

## Where has all the crispy bacon gone?

In an episode of the Goon Show an elderly gentleman rises from his seat in parliament to ask: “Why can’t we get the crispy bacon we used to have before the war?” There is a chorus of “hear, hears” from a dozen or so quavery voices.

This desire to return to the good old days can be found in much of the current debate about the ABC’s alleged failure to adequately cover the arts, and it is particularly evident in an essay by Martin Harrison , *Our ABC, a Dying Culture* (Currency House, 2004). Elisabeth Jacka’s more considered and less overstated report, *Arts Programming on ABC Radio, Television and Online*, commissioned by the CPSU, also falls victim at times.

Before echoing such complaints about the ABC’s arts coverage I think Friends of the ABC should tread carefully.

I have set out to test a number of assertions made by Harrison and Jacka.

1. The ABC is failing its charter obligations with regard to the arts., and ABC arts coverage has declined markedly (Harrison)
2. Informed discussion and debate about the arts is not welcome on the ABC (Harrison)
3. ABC Radio and Television management believe that the word “arts” puts audiences off. They have adopted a policy of “arts by stealth” and when arts material is programmed it will be broadcast out of prime time in some kind of backwater and won’t be clearly identified or vigorously promoted. (Jacka)
4. Most people with a strong interest in the arts are unable to locate specific arts programming on Radio National, or, if they do locate it, don’t find the programs worthwhile because the presenters lack expertise and specialist knowledge. (Jacka)
5. There is insufficient local content in arts programs on ABC TV.(Jacka).

### Marked decline of arts coverage

Harrison begins his essay by saying that the ABC is “not fulfilling its charter obligations in relation to the Australian arts”, and goes on to say “Arts coverage has gone down markedly”. He does not give a specific time frame for this alleged decline in arts coverage, but he does refer in particular to the late 70s and early 80s as a kind of benchmark

*“I recall my sense of what an extraordinary group of playwrights, play producers, literary journalists, and arts and culture feature makers had somehow been assembled there ... there was an engagement with the new, more experimental music community. There was a sense that ABC Radio played a significant role .... In helping develop new writers and arts journalists.”*

On the contrary I would argue that since the early 80s the ABC's coverage of the arts has grown significantly, at least in radio and on the net. Television is a different story – I can see no evidence of growth in arts programming there.

The ABC's arts coverage has grown basically because since that time the number of radio networks has grown from two to five, and the ABC has become available through a new medium, the Internet. In the early 1980s:

- Most regional and rural listeners could not receive Classic FM, an arts network if ever there was one.
- ABC FM first went to air in 1976, but was not available in all capital cities until the early 1980s.
- No listeners outside of Sydney could receive Triple J, another network devoted primarily to music, but also providing coverage of a wide range of the arts.
- Radio National was not available to regional listeners. While Classic FM and Triple J have been ABC radio's major outlet for arts performance, Radio National has been the major outlet for debate and critical review of the arts. In the early 80s regional listeners had to be content with Radio 3, a hodge podge of programs comprising some regionally produced material, some specialist rural information like the Country Hour, some programs from the metropolitan stations and some programs from the precursor of Radio National, then known as Radio 2. Regional listeners now get Radio National, Triple J, Classic FM, Local Radio and, in a small number of regional areas, News Radio
- ABC Online had not even been dreamt of. The Internet was only available to a relatively small number of scientists, academics and military personnel. Recently, when I entered the word "arts" into the Radio National search engine the site returned more than 6000 current live links to information about arts programs on the network.
- Large slabs of metropolitan radio were interrupted by parliament. Parliament is now on its own network, which broadcasts continuous news, including arts news and *ArtyFacts* segments from Phil Kafcaloudes when parliament is not in session. Metropolitan stations now have more time for other programming, including arts programming (although arts programs are not the major part of the metropolitan stations' output).

### **Arts not welcome**

Harrison argues that "informed debate and opinion are acceptable on air in all intellectual areas – except the arts."

Each week Radio National, the main focus of Harrison's attack, broadcasts 47 hours of arts programming, of which a significant proportion can be classified as opinion and debate about the arts ( although some of these programs are repeats). Key programs in this category are *Sunday Morning*, *Movie Time*, *Away!*, *The Deep End*, *Book Talk*, *Lingua Franca*, *Books and Writing*. In addition Local Radio, News Radio and Triple Jay all discuss and debate issues relating to the arts, although (with some exceptions such as Peter Clark's specialist arts program in Melbourne) these issues are mostly covered in

general programming, where arts is examined alongside politics, sport, business, and a full range of issues, rather than in dedicated arts slots.

