in the press throughout July, and readers were flooded with visions of tomorrow's nation. The *Argus* on 1 August 1888, expressed the view that:

For today it is sufficient to remember that this great territory, with all its possibilities is to be occupied by the one people, with the one code of laws, the one faith, the one tongue. They will have the same literature, the same aims, and

Held in the Grainger Museum, Melbourne.

¹⁶ *Daily Telegraph* 22 May 1888. Liedertafel Scrapbook 1874-91.

¹⁷ *Age* 22 May 1888. Liedertafel Scrapbook 1874-91.

¹⁸ *Argus* 22 May 1888. Liedertafel Scrapbook 1874-91.

the same sovereign, and consequently so far as human foresight can conceive they are assured of peace and of the progress which peace brings with it.¹⁹

The Juvenile Exhibition showed the public the achievements of the younger generation who would become the possessors of this ever-improving nation. The display of talent and progress of the next generation was an important precursor to the Centennial Exhibition. Like the Centennial Exhibition, the notion of musical progress was made a prominent feature through performance competitions for individuals and school groups. On 17 July, the *Age* reported speeches made by Cowen (who distributed the prizes) and Mr. G. B. Allen.²⁰ Both stressed elements of progress, Allen claiming that most faults were caused by performers being 'too ambitious,' seeking to 'play beyond their capacity.' The article then states that Cowen, 'referring to the progress of musical education in Victoria, said he was gratified to find that it had reached an advanced stage, so far as he could judge in the very limited time he had had of making himself acquainted with the colony.'²¹ To create a nation of unity and shared goals, it was necessary to instil these standards in the new generation. Having someone of Cowen's status judging the musical talent of Victorian youth served to reinforce progress being made in the development of national artistic culture and of unified tastes. That such events were recorded in the daily press shows how journalists used Cowen as a "high" culture icon to impress upon their readers the existence of cultural development.

But just how effective was this message of national development? It seems that not everyone was convinced by the claims of progress urgently voiced as the Exhibition grew nearer. Even the press, which was generally supportive of the Exhibition, had reservations about the state of preparations and two weeks before the opening were calling to postpone for another month, describing the scene as one of 'dire confusion and chaos.'²² Two days prior to the Exhibition this description was altered somewhat, the press now presenting a picture of fervour and excitement, a type of organised hustle and bustle that would hopefully restore public confidence for the event:

Ponderous masses of machinery are being whipped about like toys; bronze statues or vast wine barrels are being hoisted to their appointed places; foundations are being sunk for heavy showcases; an army of carpenters is sawing and planing at decorative work; goods packed in wood, canvas or paper are throwing off their coverings and passing from the chrysalis stage of existence to that of full blown butterflyhood.²³

¹⁹ *Argus* 1 Aug. 1888: 6–7.

²⁰ Mr G. B. Allen may have been George Boyce Allen, son of politician and philanthropist Sir George Wigram Allen (1824–1885). See *Australian Dictionary of Biography* Vol. 3, 1851–1890 (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne UP, 1988).

²¹ *Age* 17 July 1888: 9.

²² *Age* 18 July 1888: 7.

²³ *Age* 30 July 1888: 5.

From this we can see that the press was supportive of the Exhibition, yet to report that it was not sufficiently on schedule only two weeks before the opening must have reduced the effectiveness of the Exhibition's message.

Certain aspects of the Exhibition, however, could not be induced to go away. One notable example was the Switch-Back railway, an amusement considered by many as being of strictly non-educational value. Numerous complaints appeared in the press by those who feared that this and other such popular entertainments would interfere with the educative potential of the Exhibition. One objector, who signed themselves as 'Perplexity' wrote:

Having lately returned from England, I know something about switch-back railways, and whilst admitting they are very pleasant things to ride on, and highly remunerative to the proprietors, they are very objectionable, owing to the noise they make, and if the commissioners desire to have their music properly heard, they will have the railway located as far as possible from the concert rooms.²⁴

Such complaints were defended by the press, resulting in the offending structure being moved further away from the building. This did not, however, diminish the attractiveness of the switch-back railway for the public who continued to board it at an astonishing rate of 2600 per day.²⁵

