

The Ormond Chair of Music at The University of Melbourne: An introduction to its origins.¹

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History is a most selective form of memory, and music history is no exception. In Australia, the problem of selective historical memory is heightened by music history's entrenched place to date on the periphery of wider cultural and historical concerns. In particular, histories of the development of music education in this country are few in number and narrow in scope. Yet the emergence of music-teaching institutions and their developing educational philosophies have had a profound impact on musical culture in this country. Their respective underlying educational philosophies also reflect and sometimes encapsulate wider societal values. It is the purpose of this essay to examine the origins of one such teaching institution, the Conservatorium of Music at The University of Melbourne, and the motives of the wealthy grazier and patron, Francis Ormond MLC (1829-1889), who on 2 May 1887 handed over a sum of £20,000 to the university and thereby effectively founded the present day Faculty of Music. Despite its impact, the reasons behind Ormond's gift have remained largely unexplored. Moreover, his gift was to generate vigorous and far-reaching debate as to the nature and purpose of music education in a society. The outcome of this debate largely determined the form of the new Conservatorium, which was at the time 'unique in the Universities of the British Empire'.²

The City of Melbourne in the 1880s, wherein these events take place, was indeed worthy of the adjective 'marvellous'. In population, greater Melbourne had reached one million, making it about the thirtieth largest city in the world. It was 'fast catching Buenos Aires as the most populous city of the Southern Hemisphere, was larger than Birmingham, Boston and most European capitals, and was the seventh city of the Empire behind London, Bombay, Calcutta, Glasgow, Liverpool and Manchester'.³ An observer of Victorian society writing as early as 1868 commented that the

any community upon earth. Judged by every test, they are richer than any other known population or State of the same extent.⁴

One byproduct of this relative affluence and the consequent high standard of living was a general increase in available leisure time. Recreation became an important part in the life of the Victorian colonists.⁵ This is no doubt reflected in the enormous popularity of spectator sports; perhaps it also partly explains a smaller but no less marked growth in musical activity. The colony of Victoria, more than any other in Australia, became home for literally thousands of amateur musical groups.⁶

However, prior to the establishment of substantial higher music education, general standards in the new colony were low and were the focus of derision by visiting musicians.⁷ Before the 1880s, many partial attempts had been made to regulate and control the music education that was available. There were institutions, such as the Musical Association of Victoria, and the Melbourne School of Music, which offered certificates and diplomas of certain grades to those musical aspirants who 'desired to have something tangible to show for years of study'.⁸ There were also many teachers who did not recognise the authority of such institutions and simply issued certificates of their own invention to their pupils.⁹

Professional music making at the time of Ormond's benefaction was focused upon the two major exhibitions held in Melbourne, in 1880 and 1888. For the latter exhibition, a major music festival was organised, an astonishing achievement including more than 260 concerts covering the standard repertory.¹⁰ Of more lasting significance, however, were the many forms of amateur music making which existed concurrently, particularly choral. The Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society, for instance, began in 1853. It grew out of the tradition of English choral music, what Covell has called the 'true nucleus of formal music making'¹¹ that had found its way to Victoria with

people of Victoria, in all worldly circumstances, are perhaps the most favoured of

the British colonists. In its founding year, forty members gave a performance of Handel's *Messiah*. By 1860 the society had given 200 concerts, a sign of its phenomenal success in fulfilling the demands of the local populace.¹² By 1884, the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society could number amongst its patrons the Hon. Francis Ormond M.L.C., a man who was soon to be pivotal in shaping the future character of music education in Melbourne.¹³

In most of the standard texts on the history of Victoria, the name of Francis Ormond is rarely mentioned, even in passing.¹⁴ Yet he was a philanthropist the like of whom Australia has rarely seen, both in terms of sheer generosity and vision. Before directing his attention to music, Ormond had been hard at work bringing forth Ormond College and the Working Mens' College (later RMIT). He brought to these and other projects a traditionally Scottish belief in the utilitarian value of accessible education. It seems that what first attracted him to music education in particular was the common Victorian opinion that an appreciation of good music was of moral benefit. In Britain at least, music education had been viewed for some time as something which

weaned the mind from vicious and sensual indulgences; and if properly directed, [had] a tendency to incline the heart to kindly feelings, and just and generous emotions.¹⁵

