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As young artists watch their dreams vanish, our cultural democracy is in peril

[Lyndon Terracini](#)

The artistic director of Opera Australia

The news that Carriageworks has gone into voluntary administration is distressing but for many emerging and mid-career artists whose livelihood hangs by a thread at the best of times, the issue is not about a venue; it is about the art that they feel compelled to make.

[Opera Australia's production of Carmen in January. The arts industry - and especially the next generation of cultural leaders - are confronting a bleak future. *CREDIT: JAMES ALCOCK*]

The art they make can sometimes be difficult and often unpopular. It's the art of young people and it's important for it to be seen and heard. It's experimental art, and in a democratic society every voice has the right to be heard.

This COVID-19 crisis is driving us to a point in our history where we are loading up our children, and most likely our children's children, with massive amounts of debt. One of the consequences is that governments will be resistant to using their reduced financial resources to support new generations of artists who should be at the forefront of the cultural life of our future nation.

This will be effectively denying our children the right to see and hear the art that speaks to their generation, and that speaks to their time.

Many young and emerging artists will have no possibility of earning a living from their art.

They are naturally talented and have spent most of their lives practising and developing their art. Their training has been more intensive and difficult than virtually any other profession; but now, sadly, they see no future. They have devoted their lives, their entire being, to their chosen profession and now most of them will have no choice but to retrain.

SSO head and musicians to take pay cuts due to 'unprecedented' slump

They will need to forget their dream – the dream they have lived with for most of their lives. They have individual artistic and cultural voices that are important to

who we are as Australians in 2020 and beyond ... but their voices are being silenced by the economic devastation of COVID-19.

This crisis is sparing neither the large nor the small artistic endeavour. Opera Australia is a flagship company that had 662,000 attendees in 2019 and sold 540,000 tickets. OA is the only major opera company in the world for which more than 50 per cent of its revenue comes from the box office; that's \$73.6 million in 2019 and that needs to be earned every year.

That success enabled OA to employ 1323 artists and arts workers last year and it does so every year. However, even this extremely successful organisation cannot continue to employ so many artists and arts workers without income from a large number of paying customers. Consequently, the continued closure of theatres will have a devastating effect on Opera Australia and those who rely on it for employment.

Prowling, empire-building Opera House must leave Carriageworks to create its own art

Every industry needs flagship organisations. Without them it cannot function, and every industry needs grassroots organisations and experimental "pointy end" activity. This is what keeps the ecosystem, and in this case the artistic and cultural life of the nation, healthy, open, democratic, creative, provocative and progressive. This experimental "pointy-end R&D" will not have box office success. It will not have 540,000 paying customers. It will be seen as financially risky, but it is important in a civilised society for it to be seen and heard by the enormously diverse sections of our community.

We are now in serious danger of losing our cultural and artistic democracy, which includes the voices of our young people, unless we can find a solution to financing our artistic aspirations for the future.

If businesses had culturally incentivised tax breaks, they would be far more disposed to contributing to the artistic and creative wellbeing of the nation. Then perhaps governments could match those contributions dollar for dollar.

We cannot always rely on, or expect governments to fund everything we do. We all need to play our part, and take some responsibility, but serious tax concessions for artistic and cultural activity for young and emerging artists would make a massive difference.

Our young and emerging artists are confused, disillusioned and struggling to comprehend the enormity of what is happening. All their artistic outlets and income streams have dried up overnight.

The pervading presence of the black dog is a terrifying prospect that haunts many artists, young and old, and the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 have created a perfect storm for depression to develop into a far more dangerous state of mind which has the potential for tragic consequences. It is vitally important for all of us to make sure we do not enter the “dark hall”.

The life of an artist can be difficult at any time, but the effect of this pandemic is imposing a sometimes unbearable weight on already brittle and exhausted minds and bodies.

Consequently, it is of the utmost importance during these darkest of times, to defend and protect our cultural future with everything we have, and to embrace, and reach out, to all of our colleagues, to all of our brothers and sisters.

Lyndon Terracini is the artistic director of Opera Australia.