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<https://www.smh.com.au/culture/music/once-in-a-generation-opportunity-for-new-symphony-centre-in-sydney-20210204-p56zlf.html>

Artists want seat at Macquarie St game of musical chairs

On line as: **'Once-in-a-generation opportunity' for new symphony centre in Sydney**

CULTURAL PLAN

EXCLUSIVE : Linda Morris

A former repository of NSW's public records is to be considered as Sydney's first dedicated centre for orchestras, music ensembles, choirs and freelance musicians.

Facing a dearth of affordable space to play and rehearse, musicians have urged the Arts Minister Don Harwin to turn the Registrar-General's Building near Macquarie St into a symphony centre bringing rehearsal, recording studios, performance and instrument storage spaces under the one roof.

In a report by former prime minister Paul Keating and former Sydney lord mayor Lucy Turnbull, released this week, it was recommended that the sandstone building, which sits next to St Mary's Cathedral, become a cultural institution – possibly a design museum – bookending a revamped cultural precinct akin to New York's Museum Mile. "Sydney is clearly Australia's leading city with an enormous depth in our orchestras and ensembles," Mr Harwin said. They've brought this idea to me over the last few years and it's a concept worth exploring further. " "The Sydney Youth Orchestras is a key part of that ecosystem and they've been the cradle for new talent for almost 50 years. I think it would be great if they finally got a permanent home."

The search for permanent lodgings for Sydney's bespoke orchestras and choirs has been under way since at least 2018.

Small to medium-sized orchestras and ensembles have long struggled to find appropriate rehearsal space to meet the specific needs of the artform and say they lack smaller, commercially viable concert halls to play.

"It's not just about finding space, it's about acoustics and the availability of high-quality instruments," said Omega Ensemble general manager David Boyce, who calls the idea a once-in-a-generation opportunity. "Even something so simple as playing in summer, once it hits 40 degrees we can't play in a space that is not air-conditioned."

A 2020 report by Left Bank Co, obtained by the *Herald*, said the city's smaller orchestras and choirs were reliant on space that was costly to hire, too small, not designed with the right acoustics, or



causing sound issues with neighbours.

“There is concern for the next generation of musicians and small organisations who struggle to find affordable space to rehearse or perform and who are often working from bedrooms with no formal dedicated space,” said the report, which arose out of a roundtable discussion attended by 23 performance companies including the Sydney Youth Orchestras, Four Winds, Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, Omega Ensemble, and Pinchgut Opera.

The accommodation squeeze, the report said, was putting pressure on Sydney Opera House and City Recital Hall with school halls, churches, the Sydney Town Hall and the Seymour Centre serving as overflow

venues. Omega subleases rehearsal spaces from Musica Viva and Opera Australia.

“It impacts on consistency from one project to the next, it impacts on scheduling because those organisations obviously get first priority over their own rehearsal spaces,” Mr Boyce said. “We have to wait in line to see what they are doing and that can be difficult. We are a touring organisation so



A plan to breathe nightlife into Macquarie Street has caught the attention of Sydney Youth Orchestras CEO Mia Patoulios, pictured centre with cellist Alisdair Guiney (left) and violist Alison Eom (right); (above) an artist impression of a revamped Land Titles Building. Photo: Kate Geraghty

there are a lot of moving parts. If we had more certainty, we could plan ahead and extend our activities.”

Sydney Youth Orchestras’ 14 ensembles shifted to Santa Sabina College in 2018 after being given three weeks’ notice to leave its previous lodgings.

“There are three stages we can perform on, two of which cost \$20,000-plus a day which is the Opera House and Town Hall,” chief executive Mia Patoulios said. “We are breeding talented musicians and not giving them anywhere to perform.

“We’ve seen our open programs double in size and our core weekly program

increase by a third in five years but there is absolutely no space.”

Property NSW owns the Registrar-General’s Building and leases it out as office space to government agencies. To repurpose the heritage building would require demolition of a rear 1960s extension and adaption of the core heritage interiors.