The Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the ‘Three Musketeers’

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The story of female patronage of the arts in Australia remains untold. While female practitioners of the arts have received attention over the past two decades, patronage in general has attracted very little historical investigation and female cultural patronage has attracted even less interest. This is despite the social pages of newspapers and magazines printed in the first half of the twentieth century offering numerous examples of women from the upper classes of Australian society who utilised their social standing in support of the arts. This article explores the role of female social networks in the establishment of cultural institutions by examining the origins of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO). It will examine the process through which three women, Beatrice Swinson, Ruth Fairfax and Lady Margaret Gordon, succeeded in making orchestral music fashionable in Sydney, thus creating an enthusiastic body of orchestral patrons.

As the Sydney Symphony Orchestra was formed under the auspices of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), so too has the history of the orchestra been tied to the evolution of the Commission. Consequently, writers of the orchestra’s history have subordinated the story of the women who established the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee (SSOC) to that of key ABC personnel involved in the decision-making process that led to the formation of the orchestra. Aside from a few booklets published by the ABC, which offer chronologies of the increase in orchestra size and changes in the orchestra’s constitution, the earliest work to offer any real insight into the evolution of the orchestra was Richard Covell’s Australia’s Music, published in 1967. Covell reasoned that only orchestras of amateur or, at best, semi-professional standard existed prior to the institution of the ABC. Without sufficient opportunity to rehearse together, most of these musical bodies provided little satisfaction to Sydney’s music-lovers. In the years immediately after the first world war, the first director of the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, Henri Verbruggen, conducted an orchestra of teachers and students that set new
musical standards in Sydney. Its emergence coincided with a rising local interest in orchestral music and a corresponding decline in the popularity of choral music, developments which reflected international trends. Verbrugghen’s departure for America in 1921 left the city without clear musical leadership until the ABC emerged as a champion of orchestral music in the 1930s. In Covell’s account the ABC’s vision (he rarely talked about individual personnel) led to the creation of the SSO. The Commission’s chief concern related to the availability of quality players. Covell did not consider the issue of concert attendance, and the concomitant concern of financial viability. Yet these factors were of vital importance to the success of the ABC’s attempts to establish a permanent orchestra in Sydney.

Many years after Covell published *Australia’s Music*, Kenneth Inglis presented a similar sketch of the orchestra’s story. He discussed in more detail the role played by key members of the ABC: William Cleary; Charles Moses; Bernard Heinze; and Dr Keith Barry. Inglis similarly left the subject of concert patronage untouched. Cultural studies that have mentioned orchestral developments in Sydney, such as Geoffrey Serle’s *The Creative Spirit in Australia*, have generally presented abbreviated versions of the above histories. The publication in 1992 of Philip Sametz’s *Play On! 60 Years of Music-making with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra*, presented a long overdue account of the formation of the orchestra. Yet Sametz too explored only the views and endeavours of ABC officials based on information gleaned from the records of the ABC itself and the papers of its key personnel. The role of the women’s committee was addressed and dismissed in two paragraphs.

A lesser known source on the emergence of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra told a very different story. Written by Beatrice Swinson, it outlined the role of Ruth Fairfax, Lady Margaret Gordon, and Swinson herself, collectively dubbed the ‘three musketeers’, in the struggle to attract orchestral patrons. The document highlights the important role played by the women’s committee in the genesis of the SSO. It is the story of the three musketeers, and the strategies utilised by them to promote an appreciation for symphonic music, that occupies this account of the birth of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

*Beatrice Swinson and her Musicales, 1933*

The central character in the story of the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee was Beatrice Swinson. Like many other middle and upper class women in Sydney she had a taste for the symphonies, sonatas, arias and operas performed by large orchestras, virtuoso instrumentalists, and vocalists of world renown in the great concert halls of Europe. She was prepared, like many women of the interwar years, to extend her interest beyond passive cultural appreciation to a more active role in the development of Sydney’s musical life. In 1933 Swinson initiated a scheme to raise musical awareness through informal gatherings known as *musicales*. Other middle and upper class women readily followed her lead, indicating that Swinson had succeeded in creating a new level of interest in music. She had also forged stronger social connections through her promotion of the *musicales*. As these achievements contributed to her subsequent
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campaign to raise subscriptions for the SSO, the story of the three musketeers must begin with that of Swinson and the *musicales*.

Beatrice Swinson was born Beatrice Griffiths in rural New South Wales. As a young girl she showed talent as a pianist and received her early training in Sydney. With her equally gifted sisters, Muriel, a violinist, and Bessie, a cellist, she travelled to Europe in order to further her musical studies. Known collectively as the Australian Trio, the sisters toured England during the closing years of the nineteenth century. They were favourably received and attracted the patronage of the Prince and Princess of Wales. After more than twenty years of touring with professional musicians, listening to acclaimed orchestras and artists, and exposure to the musical circles of England and Europe, Beatrice Griffiths returned to Australia. Shortly afterwards, she married Walter Swinson, settled in the semi-rural suburb of Turramurra, on Sydney’s upper north shore, and assumed the duties of motherhood.

Music remained Swinson’s chief love and throughout the 1920s and 1930s she maintained an active interest in Sydney’s orchestral life. In 1921, she attempted to dissuade Verbrugghen from resigning as director of the Conservatorium after a disagreement (for reasons which are not clear) with the State Government. Following Verbruggen’s departure, Swinson also considered arranging an orchestra herself, and had gone so far as to obtain from Sir High Denison a guarantee of £3000 annually towards its costs. Why she abandoned the idea is unclear. Swinson would only state that she felt it was more than she could undertake.