Similarly, for music, the theme of cultural progress did not capture the public's imagination as much as the Exhibition Commissioners had anticipated. Despite the presence of Cowen, attendance at the Exhibition dropped after the initial two months, and according to the *Official Record* 'even the paintings and the music ceased, after a while, to delight the eyes and charm the ears of the many.'²⁶ Of the Exhibition concerts one newspaper lamented:

The general public seem to place a higher estimate upon the value of the brass band and sigh for those strains of martial music to which they can promenade in comfort. The executives, however, seem to think that, having paid so high a figure for really good music, the least they can do is to coerce the public into listening to it by giving them as little as possible of the inferior article.²⁷

'Really good music' according to the *Age* critic, after attending a rehearsal of the Exhibition Orchestra, consisted of orchestral works by Schubert, Wagner, and Beethoven; sections of ballet music by Gounod and Delibes; choral music from Cowen's own cantata, *Song of Thanksgiving* (written especially for the opening of the Exhibition), as well as a portion of his oratorio *Ruth*. The programme finally ended with Mendelssohn's *Hear My Prayer*. Readers were assured that Cowen had 'his forces under splendid control' and that 'under his quiet and dignified, yet masterly direction, the minutest attention was given to every shade of expression.'²⁸

²⁴ *Argus* 24 July 1888: 9.

²⁵ *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition*, 272.

²⁶ *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition*, 272.

²⁷ *Australian Illustrated News* (Supplement) 18 Sept. 1888: 166.

²⁸ *Age* 26 July 1888: 7.

Such coercing, however, did not manage to draw the public's attention away from the more spectacular musical entertainments. Throughout July and August 1888, Melbourne audiences had a varied choice of musical entertainments such as the productions of Amy Sherwin's English Opera Company, a series of concerts by the Lynch Family Bell Ringers and male-only smoke nights presented by the Metropolitan Liedertafel. Yet it was a burlesque group from England, the London Gaiety Burlesque Company, starring Nellie Farren and Fred Leslie, that drew the largest audiences. Crowds flooded to see the production of *Miss Esmeralda*, a story very loosely based on Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris*, which continued throughout July and August. The amusement journal *Lorgnette*, believed that 'no description of the burlesque can convey to the reader the splendour and magnificence of the production.'²⁹ The music, composed by the conductor Herr Meyer Lutz, consisted of twenty-five original songs, all of which were described as 'fresh, bright and sparkling.'³⁰ These were combined with stunning effects and novel staging. In act two, during 'The Prison Scene':

A novel chorus is sung; each male prisoner puts his head out of a trap in his door and joins in a chorus led by the female turn-keys and cleaners...Another feature in the production is an original and very attractive ballet, representing a game of pyramids, in which Miss Letty Lind, as the white ball, gracefully dances into the midst of the reds and manages to pocket them in the most approved fashion.³¹

The immense popularity of the production is revealed by the extraordinary scenes that took place when tickets went for sale at Nicholson's music warehouse on 17 July 1888. The *Argus* reports from 'One who was there':

As eleven o'clock drew near, the crowd, which had grown to large proportions, became unmanageable. With the scrambling and pushing and the heat, women fainted, and limp and clinging were dragged out of the crush. Brave and strong men jostled the few ladies more like wild beasts scrambling for food than human beings. Hats were crushed, coat sleeves torn, bonnets destroyed and dresses nearly dragged off the wearer's backs. The men smashed the brass rails and woodwork in front of the ticket office, and broke chairs in their endeavours to reach over the crowd in front, and when Mr Nicholson's manager suggested they were not behaving like gentlemen, some stripped off their coats in order to convince him that they were.³²

One could conclude from this scene that the people who were intent on going to *Miss Esmeralda* were those who would benefit most from the "high-class" concerts at the Exhibition. Certainly

²⁹ *Lorgnette* 3 Aug. 1888: 2.

³⁰ *Argus* 23 July 1888: 8.

³¹ *Lorgnette* 3 Aug. 1888: 2.

