



# The Modern University and the Musical Mind

Sounding out John Henry Newman

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A graduate of the University of Melbourne, Peter Tregear undertook doctoral studies at King's College, Cambridge, and was subsequently appointed a Lecturer and Director of Music at Fitzwilliam College. As a conductor, he has mounted several modern revivals and world premieres of historical and contemporary operatic and symphonic works, including an internationally acclaimed stage revival of Max Brand's *Maschinist Hopkins* in the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, in 2001. Peter was awarded the Sir Charles Mackerras Conducting Prize in 2003, and a Green Room Award for best conductor of an opera in 2009.

Dr Tregear returned to Australia in 2006 to take up a term as Dean of Trinity College, University of Melbourne and is currently a Senior Advisor (Campus Enhancement) at Monash University. Remaining active as a performer and academic, Peter also serves on the Artistic Review Board of Victorian Opera, the Advisory Boards for the International Centre for Suppressed Music (UK), the Ernst Krenek Institute (Austria), Melbourne Youth Music, and is Chair of the Australian Music Foundation in Australia.



It is a great honour to be asked to present this year's Newman Lecture at Mannix College.<sup>1</sup> Most of my adult life has been spent in or around University Colleges, and when I first came to Monash late last year I was immediately curious to know more about the life at Mannix. As it happens, nothing could have been easier, as I was to receive early in my tenure the warmest of welcomes from the Principal and staff. I am delighted to be here again this evening.

In thinking about the role of music on Campus, I have inevitably—albeit indirectly—drawn on my recent work as a Senior Advisor at Monash University. This one-year post has involved me advising the University on how we might best improve the quantity, quality, and reach of the performing arts at the University, a task which, by extension, has required me to reflect on role of the university more generally and why such things should matter to it. It is also undeniably an issue of considerable interest to me personally, as I have spent a good deal of my adult working life to-date directly or indirectly involved in promoting the arts on campus, whether here or the UK.

Certainly, at the moment at least, a modern Australian Vice-Chancellor might be forgiven for thinking that the performing arts belong anywhere but on campus, were she or he to reflect on just how much grief has lately befallen the University of Melbourne as it tries to reconcile changes to its curriculum with an absorbed Victorian College of the Arts. My own observation on that particular issue, however, was that the underlying problem there lay not in the presence of the performing arts *per se*, but precisely in a lack of clarity from either the University or the VCA as to what their purpose should be.<sup>2</sup>

1 My thanks to Dr Simon Caterson, Dr Elizabeth Kertesz, and Professor John Armstrong for their encouragement and help with the preparation of this lecture.

2 Peter Tregear, 'Lament for a Noted Absence', *The Australian Higher Education*, 26 November 2008.

It is when one begins to muse on that question that the figure of John Henry Newman looms large; the man of course after whom this lecture series is named, and the man who, on the site of a former MG Rover car factory near Birmingham, Pope Benedict XVI is expected to beatify next month.<sup>3</sup> For, in a famous collection of essays and lectures published as *The Idea of a University*, Newman ‘established the style and essential mode of discourse with which to speak and write of the academic life’, so powerful has been this work’s effect on the academic imagination of the West.<sup>4</sup>

2

Whether this influence has been universally a positive thing or not on Higher Education debate is something beyond the scope of this lecture, though I do confess that I am otherwise taking the opportunity it presents to examine both the performing arts and Newman himself, with the broadest of brushes. We might note, however, that problems present themselves from the very title page, even before we start to examine the prejudices of time, place, class, and gender that his writings necessarily betray. After all, *The Idea of a University* presupposes that a university today can indeed claim to embody a unified or unifying ‘idea’. The Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s, prefaced by the creation of a new ‘Department of Employment, Education, and Training’—an ‘ominous’ conjunction, as Stuart Macintyre notes in his *Short History of the University of Melbourne*, brought with them the gradual deregulation of university education in Australia so that we now have a wide range of institutions that call themselves universities. The range of disciplines and teaching styles that they encompass might lead us to suggest

<sup>3</sup> Martin Beckford, ‘Pope’s beatification of Cardinal Newman “to take place at disused Longbridge plant”’, *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 11 June 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Frank M. Turner, ‘Newman’s University and Ours’, in Frank Turner (ed), *The Idea of a University* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 283.

that the term 'university' now expresses no grander underlying purpose or meaning beyond an institution that awards qualifications at the tertiary level, that conducts economically useful research, and that undertakes teaching.<sup>5</sup> A university today, we might now believe, is simply the sum of its functions, and no more than that. It offers training that enhances career prospects and drives national growth, it teaches 'useful knowledge', and is part of the 'knowledge economy.'