Swinson began her campaign to raise Sydney’s musical awareness in 1933 by encouraging women to hold *musicales* as a form of entertainment in the home. *Musicales* originated in Europe and had been emulated occasionally in the homes of wealthy Australians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the 1920s, however, Australians seemed apathetic about ‘high art’ music. American music and dances, notably the ‘Charleston’, attracted many young men and women of the ‘social set’ to the dance halls. Older middle-class women, who had received their musical education through exposure to the cultural life of London, Vienna or Berlin, disliked the American influence and its morally questionable associations. The concept of the *musicale* thus appealed to the middle and upper class women of Sydney for two reasons: first, music had long been accepted as a suitable interest for women of all classes; and second, the sort of music promoted through *musicales* adhered to British ideals of high culture. The importance of the latter, as Therese Radic has argued, was that ‘high-art’ music was associated ‘with cultural superiority, moral worth and being British Australians’. In her view, Australian women held the dual roles of moral guardians and ‘custodians of cultural values’. The task for middle and upper-class Australian women thus entailed emulating everything of English origin on the pretext that it represented sound cultural and moral principles. This explanation might account for Swinson’s renewed activity in early 1933. Australia had barely begun to recover from the effects of the Depression, through which class differences had been heightened, when Swinson held her first *musicale*. It is not surprising, therefore, that women who were taught to feel an affinity for the ways of the British middle class, rushed to support such a movement.
The appearance and rising popularity of the musicale is well recorded. Early in 1933, the popular women’s journal, *The Home*, reported on the first musicale held at the Swinson’s home, ‘The Cottage’, in Gilroy Avenue, Turramurra, early in 1933. It attracted more than seventy guests including Lady Game; her son Philip; her secretary, Isabel Crowdy; Mrs T. R. Bavin, and her daughter Valerie; and others from diplomatic and military circles. In its August issue, the magazine explained:

Music as a means of entertaining in the home is being encouraged by many well-known Sydney hostesses who have arranged musicales [sic] in their homes. Mr and Mrs Walter Swinson started the notes rolling early this year when they invited a number of people to enjoy an excellent program at their home in Turramurra. Since then several similar entertainments have been given.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* also reported on the event. It conveyed Swinson’s hope that the music was to remain the central feature of each event, regardless of the host, the home, or the formality of the accompanying party. The purpose was, the *SMH* reported, ‘to provide opportunity for people to share in the wealth of talent with which Sydney is endowed’. Yet despite Swinson’s message, the paper played on the prestige value of the names of the men and women planning to host musicales during the course of the year. It listed Miss Mary Fairfax, Miss Macarthur Onslow, Mrs Lang Campbell, Mr and Mrs Hubert Fairfax, Sir Alexander and Lady Gordon, Mrs F. W. Learoyd, Mrs Sinclair Gillies, Mrs H. S. Baird, Mr and Mrs David Maughan, and the Consuls-General and wives of various countries. The women’s page of the *SMH* featured each of these subsequent events and continued to reinforce Swinson’s message. In August, it even published her portrait.

Through the involvement of these titled, wealthy and influential women in the campaign to raise appreciation of a certain class of music, the musicale became fashionable. Swinson had used her social network to bring attention to the practice. The active support of society women, whose names appeared in the print media under numerous social and philanthropic banners, conveyed to the public the impression that the musicale was a worthy and respectable social event. The effectiveness of this message is reflected in the proliferation of reports in the *SMH* on musicales held by small groups of women in the various suburbs of Sydney. The musicale movement represented an early emanation of the methods Swinson was to use to such great effect in her contribution to the evolution of Sydney’s first permanent symphony orchestra.

*The Three Musketeers and the Crusade of ’36*

According to her own account, Beatrice Swinson’s desire to see an established orchestra in Sydney prompted her to more direct action in 1933. She reported that her interest was revived when Lady Hore-Ruthven (later Lady Gowrie) expressed concerns about Sydney’s orchestral life. A passionate letter to Hore-Ruthven convinced her secretary, Harry Budge, and the vice-regal figure herself of Swinson’s sincerity. A meeting between the two women ensued, in
which they 'thrashed out the matter from A to Z' and Hore-Ruthven promised her support. The meeting gave Swinson the courage to act and she arranged for a 'few intimate friends' to meet at the Queen's Club in order to make formal plans. The gathering included her husband Walter Swinson, the new director of the Conservatorium, Dr Edgar and Ethel Bainton, Lady Margaret Gordon, Mr Hubert and Mrs Ruth Fairfax, and the Minister for Health Mr Herbert Fitzsimmons and his wife.13 The meeting resolved to seek the support of Sir Phillip and Lady Street, and Sir Thomas Bavin. Obligingly, Bavin wrote a letter to William James Cleary, chairman of the ABC, which Fairfax, Gordon, and Swinson delivered. The trio did not regard the subsequent meeting with Cleary as a success, and Swinson recalled feeling that the project was 'doomed to fail', although the Chairman had promised to discuss the case for a permanent orchestra with his colleagues.14

Swinson claims that these events took place in 1933. Another woman associated with Swinson's early attempts to raise support for a permanent symphony orchestra, Mrs Rene Hope Gibson, also recalled a meeting in 1933. One of her colleagues recorded Gibson's recollections:

In July 1933, the small Foundation Committee, of which Rene was a member, met in the old ABC Concert Department in Market Street to urge the formation of a Symphony Orchestra. This small group of women visited schools, held Musicales [sic] and tea parties in their own homes, playing recorded music and urging their guests to subscribe to the cause.15

Yet there is considerable debate about the accuracy of that date. For example, key participants in the gathering of music-lovers did not arrive in Sydney until 1934 or 1935.16 Part of the confusion may have resulted from the fact that by 1933 both ABC and Conservatorium personnel were demonstrating an increased interest in the idea of establishing a permanent orchestra in Sydney. In the absence of hard evidence we can therefore only speculate as to whether the 'small group of women' led by Swinson raised subscriptions for an ABC studio orchestra concert, the Conservatorium concert season, or the Sydney Symphony Orchestra when it formed in 1935.17