### **Arts by stealth**

Harrison quotes from Elisabeth Jacka's report *Arts Programming on Radio, Television and Online*,

*"The explicit strategy espoused by Director of Television, Sandra Levy, is 'arts by stealth', seemingly sharing the view of ABC Radio that the word "arts" scares people, although the words 'science', 'law' and 'media' do not. So arts will be smuggled in via other timeslots [...] but it won't be there in prime time in an identified time slot"*

Harrison then comments: *"In other words, the arts will only be mentioned in passing."*

The view here seems to be that in both radio and television arts programs will be broadcast out of prime time in some kind of backwater and won't be clearly identified or enthusiastically promoted.

The suggestion that the Directors of Radio and Television are "anti-arts" does not sit easily with the fact that both have distinguished careers in the arts, Sandra Levy as a highly regarded producer of TV Drama, and as a member of the board of the Sydney Theatre Company, and Sue Howard, Director of Radio, was a well-regarded and well informed presenter of music programs on both Classic FM and Radio National.

While it is true that for the most part News Radio, Local Radio and Triple J discuss the arts in general programming, alongside discussions of politics, sport, economics and other issues, the ABC broadcasts a wealth of clearly identified specialist arts programs.

- In television arts programming has been focused on Sunday afternoons since 1986 – about as close to prime time as you can get. Far from being buried, or "smuggled in via other timeslots" the bulk of ABC TV's arts programming is in this dedicated, highly visible and easily identified slot running from 2.00 pm to 6.30 pm every Sunday afternoon. No person who claimed to be a follower of the arts in Australia could reasonably claim ignorance of such a substantial block of arts programming that has been in basically the same place for nine years. Nor could "middle class, middle aged people who attend arts events at least twice a week" say that the time was inaccessible to them.
- While ABC television focuses its arts output on Sunday afternoon, Radio National has a major block of arts programming on Sunday morning. Both Sunday Morning on Radio National, and Sunday Afternoon on ABC Television, appear prominently on the ABC Arts home page at <http://www.abc.net.au/arts>, and both are prominently featured in the ABC's monthly arts magazine *Limelight*. Both Sunday Morning and Sunday Afternoon are clearly identified as arts programs both in *Limelight* and on the ABC's web site.
- A Melbourne based arts aficionado could wake up to John Cargher's "Singers of Renown", catch the short story reading at 8.30 over breakfast, then at 10.00 turn Radio National back on to hear Julie Copeland's *Sunday Morning* program of

interviews with artists, writers and thinkers. That's immediately followed by Julie Rigg's movie reviews. Alternatively, for a more local flavour, arts audiences can tune to The Sunday Show (10.00 am – 12 noon) on 774 ABC Melbourne, a specialist arts program hosted by the local station's arts reporter, Peter Clark. Pausing for a leisurely lunch the arts enthusiast can switch to television at 2.00 pm for four and a half hours of specialist arts material on Channel 2. If that's not enough to induce an art attack then a nightcap is available at 10.45 pm on Channel 2 with Sister Wendy, who could be described as the David Attenborough of the arts world.

Without listening to either of the ABC music networks (Classic FM, Dig or Triple J), which are arts networks by virtue of the fact that they focus on the broadcast of performance art, just under eleven hours of arts programming are available in Melbourne on a Sunday. Sundays are surely the day when most people have free time.

- The ABC goes to pains to promote and publicise its arts programming through the website. The ABC's arts and culture home page ([www.abc.net.au/arts](http://www.abc.net.au/arts)) leads to pages about film, music, books, regional arts, digital arts, for kids, visual arts, design, performance. Each of these specialist pages in turn link to information about current programs, or to arts material archived on *The Space*. A drop down list shows the key arts programs on both radio and television. The home page also promotes the ABC's Arts Newsletter. Delivered free to subscribers by email each week, the Arts Newsletter dated 18 February 2005 listed more than thirty relevant arts items on radio, TV, or online including arts news, arts features, film reviews, music reviews, book reviews, and theatre reviews.
- On Radio National alone it is possible, between the hours of dawn and 1.00 am, to spend more time listening to arts programs than most people spend working. Without taking into account programming between 1.00 am and 6.00am, when radio audiences are very small, Radio National broadcasts 47 hours of arts programming each week (Note: this is not all original programs – some programs have “alternative listening times” or repeats). I have included as arts programs specialist music programs such as Singers of Renown, Music Deli and The Planet. Not counted as an arts program is the Media Report, which more often focuses on the politics and economics of the media.