None of these things are bad in themselves; indeed they are very necessary. For Newman, however, it was fundamental to its identity that a university was more than the sum of its useful parts, and that it aspired to achieve something much more profound. A university should teach and exemplify a 'state or condition of mind', no less.<sup>6</sup> Yes, it might undertake research, teaching, and degree awarding, yes attending university clearly provides lasting economic benefit for most students, as well as the nation-at-large. Newman argued, however, that a university is not, or at least should not be, defined by its utility *per se*, but above all as a place of learning that is worthwhile in and for itself. '[T]hat alone', he declared, 'is liberal knowledge, which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be informed (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation'.<sup>7</sup>

3

It is all well and good to say that education is an end worth pursuing in itself, but of course one does not need to be an economist to recognise that at least a fair portion of an individual's education must be paid for by someone else. I, too, do my job, ultimately because someone (hopefully supported by some

5 Stuart Macintyre & R. J. W. Selleck, *A Short History of the University of Melbourne* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 152.

6 John Henry Newman, 'Discourse V. Knowledge its Own End', *The Idea of a University*, 85.

7 John Henry Newman, 'Discourse V. Knowledge its Own End', *The Idea of a University*, 81.

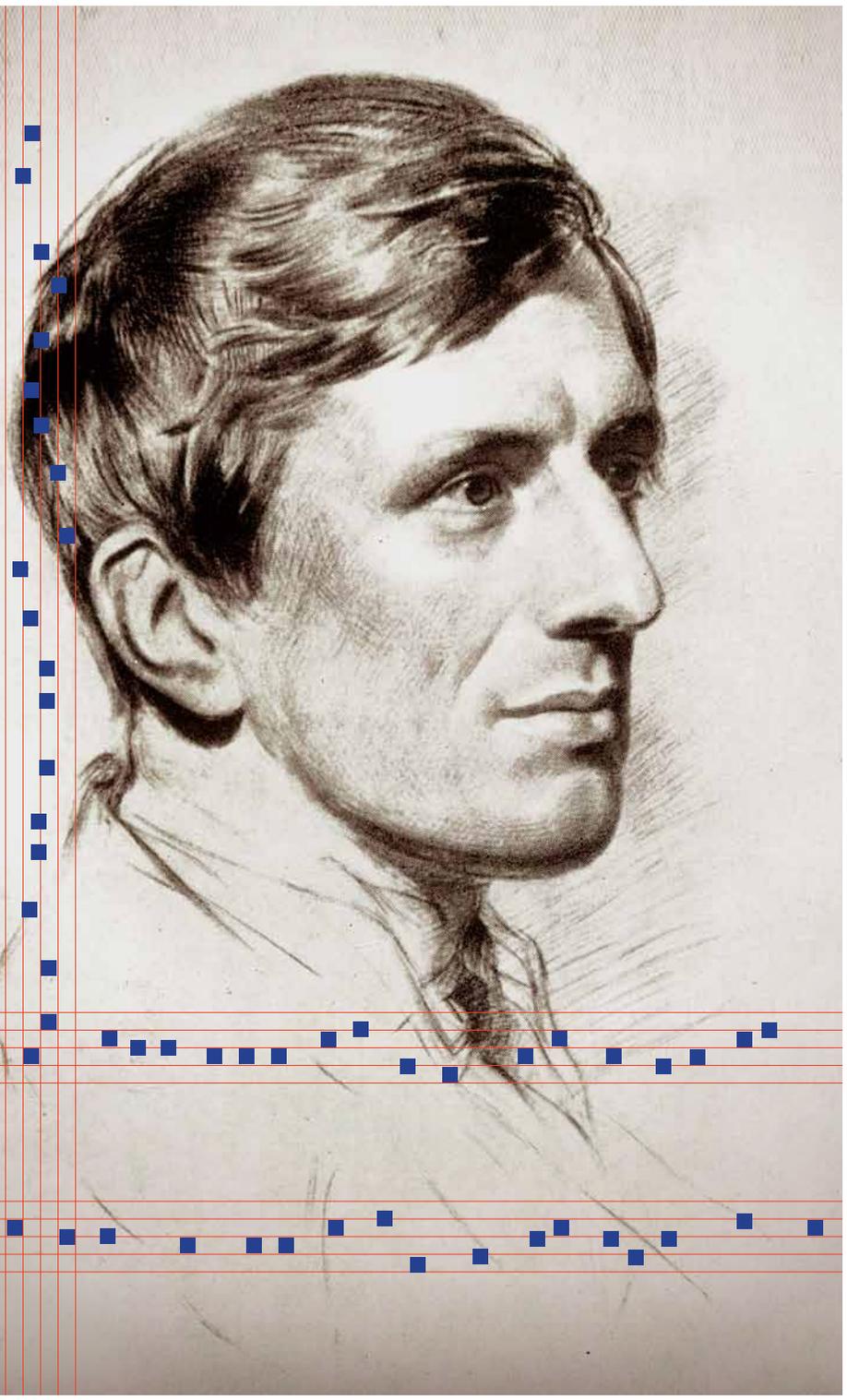
form of social consensus) has determined that a portion of the commonwealth of a university be applied in my direction. Universities as institutions are not, nor should they be, completely elevated from the demands of financial probity and administrative efficiency, and—above all—the need to justify themselves against other demands competing for our tax dollar. Ultimately what I do, just as for an academic, demands justification—a slogan like ‘knowledge for its own end’ therefore provides no easy answer, if anything it forces us to ask more questions. In particular, a musician who thinks that Newman offers a blueprint for a quiet life of studying, teaching or performing without either questioning, or being questioned, about the assumptions upon which that life is based, is to be severely disappointed.