Evidence suggests, however, that Swinson became involved in the campaign for a permanent orchestra in 1935. In that year, Edgar Bainton, in his new role as director of the Conservatorium, conducted a series of concerts by a musical body known as the State Orchestra. The State orchestra consisted of Conservatorium staff and students, and ABC studio players.18 It is possible that the musical apathy that greeted the State Orchestra's first concert season served to revive Swinson's interest in Sydney's orchestral prospects. A memorandum written by Cleary confirms this assumption. Dated 30 September, 1935, it recorded the first approach made by Beatrice Swinson and Ruth Fairfax to the ABC:

Mrs Hubert Fairfax and Mrs W. Swinston called on me to-day, and expressed the hope that a permanent orchestra might be established in Sydney, and suggested that the poor response to the concerts
during the last twelve months has been due to ineffective organising and lack of publicity.

They, with Mrs Alexander Gordon, would be willing to arrange to have a meeting called by the Lord Mayor. They think that they could organise a large committee with a view to getting a few thousand subscribers. I made clear to them some of the difficulties, but after some discussion, I said I felt sure that we would be only too glad to see them make an attempt to awaken public interest, and suggested that they might wait until our orchestral plans for next year were more mature. 19

It appears from Cleary’s confusion over names (he called Swinson, ‘Mrs W. Swinston’) that he did not know the women before that meeting and, by implication, that they had not approached him previously concerning the orchestra.

Although Swinson felt dejected after meeting Cleary, the ABC chairman soon requested that she, Fairfax and Gordon meet with members of the Commission at the Australia Hotel to discuss the matter. Swinson later proclaimed: ‘It was, indeed, a memorable and historic meeting, for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra saw the light of day’. 20 Yet Swinson failed to record the date on which this ‘memorable and historic meeting’ took place. An article in the SMH suggests that by mid-October the ABC officials had considered the proposition put forward by Swinson and Fairfax, and had decided to take up their offer. The article recorded Cleary’s announcement that from 1935, a permanent orchestra of forty-five players would be established which during concert seasons would be enlarged to sixty or seventy players. The permanent, well-rehearsed nucleus, comprising two-thirds of the concert-sized orchestra, would present public concerts of a higher standard with a greater variety of programs. As reported in the SMH, Cleary stated that

[The formation of this orchestra, and the immediate and interesting programme arranged for it, is evidence of the Commission’s optimism as to the public taste for first-class music performed at a high artistic standard: but, at the same time, it would be idle to pretend, as some do who speak and write about these matters, that there has been during the past year or two a so-called ‘public clamour’ for orchestral concerts – that is, if one interprets ‘public clamour’ in practical terms of purchase of tickets of admission. The attendances of the public concerts, both in Sydney and Melbourne, have not been satisfactory. At present we can only hope that this increased opportunity for hearing good music performed excellently will widen the circle of appreciative listeners. At any rate, the Commission is doing its part, and may fairly claim that it is anticipating, and not lagging behind, public demand. 21]
If, as Swinson claimed, the trio’s meeting with the Commissioners led directly to the foundation of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the meeting must have taken place between 30 September, when they first visited Cleary’s office, and 25 October, when the SMH reported on the ABC’s new policies. By the time Cleary made his speech regarding the new orchestra, he seemed certain at least of the ABC’s role in the provision of orchestral music. Yet it would have been a difficult task to make all the necessary arrangements to physically enlarge the studio orchestra and resolve all the problems inherent in the ABC’s assumption of direct responsibility for a civic institution in the space of three weeks. It seems more likely that the ABC had already laid the groundwork for the expansion of its own orchestra into a larger musical institution with broader public functions. When Swinson and Fairfax visited Cleary in September, their timing may have been simply propitious. While this suggests that the women were not central to the formation of the orchestra, it is likely that the trio’s promise of patronage contributed significantly to the scale of the ABC’s plans, helping to create the vision of a permanent institution with a pivotal role in the musical life of Sydney.

The ABC’s commitment to the establishment of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra proved to be just the beginning of the trio’s campaign. Cleary soon informed the musketeers that it was up to them to find the subscribers. Swinson confessed, ‘this last remark gave us cause for grave anxiety, for we had not anticipated so much responsibility [but] resolved, success or failure, we must do our utmost’. Fortunately, the ABC was supportive:

We received every possible encouragement. For instance, we were not subjected to any red tape; no committee, minutes or criticism. Just a ‘crusade’ and carte blanche [sic]. We did, however, compromise on a medium with the Commission. A Liaison Officer was appointed, and this arrangement worked well between us. We were also given a room at Broadcast House.

The campaign itself ‘prove[d] long and sometimes heart-breaking, the result more than disappointing’. By May 1936, the trio had not made much progress at all. A meeting was called involving a representative of the Musical Association, the trio, and Dr Keith Barry, their ABC Liaison. As a result, they decided to hold a public meeting at the Australia Hotel on 28 May; hundreds of ‘leading citizens’ would be invited and prominent guests would speak in favour of the orchestral concert season. Just over a week later, Barry reported that ‘the ladies of the Committee’ had signed and delivered more than three hundred personal invitations. They had also arranged for Sir Mungo MacCallum, Sir Henry Braddon, and Lady Gordon to speak at the meeting. Each committee member had drawn up large lists of names of possible subscribers, and together had arranged the printing of five thousand circulars for distribution during the week following the meeting.

