INTRODUCTION

The performance of Verdi’s ‘Requiem’...excites a crowd of ideas...[T]he audience...last night was repeatedly moved by the impressive solemnity of the music.... From first to last all went perfectly, and even the much talked of passages...where the four trumpets in the orchestra are echoed and re-echoed by four more behind the chorus, were satisfactorily achieved....the applause burst forth where ever such a tribute to genius could be paid....[The conductor], seized with fiery ardour the dramatic opportunity, forced on the [orchestra] and singers to their utmost. The whole was magnificently given, and [excited] the audience [such] that the enthusiasm was persisted...until the encore was granted.1

To the present day Sydney music connoisseur, this review could describe the most recent performance by any of the professional music organisations in the City. The review could also describe a concert broadcast by the ABC in years gone by or a performance by a visiting professional orchestra and choir. However, many would be surprised to learn that this review is of a concert given by the Sydney Philharmonic Society on 11 October 1900, an organisation with which many in today’s music community are unfamiliar. There are several reasons that the Philharmonic Society, later renamed the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney, has been forgotten by history and Sydney music lovers alike. One explanation is that this ensemble reached its artistic peak before the arrival of the ABC in Sydney. Furthermore, although the presence of the ABC boosted the musical life of the country, the establishment of the ABC was not the beginning of respectable, highly praised, and successful music performances in Australia. Rather, an in-depth study of the history of concert life in Sydney reveals a strong music performance culture present in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the most popular and fortuitous organisations from this period was the Sydney Philharmonic Society.

Formed in 1885 as the Sydney Philharmonic Society and renamed the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney in 1909, this amateur choral organisation performed

1 “Philharmonic Society. Verdi’s ‘Requiem,’” Sydney Morning Herald, 12 October 1900.
almost continuously until 1973. In its heyday, the Philharmonic was the premier choral organisation in the greater Sydney area; some music critics of the era further suggested that this ensemble was one of the best in Australia. The performances of the Philharmonic were well attended, and the organisation boasted a membership of several hundred people for many years. The Philharmonic was also invited to perform at many important civic and state events. However, as the result of a number of factors, the Philharmonic quickly declined, following World War II, and eventually collapsed completely in 1973.

This journey from pre-eminence to oblivion is one that has been experienced by other music organisations, specifically amateur societies. Therefore, the history of the Philharmonic Society may be considered a microcosm of the history of music performances in Sydney, and the ascent of the Philharmonic to artistic and musical dominance in Sydney offers a fascinating look into amateur music societies and concert life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia. Equally, a determination and an analysis of the factors that led to the decline and ultimate demise of the organisation provides insight into the various issues that affected music societies, particularly amateur associations, in the twentieth century. Thus, it is evident that the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney was a significant organisation in the city’s musical history, and the story of this amateur society is one that merits documentation.

Therefore, this thesis is presented in two parts. The first four chapters provide a narrative history of the Philharmonic Society from its golden years of Roberto Hazon and Joseph Bradley to the organisation’s long decline and ultimate demise. The final chapter then offers an analysis of the factors that led to the collapse of the organisation. Thus, this thesis reconstructs the story of the now forgotten Royal
Philharmonic Society of Sydney. To fully understand the importance of the Philharmonic during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and to appreciate the impact and circumstances of the organisation’s collapse, a brief examination of the history of amateur choral organisations before 1885, specifically philharmonic societies, in Sydney is important.²

The first concerts by amateur musicians in Sydney reportedly took place in 1826; these concerts were attended by the elite of the Colony and featured a variety of vocal and instrumental music.³ By 1833, the title “Philharmonic Society” was used by some of Sydney’s finest amateur musicians to distinguish themselves from other music clubs of the era. These early Sydney musicians most likely chose to name their organisation “Philharmonic Society” because of the reputation of the successful London Philharmonic Society, which was established in 1813 to promote amateur instrumental music. However, there were two main differences between the London Philharmonic Society and the organisations established in Sydney under the title “Philharmonic.” The London Philharmonic promoted instrumental music performances, and membership was exclusive to male amateur musicians. Conversely, the majority of the founding members of the Sydney Philharmonic Societies in the 1830s were vocalists, and membership was open to both male and female musicians of either professional or amateur status.⁴

² An earlier version of this account of philharmonic societies in nineteenth-century Sydney was presented as a conference paper entitled “Sydney’s Early Nineteenth Century Philharmonic Societies” at the combined conference of the Musicological Societies of Australia and New Zealand in Wellington, New Zealand, 27-30 November 2003.