³² *Argus* 17 July 1888: 7.

such an amusement-derived production was far removed from the rather lofty ideals of the Exhibition and its concert programmes of Beethoven and Wagner. Yet appearing directly beneath the report of Cowen's choral and orchestral rehearsal in the *Age*, is a reminder that :

A special performance of *Miss Esmeralda* will—by Vice-Regal command—take place at the Princess's Theatre on the evening of Tuesday next, commencing at a quarter-past eight. The Governors of all the Australian colonies are to be present, and will occupy a portion of the dress circle, specially reserved as a vice-regal box.³³

The evening of 'Tuesday next' happened to be the eve of the opening of the Centennial Exhibition. The fact that Sir Henry Loch saw the production as a suitable demonstration of Melbourne's cultural offerings to the visiting dignitaries and Governors suggests that *Miss Esmeralda* did not only appeal to one portion of society but to several, spreading across class boundaries. To have the Victorian Governor, the most highly esteemed member of society, supporting the production in such a manner, must have hampered, or at least partly reduced, the effectiveness of the "high" culture theme epitomised by the engagement of Cowen.

On close inspection, Cowen's true contribution to Melbourne's musical culture becomes less clear. Certainly Melbourne had never seen such a long series of orchestral and choral concerts before and for some this did bring about a greater understanding and appreciation for European "high" art music. Novelist Ada Cambridge, for example, returned many times to the Exhibition concerts, later reflecting that she 'learned to be a Wagnerite, after several unsuccessful attempts.'³⁴ The establishment of the Victorian Orchestra, built from the remnants of the Centennial Orchestra, suggests that support for a permanent orchestra increased following the Exhibition concerts, particularly amongst an influential and wealthy minority.³⁵ It is difficult, however, to accurately define how far-reaching these reactions were and whether Cowen's higher standards actually shaped musical tastes. As Graeme Davison points out, nineteenth-century Exhibitions left behind seemingly endless lists of figures and statistics but such lists can often be misleading.³⁶ The attendance figures for the Exhibition concerts do not necessarily indicate continued support since mostly admission was free, allowing visitors to come and go as they pleased. The actual quality of the concerts also remains open to speculation. Much has been made of the poor acoustic quality which, with the additional sounds of crowds shuffling past, would have made the concert experience less than ideal.³⁷ These limitations alone suggest discrepancies between

³³ *Age* 26 July 1888: 7.

³⁴ Ada Cambridge, *Thirty Years in Australia*, Intro. M. Bradstock and L. K. Wakeling (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales UP, 1989) 156.

³⁵ Thérèse Radic has researched extensively the development of the Victorian Orchestra and its brief existence. See Thérèse Radic, "The Victorian Orchestra 1889–1891: In the Wake of the Centennial International Orchestra, Melbourne, 1888," *Australasian Music Research* 1 (1996): 13–102.

³⁶ Graeme Davison, "Festivals of Nationhood: the International Exhibitions," *Australian Cultural History*, ed. S. L. Goldberg and F. B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge UP in association with the Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1988) 172.

³⁷ See Mimi Colligan, "More Musical Entertainments" *Victorian Icon: The Royal Exhibition Building, Melbourne*,

official accounts of music at the Exhibition and the actual experience of those attending free concerts whilst visiting the Exhibition.

A history of Cowen and the Centennial concerts should not be separated from the history of the Exhibition itself, either physically or ideologically. International Exhibitions existed in an environment of thinly disguised competitiveness between hosting nations and colonies; they displayed the materials and culture of other nations and also put the hosting nation on display. Cowen's engagement made a substantial statement to the International community that the colony could appreciate European "high" art music. This statement was made when Cowen was engaged as the Exhibition's Musical Director, both before he arrived and before the concerts were given. Melbourne's press played an important role in introducing Cowen to the public and, prior to the opening of the Exhibition, helped to prepare audiences by placing him within the Exhibition's message of national cultural development. Attention given to Cowen by the press preceding the Exhibition indicates that the public were expected to support the cultural aims of the Exhibition, and that this support was generated well before the concerts were given. Although Cowen's musical direction must have contributed towards his success in the colony, the public response to his image as a gift-bearer of "high" culture adds an important perspective to our understanding of how Melbourne actually sustained such a long series of concerts.

ed. David Dunstan (Kew, Vic.: The Exhibition Trustees, 1996) 214–218, which details the attempts made by Cowen and the Exhibition Commissioners to improve continual acoustic problems. Improvements included building partitions separating the concert area from the main Exhibition, and adding a false ceiling.