That the trio, in their preparations, deliberately appealed to leaders of Sydney society, and played on that sense of civic responsibility that devolved on a city’s wealthy and influential citizens, was obvious from the contents of the letters of invitation sent to those on the guest list. The letters pleaded that the recipients
'make a special effort to be present, as we are anxious that our most representative citizens should be associated with this movement'. Signed by all three women, the requests conveyed to reader the unspoken but implicit message that respectable, well-known members of Sydney society felt that orchestral patronage was a worthy cause.  

Lady Gordon’s name had appeared as patron, guest of honour, organiser or host in the social pages of Sydney’s print media without cessation for nearly thirty years. Herself a singer, she had made her debut as Margaret Thomas on the London stage in 1904, and toured Australia with the Parkina-Foldesy Concert Company for J. C. Williamson in 1905. In 1906 she married Sydney barrister Alexander Gordon in Wales. She returned to Sydney a year later and settled permanently in the prestigious eastern suburbs. During the first world war, Margaret Gordon transferred her theatrical and musical talents to the socially suitable task of organising or participating in fund-raising ventures, often in conjunction with Ethel Kelly. It appeared Gordon possessed a flair for such activities, and the range of charitable and amateur theatrical commitments undertaken by her rapidly proliferated. Throughout the 1930s, she took a particularly active interest in Sydney’s amateur theatre. Musically, she became patron of the Musical Advancement Society, and organised numerous fund-raising concerts for promising music students she deemed worthy of the chance to study abroad. Gordon played an important role in the early careers of the singers Elsa Corry and Joan Hammond, the pianist Valda Aveling, and violinist Susan Davies. Whether the cause involved the arts, charities, social events or personal occasions, Gordon’s gift for organisation and her personal repute brought supporters and success to her door. In 1945 Gordon received the ‘only life membership medallion struck by the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee’ for her continuous service as chairman of the committee since its foundation ten years earlier. Evidently, her commitment to the project was neither fleeting nor half-hearted.

Ruth Fairfax similarly appeared consistently in the women’s pages of numerous newspapers and magazines of the period. She supported, above all else, the Country Women’s Association (CWA). Elected the first President of the Queensland CWA, she toured much of southern Queensland during the 1920s promoting the organisation and helping to establish numerous rural branches. Continuing her support for the CWA when she moved to Sydney, Fairfax added to her commitments the Adult Deaf and Dumb Society of NSW, the Girl Guides Association, the Benevolent Society of NSW, the Free Library movement, and the Bush Book Club. For all this, she was appointed OBE in June 1935. Known also for her love of music and gardening, her involvement in the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee no doubt surprised few of her acquaintances. Swinson regarded her as a close friend, and felt that she was fortunate to have so dedicated, intelligent and well-respected a woman as Ruth Fairfax involved in her campaign. Swinson paid special tribute to Fairfax in her account, particularly to her ‘integrity of character and the depth of her wisdom. Mrs Hubert [sic] had the highest conception of service to her Country and lived up to those ideals’. Gordon and Fairfax represented the upper rungs of Sydney’s social ladder. Both attended the vice-regal dinner party held in honour of the Duke of
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Gloucester, in November 1934. By working with them, Swinson obtained much-needed links to those circles in which women had the power to render significant service to their community by reason of the prominence, title or wealth of their family of birth or marriage. While Swinson personally knew many of the city’s wealthy and active citizens, and her husband was a solicitor, the Swinsons occupied no special status in Sydney society. Beatrice Swinson appeared frequently in the papers in connection with her musical crusades, but she was rarely mentioned just for her presence at other events. In fact, although she attended every concert of 1936 season, the SMH only mentioned Swinson when referring directly to her participation in the campaign. It appears that Swinson relied on her association with Fairfax and Gordon to attach prestige to the drive for concert subscriptions.

Immediately after the 28 May public meeting, Gordon recommended to Cleary that a box plan be made available at the music warehouse, Palings, and arrangements made to enable people to become subscribers there. This, she argued, would warrant some publicity, which, in view of the shortness of time, would further assist their cause. ABC officials promptly followed up on Gordon’s suggestion, with the result that both the Daily Telegraph (DT), and the SMH published a number of notices and articles during the ensuing weeks. The ABC also arranged a series of three minute promotions on radio station 2FC each evening for a week. Sir Henry Braddon, Lady Gordon, Keith Barry, Fairfax and Swinson took turns to present the talks.

The combined effect of the public meeting and heightened publicity led to a rapid rise in subscriptions. Just a day after the meeting, the subscriptions reached 200. Ten days later they approached 750. By September, the trio had raised a total of 1089 subscriptions. On 19 June, a jubilant Cleary issued a statement to the papers expressing the commission’s appreciation of the splendid work of the committee, which organised the subscribers for the celebrity concert season. This committee, which comprised Lady Gordon, Mrs Walter Swinson, and Mrs Hubert Fairfax, had been largely responsible for the enthusiasm with which the celebrity season had been received by the public. The commission also wished to thank the 900 subscribers for their interest and support, which had encouraged the commission to contemplate a similar series next year, and perhaps to venture even further.

The experience of the 1936 campaign revealed the important role that a women’s committee could play during the tentative, ‘experimental stage’ in the evolution of a cultural institution like the SSO. It demonstrated that the key to success lay not in educating the public in the joys of orchestral music, but in the strategy of social networking. The ABC’s resolution to take on the task of establishing a permanent orchestra was not enough to guarantee its survival. Money via subscribers and patrons and prestige through association was necessary. Using methods familiar to them from the charitable fund-raising drives, or social events such as pageants, balls, and patriotic celebrations in
which they had previously participated, Swinson, Gordon and Fairfax made orchestral concerts fashionable and seemingly demonstrated their viability. Thus, despite all the endeavours of professional musicians’ organisations, Conservatorium personnel, and concerned journalists, it was an informal social committee of women with an appreciation for high-art music that seems to have helped the SSO into being.