The founders of the early Sydney Philharmonic Societies, specifically in 1833, would not have been ignorant of the characteristics of the London Philharmonic. Rather, the reasons for these differences mostly likely stem from the demographics of the Colony: there were simply not enough male instrumentalists in the Colony to form a Philharmonic Society to follow precisely the model set by the London Philharmonic. Due to the difficulties involved with transporting an instrument to the colony as well as the great expense of buying a new instrument from a local music shop, there were few instrumentalists in the Colony. Therefore, in an effort to reproduce familiar cultural institutions with the resources available, all professional and amateur musicians were invited to join the Philharmonic Societies established in the early nineteenth century in Sydney. As a result, those societies included women and, with the exception of members of the Regimental Band who often performed with the society at these concerts, the majority of the members were vocalists.

Interestingly, the effects of this decision made in 1833 to use the title “Philharmonic Society” to represent an organisation where the majority of the members were vocalists can still be seen in Sydney, as well as in the other cities across Australia. For example, Sydney’s Philharmonia Choir and the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic are just two of the vocal organisations in Australia that use “Philharmonic” in their name. It is plausible that these and other Australian choral


6 It should be noted that Sydney’s Philharmonia Choir is not a descendent of the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney. Rather, “Philharmonia” was the name taken by the Hurlstone Choral Society when that organisation underwent a major reorganisation in 1968. The histories of both the Hurlstone Choral Society and the Melbourne Philharmonic Society will be examined in the final chapter of this thesis.
societies were in fact following the lead of the early Sydney Philharmonic Societies. Additionally, the orchestras of the Australian capital cities do not include the word “Philharmonic” in their names, unlike some orchestras in other major cities around the world.

In Sydney, the earliest known written record of this type of music club was printed in the *Sydney Gazette* on 27 April 1833. In a letter to the editor, entitled “Philharmonic Society in Sydney,” the formation of the organisation was announced.

Sir,

As Sciences and Arts are so closely connected, I feel much pleasure in acquainting the public through your respected journal, that a society of the above description has been formed in our town. A locale has been hired, and the preparations have advanced so far that in a month or six weeks’ friends may be admitted to witness the proceedings of the society....We congratulate the lovers of musical science upon this opportunity to improve the minds of our fellow citizens.

The reviews of the only two performances by this Philharmonic Society in 1834 announced great praise of the efforts put forth by the Philharmonic Society. One writer declared the concerts as “the birth of classical music in Australia,” whilst another added his acclaim, stating that the concert gave “greater satisfaction than any thing of the kind which has preceded it in this Colony.” These reviews also confirmed that the concerts featured a majority of vocal performances, with additional instrumental solo and ensemble music provided by the Band of the 17th Regiment.

Further references were made in these articles to the performances of ballads, vocal

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7 A reference to this letter from 27 April 1833 was found in James Hall, “A History of Music in Australia: Early Period – New South Wales, 1831-1833,” *Canon* 4:11 (June 1951): 519. Hall also explicitly states that this was the first formation of a Sydney Philharmonic Society.

8 *Sydney Gazette*, 27 April 1833. The association of science with art was not unusual. According to Ann K. Wentzel, many of those with an interest in the arts often considered “music as a science, as a subject studied historically [and] as a subject calling for systematic examination.” Wentzel, 4.

9 “Philharmonic Concert,” *Australian*, 29 July 1834.

duets, a variety of airs and glees, and instrumental solos with pianoforte accompaniment.\textsuperscript{11}

Aside from being a musical achievement, these concerts were also considered to be social successes. In addition to Sir Richard Bourke, the patron of the Society and Governor of the Colony,\textsuperscript{12} the attendance of the Solicitor General, the Commissioner of the Court of Requests, Chief Justice, and “a great number of the first families” of the Colony were recorded. It was further noted that “no shopkeepers, emigrants, or emancipates defiled the concert room.”\textsuperscript{13} Although still a relatively new colony, a well-defined social structure existed in Sydney in the 1830s, largely related to the history of the settlement as a convict colony. According to James Forsyth, the social class system in early colonial Sydney comprised a ruling class of educated and military personnel (mostly English) governing an underclass of convicts (many of them Irish Roman Catholic) and a small but growing number of free settlers, mostly artisans and farmers...\textsuperscript{14}