Ormond formed a plan to found a school of music in Melbourne at the same time as similar institutions emerged in Britain; he had taken a close personal interest in the foundation of the Royal College of Music, London, in 1882. Two years later, on 17 December 1884, at the annual speech day gathering of Scotch College in the Atheneum theatre:

Mr F. Ormond, M. L. C., intimated that he intended, when he next visited Europe, to inspect, if possible, some colleges or *conservatoires* of music, and, if his observations sufficiently encouraged him to do so, he would be pleased to aid in the establishment of a college of music here. He thinks that such an institution ought to be provided for £20,000 or £30,000, and he intimated that he would be prepared to contribute no small share of that amount if the idea finds acceptance with the people.¹⁶

The announcement quickly spread and awakened a lively interest in the city, particularly in the press. *The Age* speculated as to Ormond's motives:

The value of music as a regenerating social influence has evidently impressed the Hon. FRANCIS ORMOND. It can scarcely be, that for the purpose of increasing idle pleasure or mere enjoyment, he was tempted to announce his generous intention of assisting liberally in founding a college of music in Victoria, should his observations encourage him to believe the results from such an institution are worthy of striving for. Mr. ORMOND, in common with most thoughtful persons, looks forward to occupation to divert the minds of the younger generation from evil. He considers, as they do, the successful cadet system as an antidote to larrikinism, and his mention, in almost the same breath, of the sentiment that increased attention should be paid to music, shows that he also looks to that divine art to accomplish a measure of social reform. In England the fact is receiving distinguished recognition, and numerous attempts have been made by ladies and gentlemen having the welfare of the people at heart to draw the lower and, as has been tried in some cases, even the criminal classes, within the magic circle of pure artistic enjoyment.¹⁷

On the invitation of Ormond, a meeting of interested parties was held on 29 January 1885 in the Melbourne Town Hall.¹⁸ During this meeting, it was generally agreed that the colony was not yet ripe for the establishment of a college of music, and would be better served by founding a Chair of Music at the university, with scholarships attached.¹⁹ Ormond supported the change for several reasons. He was not prepared to give more than £20,000 to the project, while the minimum cost of founding a school of music had been estimated at beginning at around £40,000. The public support necessary to raise the difference was not forthcoming. That support was necessary because Ormond was not prepared to create an institution that could not capture the public's imagination, demonstrated by the procurement of generous subscriptions. A Chair of Music operating through the university also presented a more efficient means of raising the standard of music education than would have been possible through

the creation of yet another separate music-teaching institution.

For the subsequent two years, a controversy raged between various individuals and factions of the Melbourne music scene. The public correspondence published in the leading newspapers of the time gives a wonderful insight into the motives and ideals that were at work in the musical life of the colony. Time and time again, an increasingly exasperated Ormond had to justify his actions to what must have seemed at times an ungrateful, if not hostile, public.

Following the publication of a letter by Mr E. Hartung, who proposed using the money for a 'grand orchestra for Melbourne',²⁰ the editorial view of one leading Melbourne newspaper, the *Argus*, swung dramatically from support for Ormond's project to veiled hostility. Hartung's letter supported arguments for an orchestra by implying that musical studies through the university would be necessarily elitist, an appeal to colonial egalitarian values that no doubt would have found support in a readership which was known to be suspicious of intellectual activity.²¹

The subsequent extraordinary partiality of the *Argus*, whilst perhaps not unusual for the time, suggests that it had been influenced by 'certain music teachers' who evidently thought that the endowment of a professorship of music, with its corollary interests, would prejudice their own.²² Much of the opposition to the Chair seems to have arisen from teachers who assumed their interests would have been better served by a school of music. This is not surprising, since a school of music would have seen the addition of several new and well-paid teaching positions. A Chair of Music, on the other hand, created a position of great influence for the benefit of one individual. It necessarily upset the status quo and undermined the comfortable and well-entrenched positions of local musicians.