Widening social circles, and the Committee of 1938

Inspired by the successes of 1936, the ABC planned a full programme of orchestral concerts for 1937, beginning with Italian conductor, Giovanni Patti, in January and February, followed by the contralto Essie Ackland in March, the soprano Lotte Lehmann and conductor Georg Schneevoight in April, the pianist Vladimir Horowitz in June, and the much-loved Malcolm Sargent later in the year. An appraisal of the public response to the 1937 season concluded that concert-goers did not rush to attend every concert, but rather became more selective. It seems that the new-found appreciation for orchestral music did not create a body of spontaneously enthusiastic subscribers capable of sustaining their numbers and expanding in proportion to the ABC’s ambitions for the new orchestra. By early 1938, the ABC began to panic. Its season of four concerts featuring the tenor Dino Borgioli, timed to complement the sesqui-centenary celebrations through February and March, attracted poor audiences and few subscriptions. It was time for the musketeers to draw on their social network once again.

This time the trio called on Lady Street and Lady Gowrie for assistance. The significance of the involvement of the two women cannot be underestimated. Gowrie was a well-known music lover and patron of the arts. She had consistently demonstrated her interest in the progress of Australian musicians since her arrival in Australia early in the decade. As wife of the Governor of South Australia, she had surprised Miriam Hyde, a young pianist and composer, by attending a fund-raising bridge party designed to assist her plans to study at the Royal College of Music in London. After her arrival in Sydney, Gowrie (still known as Hore-Ruthven) readily attended musicales and concerts. Rene Gibson served as her aide-de-camp in 1935-36. Herself a founding member of the Killara Music Club, Gibson inevitably encouraged Gowrie to attend Killara’s musicales. It was at one such event that Gowrie heard the young singer, Joan Hammond, for the first time. Shortly afterwards, she called a meeting to ‘discuss plans’ for sending Hammond abroad to continue her studies, and to establish an executive committee for that purpose. It is hardly surprising that Swinson and Gordon were both members, although the latter played a much more significant role than the former. In 1936, when Hyde returned to Sydney from London, Gowrie remembered hearing of her in Adelaide, and invited her to Admiralty House in order to follow up on the musician’s progress and to hear a private recital. Gowrie also put similar requests to internationally renown singers such as Dino Borgioli. Her commitment to music, both as a source of personal enjoyment and as a desirable part of civic culture, thus emerges as a well-documented and established fact.
In relation to the birth of the SSO, we already know of the early encouragement Gowrie offered Swinson. In 1936, she again offered assistance. Conscious of the weight that her station carried, she accepted the invitation to attend the first public meeting at the Australia Hotel. When ill-health prevented her appearance, she sent a gracious letter of apology, and countered any disappointment with her request to become a subscriber. Through Keith Barry, this request was published in the DT, thus making known her support of the movement. 42

Perhaps the most important figure in the 1938 campaign was Lady Street. Wife of Sir Philip Street, the Chief Justice and the Lieutenant-Governor of NSW from 1934 to 1937, she energetically took on the many social obligations entailed by her position as a prominent member of Sydney’s upper class. Like Gowrie, she became a familiar figure at musical events in Sydney. In 1934, her husband as acting State Governor, temporarily relocated to Government House. Taking advantage of their new residence Street held a large musicale in its grounds. Both Gordon and Swinson attended, as did many people who otherwise do not seem to have been staunch supporters of musical causes. 43 It was perhaps her connection with so many circles within Sydney society, and her ability to interest them in musical activities, that made Street such an asset to the trio’s campaign. That Street was regarded as a natural leader in female social circles is demonstrated by her election as the first President of the committee formed in 1938 to promote the celebrity concert season. In 1939, for reasons of health, she submitted her resignation to the general manager of the ABC, Charles Moses. His reply expressed the dismay of all involved in the campaign:

> It is with genuine regret that the Committee accepts your resignation as President of the Ladies’ Orchestral Committee. I do not think it is possible that we shall find someone to replace you adequately. 44

With a view to raising the subscriptions to the 1938 season, the trio planned a ‘meeting Extraordinaire’ for 18 March 1938. 45 As before, they issued personal invitations to the event, promoting the fact that Lady Street would preside and that Lady Gowrie had promised to address the meeting. This gesture showed Gowrie’s commitment, as she was due to depart for England on the same day. Swinson affectionately described how Gowrie ‘came to that meeting and began her speech by saying, “I am going to be brutal”’. ‘Imagine Lady Gowrie being brutal’, she gushed. 46 The SMH adds another detail to this story. Despite their imminent departure from Sydney, and planned absence during the entire concert season, Lady Gowrie purchased six season tickets. 47

Given the prestigious company, it is perhaps not surprising that a large and respectable body of women attended the meeting. Following the speeches, Fairfax successfully proposed that ‘all those present form themselves into a committee known as the Sydney Symphony Orchestral Committee’ (SSOC). 48 Thus the trio formally involved a larger number of society women in their campaign, enabling them to draw on a wider network of associations for the social resources they needed. Swinson proclaimed that the ‘meeting was an
unqualified success. We gained many friends and adherents, and that hurdle was safely over." To maintain the interest generated by the 18 March meeting, Lady Street held a reception at her home at Elizabeth Bay. The stated purpose of the reception involved consideration of ‘ways and means of making a great success of the season’ beginning on 31 May. By way of encouragement, it was announced at the reception that applications for season tickets had reached seven hundred, and that Lady Huntingfield had sent a letter from Victoria, ‘expressing her great interest in the movement’. Swinson, Fairfax, Cleary, Barry, Lady Sheldon, and Mrs Alexander Kipnis, ‘wife of the visiting Russian singer’, all spoke to the assemblage.