### **Arts programs hidden, presenters don't have necessary expertise.**

Elisabeth Jacka writes:

*I have undertaken informal interviews with a reasonably large number of people from two important ABC constituencies. The first are middle-class, middle-aged people who attend arts events at least twice a week, subscribe to opera, ballet, orchestra and theatre events, attend exhibitions and follow arts and culture policy issues closely. In this group not one person uses RN arts programs. The reason given is that they no longer know*

*where to find them and if they occasionally find them, they do not find them compelling because of loss of expertise and falling production values.*

Later she says:

*My perception of dedicated arts consumers is that “grazing” arts coverage will not satisfy their needs. You cannot expect such audiences, for example those interested in new music or acoustic arts, or opera for that matter, to have to listen continually to a station in the hope of hearing something – inevitably brief – that they are interested in.*

In contrast to Harrison, Jacka places the availability of the crispy bacon in the early 90s. 1991 she says, was the start of the ‘glory days’.

Since then the old *24 Hours* has been replaced by the more substantial monthly arts journal, *Limelight*. Surely middle-class, middle-aged people who follow the arts closely can purchase *Limelight*, or browse the ABC web site. Both *Limelight* and the web site provide references to both acoustic arts and opera, audiences do not have to follow the “grazing” approach if they don’t find it effective.

The current (March) issue of *Limelight* has thirty odd pages of arts discussion and review, detailed listings of programs on Classic FM and Radio National plus a page devoted to “the best in arts programming” on ABC television. It also publicises arts programming on ABC 2, the ABC’s new digital television channel which appears to be placing a greater emphasis on arts programs (although many will be “time shifted” from the main channel).

Without spending \$6.95 a month simply pointing your web browser to [www.abc.net.au/arts](http://www.abc.net.au/arts) takes you to a page with a drop down list of all the major dedicated arts programs on ABC radio and television.

### **Acoustic arts**

Both Harrison and Jacka were particularly concerned about lack of coverage of this area. The long running program *The Listening Room* has been dropped from Classic FM, and that is a loss. However simply entering “acoustic arts” into the search box on the ABC web site revealed that the Executive Producer of the ABC Acoustic Arts Unit is Robyn Ravlich. Robyn presents Sunday Night Radio National at 7.00 pm every Sunday, as well as being responsible for the “Eearclips” series of acoustic arts pieces. While Sunday Night Radio National is not devoted exclusively to acoustic arts, there is a strong focus on that area. For example last Sunday’s program featured the following:

**Sunday 13 February 2005**

 [Listen](#)

[The Harbour Breathes](#)

**by Rik Rue**

A meditative liquid sound work recorded early morning and late evening around Sydney harbour.

## Terra Marique

**By Jane Ulman and Russell Stapleton**

A mosaic of sound and voice, following in the footsteps of the poet Shelley whose drowned body washed ashore at Via Reggio in Italy.

## Sea Surface Full of Clouds

A radiophonic reading of Wallace Steven's poem "Sea Surface Full of Clouds", following a journey by the poet and his wife in the 1920s along the Mexican coast to California.

## **Opera**

As for opera I know that not all opera fans are admirers of John Cargher. However he has been on the ABC for forty years and I find it hard to believe that a serious opera fan would not at least know that the program exists.

Even so, entering "opera" in the search box this morning produced:

### **1. Sunday Night Opera [Home]**

**Summary:** ... Sunday Night **Opera**, 7. 05pm From Sunday 2 January to 29 May 2005 at 7. 05pm, ABC Classic FM ... 05pm, ABC Classic FM will broadcast all twenty operas in the 2004-5 Season of the Metropolitan **Opera** of New York plus a couple of rare performances from the archives. ... Botha, tenor Timur: Hao Jiang Tian, bass Metropolitan **Opera** Chorus and Orchestra/Bertrand de Billy Recorded in New York last month by the Metropolitan **Opera** International Radio Network ...

<http://www.abc.net.au/classic/opera/> - 22k - [ html ] - [Cached: 1](#) - 20 feb 2005

By coincidence, as I write this at 11.05am on February 20, Julie Copeland is interviewing the Melbourne based composer of a new Australian opera, *Postcard from Carlton*.

## **Lack of expertise**

Let us now turn to the claim about lack of expertise. Nearly all ABC production and presentation staff are tertiary educated. While many (but by no means all) of the generalist presenters on local radio, ABC TV, or NewsRadio, have no specialist arts qualifications or experience, this is certainly not true for the bulk of presenters of arts material on Radio National or Classic FM.

Here are some details of some of the more prominent presenters on Radio National:

*Poetica* is produced and presented on Radio National by Mike Ladd. Mike joined the ABC as a sound engineer and has worked for many years in the ABC's drama department. He has published three of his own books of poetry, and his work has appeared in a range of journals including *Overland*, *Poetry Australia*, *Southern Review*, *Westerly* and *The Bulletin*.