It was always Ormond's aim that the foundation of the Chair should be at least partially indebted to some broad-scale manifestation of public support. To this end, he made the gift of £20,000 conditional on the Victorian public raising another £3,000, which was to be used for music scholarships to the university. Continued public squabbling among the existing music institution destroyed any hope of any united effort to raise the money, but a fundraising bazaar held by the Ladies

of the Metropolitan Liedertafel in December 1886 raised the required sum in one extraordinary effort. The Liedertafel obviously did not believe as strongly as others that the creation of the Chair would be prejudicial to the pre-existing music establishment.

His conditions fulfilled, Ormond announced in April 1887 that he would soon hand over to the University the promised sum of money. The *Argus* was quick to respond:

Mr. ORMOND has handed over £20,000 and the responsibility for the musical culture of the future to the University. The gift was gladly accepted; the condition is evidently embarrassing.²³

Repeating an age-old argument that musical studies do not belong in a University, the article continued:

Mr. ORMOND has willed that music shall be added to the arts of the University, and draped in the sombre cap and gown. Under the circumstances, the council could not well refuse, though it is almost the last body that an expert would ask to stand sponsor for the musical education for the colony

The unease the University Council felt in dealing with the prospect of music studies at the university is reflected in the inordinate time it took to fill the newly created Chair; the matter only came to a rest when, at a council meeting on 1 September 1890, George William Louis Marshall-Hall was appointed the first Ormond Professor in Music.²⁴ Ormond, however, did not live to see his last great project come to fruition. In failing health, he had left Australia on 28 December 1888 for France, and died in Pau on 5 May 1889. Perhaps it is just as well, for further controversy, and of a kind that Ormond may well have found much more disturbing, was soon to torment the Chair of Music's first occupant.²⁵

Because he refused to patronise the interests of the musical establishment, Ormond's proposal was easily attacked. He always viewed the Chair, and musical education generally, in a wider context. Perhaps his educational idealism bordered on the naïve, but in the end, it enabled him to implement his vision despite entrenched opposition. Ormond was fully aware of the then exceptional nature of

the position he was creating; he was to ensure, for instance, that the position was to be tenured for periods of only five years. This was in case the professor did not demonstrate 'great ability and teaching power', or, became 'out of touch with the higher musical culture of Europe'.²⁶ Little was he to know that this covenant would precipitate the unceremonious undoing of Marshall-Hall.

The subsequent influence of the Ormond Chair on the educational development of music in Victoria has been decisive and extensive. Through its musical studies gained the permanence, the accessibility and the respectability of association with the University that they might not have otherwise achieved. When Marshall-Hall arrived at the University in 1891, he found that the Chair itself was all that a reluctant University had been willing to provide in the way of a music department. Marshall-Hall had to recruit students and staff and acquire a building, opening the Melbourne University Conservatorium on the corner of Rathdowne and Victoria Streets, Carlton on 28 February 1895.²⁷ Thus this precursor of the present-day Faculty owed its peculiar existence and infrastructure to the Ormond Professorship and the vision of its first occupant. Ormond's gift and the University's initial reticence ensured that standards of musical achievement became subject to the personalities of such figures who were subsequently appointed.²⁸

NOTES

¹ This article draws on material from my B.Mus (Hons) thesis, 'The Foundation of the Ormond Chair of Music', diss., University of Melbourne, 1991.

² Geoffrey Blainey, *A Centenary History of the University of Melbourne* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1957), p. 114. The Faculty was unique in that it combined both academic and practical (conservatorium) studies within a University framework.