Lady Street’s reception proved effective, and the ladies embraced their new roles with enthusiasm. The fresh input of the new members soon had an impact on the nature of the committee’s subscription-raising activities. The committee showed a greater propensity to revel in the more social aspects of high culture. A reception was organised at the Australia Hotel in honour of the first of the celebrity artists, the conductor, Professor Georg Szell. On behalf of the Ladies’ Committee (as they were less formally known), Lady Street received the guests, wearing her best ‘silver fox fur’. Other committee members dressed to the hilt, treating the occasion as a significant social event. At the first concert of the season a few days later, Lady Street, Lady Gordon, Lady Jordan, and Fairfax were all prominent. The SMH detailed their apparel, and rejoiced at the multitudes that streamed into the Town Hall for the concert.

The trio again capitalised on this publicity in order to sustain the interest generated by their March and April meetings. In an announcement issued in May, Swinson declared that they had sold over a thousand tickets. She cleverly drew on the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne to rally support for the SSO, pointing out that

the seating capacity of the Town Hall is 3300, so that there remains a considerable leeway to make up before the list of subscribers is complete...in Melbourne the Town Hall had been completely booked out only 24 hours after the sales began.... The social committee here is determined to bring about an equal enthusiasm in Sydney.

The high profile thus imbued on the 1938 concert season seems to have improved ticket sales, which continued to rise until they reached a total of 1231 subscriptions, bringing in over £2000. The musketeers’ formation of a women’s committee to raise subscriptions was a successful strategy. The action extended the principle of social networking and attached even greater prominence to the orchestral concerts. In the committee’s hands, orchestral music had become fashionable.

Not everyone appreciated the strategies used by the trio. The Home published an article by David McNicoll in its July issue which applauded a comment he overheard at one concert: ‘Mrs Swinson scores another touchdown for Dear Old Art’. Agreeing with its cynical tone, he argued that most of the concert patrons
cared more about the social aspects of the occasion than the music itself. He wondered, ‘gazing around at the sea of vacant faces’, ‘what interest did 75 per cent of these people have in music or in Georg Szell?’ He knew that many could intelligently discuss the family background of this or that important figure, or the size of someone’s estate before the Depression, but doubted that more that fifteen per cent of the audience held an even rudimentary knowledge of music.54

Indeed, ‘A.L.K.’, the Sydney correspondent for AMN had politely observed that the ‘clamorous and long-continued demonstrations that followed Miss [Eileen] Joyce’s performance’ in July 1936 revealed that certain flaws in her style had ‘disturbed the intelligent public not at all’.55 By 1938, ‘A.L.K.’ spoke with greater directness and unconcealed contempt for the musical illiteracy of the Sydney public:

Where music is concerned, my fellow-citizens [sic] are actually a laodicean throng, prepared to swallow uncritically what is offered them. This is true, I suppose, of most great modern cities but in Sydney the core of real music-lovers, people who know the repertories that count and who cleave to definite viewpoints and standards in music and its performance, are, I believe, a smaller part of the ‘musical public’ than is the case elsewhere.

He continued:

Properly stirred from without Sydney can get quite excited about great artists, even though the masterpieces presented may mean almost nothing to the vociferously cheering crowd. Values in art mean little in Sydney; otherwise, we should not find practically the same people, who acclaimed Pinza, Huberman and Lehmann, roaring with delight at the insanities or antics of a combination of slick entertainers in the department of unaccompanied vocal music.56

McNicoll’s views thus appear to have epitomised the scepticism engendered in many male critics and professional musicians by the nature of the audience attracted through the trio’s social networking strategies. They also provide a clue to the relative absence of the contributions made by women’s committees to the development of state orchestras by the ABC in historical accounts of the SSO. A critical and historical bias against the patronage offered by social committees seems to exist.

McNicoll’s observations do raise questions concerning the sincerity, or at least the motives, of the participants in the 1938 campaign. Without a doubt, the new Committee comprised a note-worthy, socially prominent collection of women. As mentioned, Street was its first President. Elected Vice-President in 1938, Lady Bertha Jordan also brought great prestige to the Ladies’ Committee. Her husband, Sir Frederick Jordan, was appointed Chief Justice after Street, and Lieutenant-Governor when Street left that post. The daughter of an early subscriber to the SSO concerts recalled Jordan’s active recruitment of friends and
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relatives during the difficult periods that afflicted the early Subscribers' Committee. 57 Mrs W. J. Cleary, wife of the ABC Chairman, was also a member of the executive of the first formal Orchestral Committee.

Non-office bearing members included Lady Anderson, wife of a former NSW Governor; Lady Davidson, also wife of a former Governor of NSW; Dame Mary Hughes; Dame Constance D'Arcy, obstetrician and gynaecologist; Miss Ruby Board, voluntary welfare worker and daughter of the Director of Education; Miss Kate Egan, President of the Catholic Women's Association; Miss Camilla Wedgwood, president of the Sydney University Women Graduates' Association; Mrs Rene Gibson, whose husband William Hope Gibson was a lecturer at Sydney University and was listed in 1938 Who's Who, while Rene herself received an MBE in 1948 for her services to the music community in Sydney; Mrs Jean Alice Maughan, wife of the barrister David Maughan, and daughter of Sir Edmund Barton; Miss Macarthur Onslow, charity and church worker; Miss Lena Ward, long time secretary of the Associated Music Clubs of NSW; Lady Eva Julius; Lady Blanche Sheldon; Mrs Thelma Dixson, wife of Robert Dixson; Mrs Hannah Lloyd Jones; Miss Mary Fairfax who had served as president or vice-president of the Society of Arts and Crafts since 1912; Mrs Wilfred Fairfax; Miss Gwen Friend, sister of the artist, Donald Friend, and prominent figure in amateur theatre circles; Mrs Sibyl Mitchell, author and wife of Thomas Walter Mitchell; Miss Nancy Jobson, Headmistress of the PLC at Pymble to 1933, and founder of Hopewood House, a finishing school for girls; Mrs Ruth White, mother and active promoter of Patrick White; Mrs Percy C. White, who did much work for the Kindergarten Union; and numerous other wives of politicians, military figures, and senior ABC or Conservatorium personnel. 58