- 4 The cunning of Newman's argument, however, is that we cannot possibly know what is worth valuing, economically or otherwise, and thus paying for, unless we cultivate the kind of reason that is able to grasp questions of value honestly and completely. So, in *The Idea of a University*, he asks: What kind of education would one need to have the kind of mind to be able to tackle this kind of question? The answer he gives, in brief, is an interdisciplinary one, for no one field has all the answers. ‘Chemistry tells us that we are sites of a variety of reactions; biology, as Newman was shortly to learn from Darwin, that we are in key part what we are because of the evolution of species. Sociology and economics characterise the structure of our roles and relationships; history informs us that we are what our past has made us and what we have made of our past.’<sup>8</sup> And music? It too surely must have a role, and an important one at that, on Newman's idealised university campus.

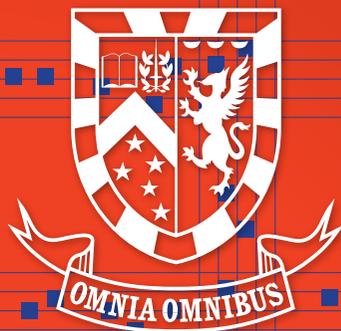
<sup>8</sup> Martin Beckford, ‘Pope's beatification of Cardinal Newman “to take place at disused Longbridge plant”’, *Daily Telegraph* (UK), 11 June 2010.

Well, I would say that, wouldn't !! But let us consider for a moment just how significant musical culture has become in our lives. At least for us lucky enough to live in the affluent West, music now inhabits most of our waking hours, from the moment our radio alarm clock goes off, through what we absorb during the course of a day, whether that be from our iPod, or the Musak pumped into the supermarket or nightclub, or the soundtrack to the film or television programme we might be watching, or through that most underrated of music venues, the car. It has never been more important to understand what all this music means, how it might influence, and control our lives, and for whose benefit. And, yes, it might also be a good thing to have music on campus, simply because it can also be beautiful, compelling, awe-inspiring, moving, and even fun!