*Movie Time* is presented by Julie Rigg. Following a successful career in newspaper journalism she joined the ABC some thirty years ago. Julie was recently awarded the

prestigious (and at \$15,000, very valuable) Pascall Prize for critical writing, based on her cinema reviews.

*Julie Copeland*, presenter of Sunday Morning on Radio National is also an ABC veteran of nearly thirty years, most of that time as a specialist producer and presenter in the field of literature and art.

*Robyn Ravlich*, another ABC veteran is also a published poet. She was Executive Producer of the much-awarded *The Listening Room*, and was awarded the Human Rights Award for radio in 2004.

*Books and Writing* is presented by Ramona Koval, a freelance columnist and feature writer for newspapers and the author of one novel and three books of non-fiction. The new edition of her book *Jewish Cooking, Jewish Cooks* was published in March 2002 and has been sold to the UK. Ramona is currently on the board of *Australian Book Review*, and on the Victorian Premier's Literary Award Advisory Committee and the Asialink Awards Literary Committee. She has judged the radio section of the Walkley Awards twice, and been a judge of non-fiction of the Victorian Premiers Literary Awards twice, once as chair of the committee. Her interviews are regularly published in transcript in *Australian Book Review*, *Meanjin*, and on the Web. Ramona won the Order of Australia Media Award in 1995. She is the current staff elected member of the ABC board.

### **Not enough Australian produced arts material on television**

I think that Elisabeth Jacka has correctly identified a deficiency here. Currently ABC TV runs 7 hours a week of arts programming. While most of this is at accessible times, 7 hours is not a lot. Jacka reported that her survey of Sunday Afternoon indicated that less than half of it was Australian produced. A quick check of the program guide for March 2005 indicates that the situation has not changed. While the new digital television channel might see more hours of arts material broadcast, it remains to be seen how much will be locally produced and how much will engage with current issues.

### **Conclusion.**

Much of what Martin Harrison writes is unsubstantiated and overstated. We would be unwise to take it at face value. Elisabeth Jacka's report is more considered, and it makes some important observations, but it also makes some significant errors. Both papers tend to reflect a particular internal ABC view.

It is not easy to establish an agreed benchmark as to what is the proper level of arts programming on the ABC. Perhaps what I am suggesting is just as subjective as the views put forward by Harrison and Jacka, but nonetheless I submit that:

- Radio National carries a very large amount of arts discussion and review, and a reasonable amount of arts performance. It covers a wide range and is for the most part of high quality. Radio National's arts presenters and producers are some of the networks longest serving and most accomplished staff. Most

of it is positioned in well-publicised and clearly identified dedicated arts slots. It is not reasonable to describe it as inadequate either in quality or quantity.

- Classic FM, Triple J and Dig, the ABC's music networks are principally concerned with the broadcast of arts performances, although they do contain a degree of arts commentary and review. Given that their output is principally arts performance, again I would argue there are no serious inadequacies, particularly when one considers the range of music performance across the different radio networks.
- Local radio (metropolitan and regional stations) carry a significant amount of arts output including live musical performance, broadcast of recorded music, interviews with authors and a wide range of artists, book reviews, theatre and cinema reviews. Much of this has a local rather than national focus. This is mostly, but not exclusively, at the more popular end of the artistic scale. . (Peter Clark's dedicated Arts program on 774 Melbourne is an exception to this) With some exceptions, arts material on local radio is mixed in with other general coverage, and is not generally found in dedicated arts programs. Since both Radio National and ABC television have dedicated arts "blocks", I suggest it is not necessary for every network to follow this practice. The amount and breadth of arts coverage on Local Radio is recognised by both Harrison (page 11) and Jacka. (page 9)
- The Parliamentary and News Network, more often known as NewsRadio, has a clear brief to present news when parliament is not in session. Within this brief the network covers news about the arts, and also regularly broadcasts mini reviews and short segments by Phil Kafkaloudes known as ArtyFacts.
- ABC Television carries approximately 7 hours of dedicated arts programs per week. Most of this is available at the premium viewing time of Sunday afternoon. The material has a high profile, and is well publicised. However a little less than half is produced in Australia. Both in terms of the overall quantity of material broadcast, and also in terms of locally produced material, the adequacy of arts coverage on television is open to question. It remains to be seen if ABC 2 will be able to improve the situation in television.
- ABC Online carries an extraordinary amount of arts material. Typing "arts" into the search box produces links to more than 6,000 items on the ABC site.
- The ABC publishes a monthly magazine, *Limelight*, which is exclusively devoted to the arts, and to publicizing arts programs on the ABC.
- While the ABC now has a looser relationship with the various State symphony orchestras, they remain legally subsidiaries of the ABC.