If not all music-lovers, most lived up to the ideals of middle-class and upper-class womanhood. Most belonged, through family or marriage, to that class of society in which the appropriate public activity for a woman involved service to the community and the preservation of specific moral and cultural values. Many fulfilled social expectations in a number of capacities, while others focused on particular philanthropic, philosophic or cultural causes. Thus, each had their own circles of influence, and together they represented a broad range of nurturing, charitable, cultural, philosophic and feminist interests. A large number of them hailed from the prestigious eastern suburbs. Most of the remainder lived in large rambling homes high on the hills of Sydney's upper north shore.

An early subscriber, Marjorie Chartres, suggested that not all of them were 'workers'. 59 Some seemed to enjoy the benefits of their position without carrying out the concomitant social obligations. Despite this, many of the women listed had participated directly in Swinson's musicale movement in 1933, and maintained the practice in following years. Many also supported or initiated fund-raising committees in support of young, skilled musicians. A survey of The Home magazine or the SMH during the 1930s provides sufficient proof of the commitment of most to musical causes. The list thus provides sufficient grounds on which to assess the quality of the SSOC formed in 1938. An unconscious awareness of the social significance of high-art music, bred through an Anglo-centric, bourgeois up-bringing, undoubtedly attended the motivations for their
involvement. While a taste for social prestige may have mingled with more sincere wishes in the hearts of some of the participants in the campaign, the convictions of its key figures are clear.

Ultimately, whatever the inspiration, the involvement and patronage of the women in the subscriber's committee helped the SSO to overcome early financial difficulties and the constitutional inconsistencies and bureaucratic dilemmas inherent in the formation by a federal organisation of a state musical institution that rivalled private, commercial interests. Through expanding circles of social acquaintance, Swinson had enlisted the significant services of Gordon and Fairfax, acquired the essential endorsement of Government House, and attracted the cream of Sydney's female elite to her cause. Through word of mouth, as each tapped into her own social resources; through force of example, as prominent women were seen to support the cause; through sheer determination, as those particularly committed spent their time and energies on its progress; and through the passionate hopes of a few, the SSO and the SSOC became permanent civic institutions.

Eventually, ABC personnel acknowledged the strength of the social networking strategies used by the Ladies' Committee. Successes in Melbourne were attributed to the same approach. When the Manager for Queensland complained of a poor response to the 1938 season, Moses replied:

I cannot help but feel that the reason for the poor response is your decision not to form a social committee. The only sound plan to adopt is to get together a Social Committee comprising people who by their own attendance at the concerts, or by their enthusiasm in rounding up subscribers, persuade more and more people to believe it is 'the correct thing' to be seen at orchestral concerts. 60

In his very brief treatment of the subject, Sametz also acknowledged tributes paid to this approach to 'audience-building'. He reported that great importance was placed on the 'patronage of the social elite'. The Ladies' Committees were 'taken very seriously' as '[t]hey were really crucial at this early stage, when subscribers had to be created from nothing'. 61 Even McNicoll conceded that at least 'Mrs Swinson and the rest of the team [were] clever enough to round everyone up, and herd them into the Town Hall'. 62 The musketeers indeed had mobilised a public which three years earlier had clearly failed to patronise orchestral music in Sydney.

It is difficult to deny the sincere intentions motivating Beatrice Swinson, Ruth Fairfax and Lady Margaret Gordon. Their approach to the task of creating sufficient public interest to sustain the institution of a permanent orchestra ultimately proved triumphant. Perhaps a critical or historical bias against the social activities of women from the upper echelons of Australian society has prevented them from acquiring a more prominent position in histories of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra. Yet their crusade constituted just a ripple in a whole wave of indirect female patronage which gently influenced the development of the arts in Sydney during the interwar period. This upsurge of
cultural activity has likewise gone unnoticed. Thus, the story of the three musketeers represents just a beginning.

ENDNOTES


5 The Late Muriel Griffiths’, *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 29 September 1934, p. 10.


9 ‘Personal and Social’, *Home*, 3 January 1933, p. 4.

10 ‘Personal and Social’, *Home*, 1 August 1933, p. 4.

11 *SMH*, 20 May 1933, p. 7. In October, the *SMH* article on a *musicale* held by the Victoria League noted that it formed part of the ‘series inaugurated this season by Mrs W. Swinson’. This confirms that the bulk of Swinson’s *musicales* campaign was carried out during 1933. The *SMH* article of 20 May 1933 implied that the movement began in 1932. As I found no reference to *musicales* in connection with Swinson for 1932, it seems reasonable to suggest that by ‘last year’, the writer meant the *musicale* held by Swinson sometime prior to 3 January 1933, when it was reported in *The Home*. See *SMH*, 24 October 1933, p. 4.

12 *SMH*, 12 August 1933, p. 7.

13 Swinson, ‘Creation’, p. 2.

14 *ibid.*, p. 2.

15 Ann Williams Clark, ‘Tribute to Irene Hope Gibson, MBE’, unpublished, Sydney, 1989, p. 2. Gibson was also quoted in, ‘How it all began’, *Sydney Symphony Orchestra Subscribers Committee Bulletin*, November 1981, p. 1. This account also presented contradictory details further suggesting that a meeting concerning the establishment of a permanent symphony orchestra could not have taken place in 1933.