The Modern University and the Musical Mind:  
Sounding out John Henry Newman  
August 11, 2010 8:30pm, Mannix College



# The Modern University and the Musical Mind: Sounding out John Henry Newman



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## II

8 As it happens, however, we won't get much of a sense of any of this from reading *The Idea of a University* alone. Newman here seems to have adopted an English reticence as opposed to a Germanic enthusiasm for music. Mind you, it has to be said that few musicians will have considered Newman either. If they have read (or, should I say, sung) a word of him at all, it will be through an encounter with Elgar's setting of 'The Dream of Gerontius', his poem describing the soul's imagined journey after death, or, increasingly less likely, through singing one of Newman's hymns that pops up in the traditional Catholic or Anglican Hymnals. In fact we owe him a lot more than just this, or at least those of us involved in choral music do, for, as the early intellectual leader of the Oxford, or Tractarian, Movement he did much to inspire the great nineteenth-century resurgence of choral music in the English cathedrals and university Colleges. Without Newman there may not have been any of that glorious repertoire of choral music from Parry, Stanford and Howells; no Nine Lessons and Carols from King's, but also no Monteverdi Choir, no Sixteen, no Tallis Scholars, and other ensembles whose existence is only possible today because of the musical training and opportunities provided by English Cathedrals and the collegiate choral foundations at places like Oxford and Cambridge.

While there is no doubt Newman loved music, one reason for Newman's, and indeed a general Anglo-Saxon, reticence towards music as a humanities discipline (as opposed to a mere skill or craft) lies, I think, in the problematic character of music itself. As the comparative literary critic Edward Said once observed, 'the paradox is that while music is accessible'—indeed,

as anyone who has sat next to someone with an iPod on a train will know, it is not so much accessible as *unavoidable*—‘it can’t ever be understood’, that is, it defies the kinds of conceptualisation open to other art forms.<sup>9</sup> Or, if you like, there is more than a grain of truth in that saying, commonly attributed to Frank Zappa, that ‘talking about music is like dancing about architecture’. To put it bluntly, we feel we are on much safer ground when we say that a book, a painting, a poem, or a sculpture are about something; but a symphony? A Sonata? ‘*Sonate, que me veux-tu?*’<sup>10</sup> indeed! The fact that music seems to be, at least in part, indescribable is, however, far from saying that it has no meaning. Indeed, Said argued, it is *precisely* because of this problem that music is ‘of fundamental interest... because it represents the rarity, uniqueness, and absolute individuality of art, as well as its intermittent, fragmentary, highly conditional and circumstantial existence.’<sup>11</sup>

9

I am less concerned here with investigating this statement as a truth claim than I am with the fact that Said was drawn to making it at all. I suspect he only did so because he had been lucky enough to encounter the great works of the Western musical canon from a young age; basically he did so because he *loved* this music, and it was a testament to the broadness of his mind, but also to the culture of inquiry that he had practised at Columbia University, that he felt compelled to interrogate that love. The best criticism, after all, as Henry James once wrote, is simply the mind ‘reaching out for the reasons of its interest’.<sup>12</sup> It follows, then, that a mind ‘attuned’ to music as an object of contemplation is a mind susceptible to thinking in a way that seems fundamentally different from what we might otherwise experience through, say, the empirical sciences alone. Indeed, the German critic Theodor Adorno, for one, thought critical

9 Daniel Barenboim & Edward Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes Explorations in Music and Society*, ed. Ara Guzelimian (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 24.

10 ‘Sonata, what do you want of me?’; Jean-Jacques Rousseau quoting Fontenelle, as recalled in the former’s *Dictionnaire de musique* (Paris, 1768; facs. repr., Geneva: Minkoff, 1998), 460.

11 Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 75.

12 Henry James, ‘The New Novel’, *Literary Criticism: Essays on Literature, American Writers & English Writers*, Vol. 1, ed. Leon Edel & Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 124.

thinking about music should be concerned above all with what he called '*das Mehr*', that is the very content that extends beyond the presentation of mere facts.<sup>13</sup> This is not to say that this form of knowledge is *better* than scientific enquiry, indeed that would be an especially foolish claim. But if we accept the premise of Newman's university that a well-trained mind is a mind capable of appreciating a variety of ways of knowing, then music unquestionably belongs in it.

More generally, an appreciation of music, like any of the arts, can improve our imaginative capacity, and this is much more than about merely cultivating a superior ability to day-dream! Rather, an imaginative mind is one that is predisposed to be creative and organic when faced with problems; it is one that 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate.' It understands that it is not a *tabula rasa*, whose only function is to give order to external stimuli, but is in fact fundamentally determinative as to the way one perceives a sense of experience itself.<sup>14</sup> Or, as Goethe famously once put it:

10

A fine day is like a grey one if we look at it unmoved,  
and what can move us but the quiet hope that the innate  
inclination of our heart will not remain without an object<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately it is this kind of imagination which allows us to contemplate not only what we think is real, but what is *possible*, not just what is, but what *might* be.

