

Title: "From Musicians to Cultural Leaders: Empowering the Next Generation"

Samuel Cairnduff – Monash Youth Music Festival AGM

Good evening everyone,

It's a real pleasure to be here tonight at the Monash Youth Music Festival AGM, and to be among a community that believes in the power of music to shape lives.

Tonight, I want to share a simple idea—one that I believe could reshape how we think about youth music education:

What if we nurtured young musicians not just as performers, but as cultural leaders?

We often talk about youth development in terms of technical excellence, ambition, and practice hours. But increasingly, I think we need to talk about leadership—ethical, creative, socially aware leadership—and how young musicians can become powerful voices for change in their communities.

This idea has emerged from my own research into cultural leadership in professional orchestras across Australia. I've been asking questions like:

- What do we expect from our cultural institutions today?
- Is it enough to just perform and educate, or do we expect them to lead?
- What does leadership in the arts actually look like, and who gets to do it?

What I've found is that orchestras—and really, all cultural organisations—are under increasing pressure to be more than artistic providers. They're being asked to engage their communities, take positions on important social issues, and reflect the diversity and complexity of the world we live in. These expectations aren't just from government or funders—they're coming from *audiences*, from *artists*, and from the *next generation*.

One moment that made this shift crystal clear for me was the **2017 Marriage Equality Plebiscite**. Some arts organisations, including orchestras, proudly voiced their support for the YES campaign. Others chose to remain neutral—or silent. That silence spoke volumes. And the public reaction to that silence showed us something: that **cultural organisations are no longer afforded the privilege of neutrality**. Not when the issues at hand are about human rights, justice, and inclusion.

More recently, we've seen this tension emerge again—and again.

The **Melbourne Symphony Orchestra**, which I discuss in my research, faced intense internal and public pressure following their removal of pianist Jayson Gillham, after he referenced Palestinian journalists in a concert dedication. The orchestra's leadership was publicly challenged by its own musicians, leading to resignations, reputational damage, and unresolved legal proceedings.

And then, earlier this year, **Creative Australia's decision to withdraw Khaled Sabsabi and Michael Dagostino** from the 2026 Venice Biennale—after external criticism over a decade-old work—sparked national outcry. This wasn't just a curatorial reversal. It sent a chilling message: that artistic expression is only safe when it's uncontroversial.

In both these cases, the institutions weren't reacting to clear public consensus—they were reacting to perceived risk. And when risk avoidance becomes the guiding principle, *leadership* suffers. Art loses its power to challenge, to interrogate, to provoke thought.

In these cases, what stood out was that silence—the **absence of leadership**—was noticed. And it wasn't acceptable.

I remember speaking to a musician who told me, “*We knew our audience wanted to hear from us—not just musically, but as a voice in their lives.*” That really stuck with me. Because it confirmed what I was starting to believe: performance alone isn't enough. Presence—*social* presence—is now part of the job.

Audiences are now expecting more: for their cultural institutions to stand for something. To take a position on issues that matter. To reflect the communities they serve—not just artistically, but socially and ethically too.

So how do we prepare the next generation to meet this challenge?

That's where programs like **RESONATE** come in—an initiative I've developed with the Australian Youth Orchestra. It's designed to equip emerging musicians not just with performance skills, but with the tools to become *cultural leaders*—to understand the world around them, to speak with purpose, and to create work that makes a difference.

The program looks at themes like: – First Nations representation and cultural protocols
– Neurodivergence and inclusive performance practice
– Gender and leadership in orchestras
– Mental health, community impact, and sustainability
– And crucially: youth voice and empowerment

And these aren't abstract ideas. One session, for instance, looked at how LGBTQI+ musicians can create safer spaces within ensembles—not just through representation on stage, but through conversations, repertoire choices, and inclusive rehearsal environments. These aren't extras—they're core parts of what it means to lead today.

At its heart, **RESONATE** is about asking: *What kind of musician do you want to be?* Not just technically—but ethically, strategically, and socially. Do you want to perform beautifully—or do you want to lead powerfully?

Because leadership in music isn't just about being the loudest voice in the room or getting the solo. It's about generosity. About curiosity. About knowing that your talent can be a bridge to something bigger than yourself.

And that's the leadership we need.

I believe that music has always been a force for social change. Think of El Sistema in Venezuela, or the Chicago Symphony's *Notes for Peace* project. Think of the power of music to break down barriers, to heal communities, and to tell stories that otherwise go unheard.

But leadership in music doesn't only happen at the highest levels. It begins right here—with young musicians, in youth orchestras, in rehearsal rooms like the ones you support through this festival.

Leadership happens when a young person chooses to program a diverse work, or starts a conversation about access, or uses their music to respond to what's happening in the world around them.

Our role—as educators, mentors, supporters—is to make sure they feel equipped to do that.

It means giving them more than repertoire. It means giving them a voice.

Because I believe deeply that cultural leadership is no longer optional. It's expected. Funding bodies, audiences, communities—rightfully—want to know how institutions and individuals are responding to issues of relevance: climate change, equity, reconciliation, wellbeing.

And if we want our future leaders to do that with courage and clarity, we have to give them the frameworks, the language, and the space to practise.

Let's ask the big questions with them: – What does a socially engaged musician look like in 2025?
– How can orchestras be more than performance platforms—how can they be agents of change?
– And how can we turn threshold anxiety—those old fears about elitism, inaccessibility, or not belonging—into confidence, into welcome, into invitation?

That's what cultural leadership makes possible. It's not about imposing one model of how to be a musician. It's about expanding the possibilities of what musicianship means in today's world.

If we do this well, we're not just creating better musicians. We're creating people who will lead with empathy. People who will listen deeply. Who will speak up. Who will know how to collaborate, how to engage across difference, how to create meaning.

And that is something our sector—and our society—urgently needs.

So I return to the idea I began with:

What if every youth orchestra rehearsal was also a leadership laboratory?

What if we treated our young musicians not just as students—but as emerging leaders in the cultural life of this country?

Let's give them the skills. Let's give them the trust. And most importantly, let's give them the space to lead.

If we believe music can change lives, then we need to believe young musicians can change society.

Let's not wait for them to become professionals before we treat them as leaders.

Let's start now.

Thank you.