16 Lord Hore-Ruthven had served as Governor of South Australia until April 1934, after which he returned to England. Shortly after his arrival in England, he was appointed as Governor of New South Wales. He subsequently returned to Australia with his family, disembarking in Sydney on 21 February 1935. Consequently, Lady Hore-Ruthven could not have arrived for a permanent stay in Sydney in 1933. Edgar Bainton did not arrive in Sydney until May, 1934 and W. J. Cleary did not become Chairman of the ABC until July 1934. The meeting would have had to occur sometime in 1935, after Cleary’s appointment, and the arrival in Sydney of Lady Hore-Ruthven and Edgar

17The ABC’s commitment to the idea of a permanent orchestra is debatable. Although long time subscriber, Patricia Lemaire recalled that her mother first subscribed to an ABC concert series in 1932, the Sydney-based studio orchestra comprised only twenty-four players. In 1933 the ABC did engage British conductor, Malcolm Sargent, to visit Australia and issued him a directive to create a competent national orchestra, and when Sargent cancelled, the ABC engaged another British conductor, Hamilton Harty, to tour Australia in 1934. Yet interested journalists argued that the ABC was unsure about the idea of importing an orchestral conductor. They related this reluctance to complications caused by the Musicians’ Union. In addition, the General Manager, Major Walter Conder, apparently held no affection for the ‘big orchestral plan’. When Cleary first took up his position as Chairman of the Commission in 1934, he made clear that he had no intention to pander to either ‘highbrows’ or ‘lowbrows’. The ABC’s broadcast policy reflected a tendency to indulge the lowbrow. Cleary was accused of ‘mutilating the masterpieces’ when the ABC scheduled the separate movements of musical works at different times because of ‘the difficulty the non-musical person finds in keeping his attention throughout the four movements of a symphony’, G. S. L. ‘Mutilating the Masterpieces’, *Australian Musical News, (AMN)*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1 April 1934, p. 21. See also *AMN*, vol. 23, no. 10, 1 May 1933, p. 9; vol. 23, no. 11, 1 June 1933, pp. 3-4; ‘Mosman Municipal Band’, *The Daily*, 24 July 1934; also ‘Mr Cleary’s Taste’, *Wireless Weekly*, 3 August 1934, pp. 11-12; *SMH*, 23 April 1934, p. 11; and ‘The ABC and Taste’, *Home*, vol. 15, no. 9, 1 September 1934, p. 24.

18Bainton ran a separate subscription series during 1934, and looked forward to a special concert scheduled for 31 October, which combined the Conservatorium and ABC studio orchestras for the first time. It was proposed that the same orchestra would also present a series of eight concerts in addition to the Conservatorium’s seven during 1935. See *SMH*, 6 October 1934, p. 10.

19W. J. Cleary, Memorandum, 30 September 1935, Subscribers (Sydney) and Ladies Orchestral Committee folder (SLOC), Australian Archives New South Wales Office (AANSW), SP 1558/2 B.28.

20Swinson, ‘Creation’, p. 3.


22Swinson, ‘Creation’, pp. 3-4.

23ibid.

24ibid.


26Barry, Memorandum, 20 May 1936, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.

27Ruth B. Fairfax, Margaret Gordon, Beatrice Swinson (signed) to the Lord Mayor, corr., 15 May 1936, marked ‘Specimen only’, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.


29A special feature article on Gordon described her as ‘[o]ne of Sydney’s most indefatigable and best-loved women’. Further, ‘[e]very charity with which she comes in contact benefits from her interest and help, and every person she meets is left with a vivid impression of her charm’. See *SMH*, 26 March 1936, p. 22.


33M. Gordon to Cleary, corr., 29 May 1936, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28; A. Quinn to Cleary, corr., 30 May 1936, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28; Cleary to Gordon, corr., 1 June 1936, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.


35*SMH*, 19 June 1936, p. 10.
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37 SMH, 5 December 1936, p. 12.
38 SMH, 1 January 1938, p. 5.
41 Hyde, Complete Accord, p. 90; SMH, 26 January 1938, p. 4.
42 DT, 29 May 1936, p. 6.
43 SMH, 14 July 1934, p. 7.
44 C. J. A. Moses to Lady Street, corr., 20 March 1939, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.
45 Swinson, 'Creation', p. 4.
46 ibid, p. 3.
47 SMH, 24 March 1938, p. 21.
48 SMH, 11 March 1938, p. 6; 19 March 1938, p. 18; SSOC, Prospectus 1938, 21 March 1938, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.
49 Swinson, 'Creation', p. 4.
50 SMH, 6 April 1938, p. 8.
51 SMH, 27 May 1938, p. 4; 1 June 1938, p. 7.
52 SMH, 7 May 1938, p. 20.
53 ABC, Comparative Statement of Subscribers to Orchestral Concerts, not dated, SLOC, SP 1558/2 B.28.
54 David McNicoll, 'Another Touch-Down for Dear Old Art', Home, 1 July 1938, p. 23.
55 A. L. K., 'A Dual Farewell', in AMN, vol. 26, no. 12, 1 July 1936, p. 11.
58 See SSO, Celebrity Concert (8th in 1938 series), program, Sydney, 1 September 1939. Over half of the members listed appear in the ADB either on their own merit or as wives or relatives of men who held distinguished positions in Sydney. Some are mentioned in the 1938 Who's Who. See Joseph A. Alexander (ed.), Who's Who in Australia, 1938, Herald and Weekly Times, Melbourne, 1938. All receive mention in the social pages of newspapers and magazines on a relatively regular basis.
59 Hunt, Interview with Marjorie Chartres, 3 December 1996.
60 Moses to Manager for Queensland, corr., 27 October 1938, Celebrity Concert Season 1938 folder, AANSW, SP 1558/2 B.30.
61 Sametz, Play On, p. 47.
62 McNicoll, Home, p. 23.