This kind of mind, according to the American jurist Billings Learned Hand, requires 'an endowment as rich as possible in experience'. And by that he meant, explicitly, history, letters, poetry, philosophy, the plastic arts, and—yes—music. Such experience 'makes the heart generous and provides the mind

13 See Theodor Adorno, 'On the Problem of Musical Analysis', *Music Analysis* 1 (1982), 167–87.

14 See I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 72–99.

15 'Ein heiterer Tag ist wie ein grauer, wenn wir ihn ungerührt ansehen, und was kann uns rühren, als die stille Hoffnung, daß die angeborne Neigung unsers Herzens nicht ohne Gegenstand bleiben werde?', *Goethes Werke* (Hamburger Ausgabe) vol. 7, 421; quoted in Boyle "'Theology': Gods, Goddesses, and Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre", in Lorraine Byrne (ed), *Goethe: Musical Poet, Musical Catalyst* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004), 237.

with an understanding of the hearts of others', that is, it made the mind better able to take on the task of judging others.<sup>16</sup>

What Goethe, Said, Billings and Newman all recognised was that our imaginative stance towards something fundamentally changes our attitude towards it. And what the experience of music offers is a space where the imagination is, lacking an object external to itself, at its most free.

At this point, then, we might cautiously venture to suggest that a university that encourages creative endeavour, and, in particular, musical endeavour, might actually be a better one. It certainly seems to have been recognised that it can be better for the economy. When asked recently why Singapore produces so few truly world-class entrepreneurs, or scientists or academics compared to, say, the United States, despite being ranked at the top of the global league tables for science and maths education, the Minister of Education there noted:

We both have meritocracies...[but] yours is a talent meritocracy, ours is an exam meritocracy. There are some parts of the intellect that we are not able to test well—like creativity, curiosity, a sense of adventure, ambition. Most of all, America has a culture of learning that challenges conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority.<sup>17</sup>

Singapore is meeting the challenge of providing creative education in a number of ways, but one of the most conspicuous has been the founding of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in 2001. In short measure the university has erected a world-class teaching and performing facility in the heart of a new campus which offers programmes for both full-time students of music, but also musically-inclined students of any

16 Quoted in Frank. M. Turner, 'Newman's University and Ours', 300.

17 Quoted in Fareed Zakaria, 'We All Have a Lot to Learn', *Newsweek*, 9 January 2006.

discipline. And of course it offers frequent musical performances for all. In other places, the trend for the undergraduate academic curriculum to become increasingly 'professional', has been met by a trend for professional post-graduate courses to introduce if not performance training, then at least a space to discuss questions of aesthetic value, such has been made possible by the appointment of a previous Newman Lecturer, Professor John Armstrong as Philosopher-in-Residence at the Melbourne Business School. Now, I think we are some way off a business school appointing a Musicologist-in-Residence, but the idea seems less far-fetched when we note what ambitious Universities in our region, like the National University of Singapore, have been doing of late, and why.

12

Outside the lecture hall and laboratory, an orchestra or choir is also one of the few places on campus where students not just of different courses, but of different ethnicity, religion, and economic class, can meet and share in a joint enterprise, with all the side benefits that entails. The value of music on campus, then, is two-fold. It helps promote the creative and imaginative mind, as opposed to the merely trained one, and it cultivates our capacity for play and empathy.

Here too we might also note that the benefits of a musical campus, and the benefits that accrue from being a member of a residential College like Mannix are in close agreement. Both express something of Newman's vision of a university campus as a place where students are offered with opportunities to become fully-rounded individuals.