³ *Victorian Year Book*, 1892, p. 131; Geoffrey Serle, *The Rush to be Rich: A History of the Colony of Victoria 1883-1889* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1971), pp. 272-273.

⁴ Original reference lost; from Don Garden, *Victoria: A History* (Melbourne: Nelson, 1984), p. 189.

⁵ Garden, *Victoria: A History*, p. 183.

⁶ Geoffrey Blainey, *Our Side of the Country: The Story of Victoria* (Melbourne: Methuen Haynes, 1984), p. 81.

⁷ For instance: Hamilton-Clark, 'Two Years' Music in Australia: A personal narrative by one of the survivors.' Transcript of lecture given in London before the Royal

College of Organists, 5 January 1894. Reprinted in the *Argus*, 17 March 1894; Liedertafel Collection, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne.

⁸ C. S. Ross, *Francis Ormond: Pioneer, Patriot, Philanthropist* (London: Melville & Mullen, 1913), p. 123.

⁹ Source: Letter dated April 9 [1884], signed J. A. S., and published in the *Argus*, Chair of Music Scrapbook, Ormond College (hereafter CMSB), p. 1.

¹⁰ Serle, *The Rush to be Rich*, p. 287.

¹¹ Roger Covell, *Australia's Music: Themes of a New Society* (Melbourne: Sun Books, 1967), p. 17.

¹² W. A. A. Carne, *A Century of Harmony: The Official Centenary History of the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society* (Melbourne: Royal Melbourne Philharmonic Society, 1954), p. 13.

¹³ The others being the Rev Dr Moorhouse, Bishop of Melbourne, and Sir W. J. Clark, Baronet. Report in *Argus* detailing the society's prospectus for 1884; CMSB, p. 2.

¹⁴ There is no mention at all in Blainey's *Our Side of the Country*, or Garden's *Victoria: A History*. Ormond does rate a mention in Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*, vol. 5, and Frank Crowley's *A Documentary History of Australia*; however he is listed in the index as Sir Francis Ormond. The sad irony is that, worthy as he may have been, Ormond was never to receive a knighthood.

¹⁵ From a lecture delivered before the London Mechanics' Institute in 1837 by W. E. Hickson, the 'father of English school music'; E. D. Mackerness, *A Social History of English Music* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 154.

¹⁶ Extract from Editorial, 18 December, 1984; CMSB, p. 3.

¹⁷ Editorial, *The Age*, January 1885; CMSB, p. 3.

¹⁸ 'Musical Professorship & Scholarship', *Argus*, 28 January 1885; CMSB, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, 28 January 1885. CMSB, p. 3.

²⁰ Letter to the editor of the *Argus*, 12 March 1886.

²¹ See, for instance, the early history of the University of Melbourne in Blainey, *A Centenary History*, pp. 1-10.

²² Ernest Scott, *A History of the University of Melbourne* (Parkville: Melbourne University Press, 1936), p. 140.

²³ Leader in the *Argus*, 21 April 1887; CMSB, p. 11a. In the Scrap Book this cutting has been mistakenly dated 'Argus 1886'. The cutting appears on page 11a (page numbers which have been added to the Scrap-Book), suggesting that it was incorrectly inserted at a later date.

²⁴ *Minute Book of the Council of the University of Melbourne*, 1890-92, p. 131. Ormond strenuously opposed the naming of the Chair after himself, but the Council was unmoved. No doubt they hoped to attract like benefactors who wished to save their name for posterity.

²⁵ Thérèse Radic, *G. W. L. Marshall-Hall: Portrait of a Lost Crusader* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1982).

²⁶ Report of the Meeting of the University Council, Monday 16 July 1888, and published in the *Argus*, Tuesday 17 July 1888.

²⁷ Radic, *G. W. L. Marshall-Hall*, p. 20.

²⁸ Thérèse Radic, 'Some Aspects of Musical Associations in Melbourne 1888-1915', diss., University of Melbourne, 1983, p. 150.