### III

Newman's idea of a university seems more problematic for us today, however, when we consider the ultimate role he gives to theology. For Newman, a reflection upon a beautiful work of music, or upon the nature of creativity itself, cannot but lead to a self-questioning about one's inner life and its relation to the shaping forces of existence—and that should ultimately lead to orthodox faith. This was because thinking about what is beautiful or ugly piece in a piece of music, for instance, can never of itself answer the question of what is a good or bad thing or deed. It certainly isn't true that being involved in the arts makes you *prima facie* a better person. To take a rather extreme example, some of you will be familiar with the scene from *Schindler's List* where amidst depictions of the horror of the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, the camera cuts to a scene where a uniformed SS officer, discovering an old piano in a house he has just emptied of its inhabitants, calmly sits down and starts playing. A soldier listening in asks another "Is it Bach?", "No, Mozart", comes the reply—all the while the slaughter continues around them.

13

In fact it *was* Bach, but of course the point that Spielberg is hammering home here is that an appreciation of the finer products of Western culture neither saves us from barbarians, nor makes us immune from a descent into barbarism ourselves. A love of music no more makes us a better person than a public profession of religious virtue, or the possession of a high IQ. This problem was as obvious to Newman as it was to Spielberg:

Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another, good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith. Philosophy,

however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the . . . cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life;—these are the con-natural qualities of a large knowledge; they are the objects of a University; I am advocating, I shall illustrate and insist upon them; but still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness. They may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless, —pleasant, alas, and attractive as he shows when decked out in them...<sup>18</sup>

14

By the same token it is also inadequate to say, as Theodor Adorno once did, that there can be ‘no poetry after Auschwitz’—art can never of itself solve the problem of evil. Or, as Henry James notes in *A Portrait of a Lady*, ‘there are moments in life when even Schubert has nothing to say to us’.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, by bringing into sharp relief the best, and the worst, of which humankind is capable, and by forcing us to accept that all that we might see in the world may not be all that there is in the world, it certainly can help us to reflect upon it.<sup>20</sup> And potential is, I think, everything, and in this sense it is hard not to agree with Newman when he declares that ‘[t]he educated mind may be said to be in a certain sense religious’.<sup>21</sup>

Whether one is of a religious inclination or not, the idea that the properly educated person is likely to be able to think more profoundly is not so much a comfort, as a challenge, a call to action. If access to a liberal education, like the rain, ‘falls on the just and the unjust’, it follows, then, that we can never consider

18 Newman, ‘Discourse V. Knowledge its Own End’, 89.

19 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1996), 155.

20 ‘Kulturkritik findet sich der letzten Stufe der Dialektik von Kultur und Barbarei gegenüber: nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch, und das frißt auch die Erkenntnis an, die ausspricht, warum es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben’, *Prismen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963), 26.

21 Newman, ‘Discourse VIII: Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Religion’, *The Idea of a University*, 127.

the bountiful intellectual harvest of that education our personal property alone. Instead we should feel obliged to share the benefits and insights that accrue with those less fortunate, or otherwise disinclined or unable, to gain it themselves. And we should do so with all due humility, knowing that the things, ideas, and beliefs that we might come to love and appreciate at a Newman-esque university may not be so readily valued by those who, often through no fault of their own, find life's horizons more securely bolted. But we should do it nonetheless, for the ultimate proof of such a university lies not just in the extent to which it can improve an individual's economic prosperity, but also in the extent to which it can raise national ambition, stimulate debate, and help us all continually reassess or reinforce the propositions of value (cultural, economic, technological) that form the foundation of our civil society.

15

The idea that Australian universities are in urgent need of such a renewed sense of civic vision I will leave here as a proposition for further discussion, but that this vision might, nay *should*, encompass music is certainly one of the conclusions we might justifiably reach from a fresh engagement with Newman's *The Idea of a University*. That is, if nothing else, a good note, I think, on which to end.

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The Newman Public Lecture, named in honour of Cardinal Newman, commenced at Mannix College in 1981 and is delivered annually. Past lecturers include Bishop Eric D'Arcy (who gave the inaugural address), Sir Edward Dunlop, Dr Veronica Brady, Mr Robyn Williams, Senator Michael Tate and Professor Max Charlesworth.

The three most recent lecturers were Professor Gabrielle McMullen, former Dean and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) at the Australian Catholic University, who gave an address marking the 40th anniversary of the establishment of Mannix College, philosopher Professor John Armstrong, who spoke on "The Promise of Civilisation", and Dr Simon Caterson, College Librarian and Senior Tutor, who outlined the parallel lives of General Sir John Monash and Archbishop Daniel Mannix.

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