As a result, the “first families” of Sydney, that is those families of high standing who had arrived in Sydney to settle the colony and often held government appointed jobs, regularly strove to establish clubs, societies, and events that would intentionally exclude the lower classes, including those of convict origin. The concerts of the Sydney Philharmonic Society appear to have been one of those events. Given that the name of the organisation reflected high society in London and the public


\textsuperscript{12} For more information of Governor Bourke’s patronage of the Arts, see Maximilian Holzer, “Music Under the Governorship of Sir Richard Bourke 1831-1833: The Humanisation of the Colony.”

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Sydney Monitor}, 26 July 1834.

\textsuperscript{14} Forsyth, 66.
announcement of the Governor’s attendance and patronage of the Society, as well as a relatively high priced ticket that had to be purchased in advance, the members succeeded in excluding the social “riff-raft” from the concert. Thus this concert may have helped in further constructing and defining an element of the elite culture in colonial Australia.

Despite the praise, respect, and support of Sydney’s upper social class, the Sydney Philharmonic Society ceased to exist later that year with no apparent explanation. Furthermore, only the Sydney Gazette noted the absence of the Society’s concerts. In an article about an upcoming concert by the Bandmaster of 17th Regimental Band in November 1834, the Gazette’s music critic commented that the Philharmonic Society had “apparently ‘given up this life’ [of concerts].”15 A Philharmonic Society in Sydney was not mentioned again in the Sydney press until 1836.

The musical scene in Sydney in 1836 was seemingly more active than it had been only two years earlier. The arrival that year of two important musical figures, William Vincent Wallace and John Philip Deane, began a frenzy of concerts. Both men were violinists and accomplished musicians. Wallace was considered by many to be the “Australian Paganini,”16 and Deane had been a performing member of the London Philharmonic Society.17 Often, the two men were in direct competition with each other for audience members. Despite this competition, they collaborated on more than one occasion. One such event was the formation of a Philharmonic Society, as reported by the Sydney Gazette and the Sydney Monitor, in June 1836.


17 Australian, 3 May 1836.
The meeting was reportedly held at Deane’s home, and Wallace was selected as leader of the group.18 With both professionals and amateurs invited to join, the Gazette reported, the “Philharmonic Society may therefore be now considered as effectively put in operation.”19 However, neither the Australian nor the Sydney Herald reported the formation of such a group, and no performances given specifically by the Philharmonic were advertised or recorded in any of Sydney’s four newspapers during 1836. Nonetheless, the Philharmonic must have been active. For example, in September of that year the “Gentlemen of the Philharmonic Society” were listed as being involved with a “Grand Musical Festival,” an event organised to raise money for an organ at St. Mary’s Church in Hyde Park.20 Their involvement was praised in the Sydney Gazette, which reported, “Members of the Philharmonic Society contributed...their valuable assistance, for which they certainly deserve credit.”21

The 1840s brought about two short-lived attempts at formations of a Philharmonic Society, both reported solely by the Sydney Gazette. Although this newspaper cited that organisations featuring performances by amateur musicians had been popular in Great Britain, where members of those clubs as well as the general public enjoyed the concerts, neither venture resulted in an actively performing body.22

Although erratic at best, the formations of and performances by the Sydney Philharmonic Societies during the 1830s and early 1840s were an important part of

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18 “Philharmonic Society,” Sydney Gazette, 18 June 1836; Sydney Monitor, 18 June 1836.


20 This assistance from the “Gentlemen of the Philharmonic Society” was recorded in several advertisements and reviews of the concert in the Sydney Gazette, the Sydney Herald, and the Australian in August and September 1836.

21 Sydney Gazette, 24 Sept 1836.

22 Sydney Gazette, 15 December 1840; Sydney Gazette, 28 April 1842.
early nineteenth-century concert life in Sydney. As the reports from the time suggest, the music performed by these societies was some of the best ever heard in the Colony, and many of Sydney’s social elite attended the concerts. Also important was the reoccurrence of the name “Sydney Philharmonic Society” in conjunction with amateur music clubs that mainly included vocalists as members. However, the association of the title “Philharmonic” with performances by both men and women in Sydney became somewhat less restrictive during the second half of the nineteenth century.

In 1854, the Sydney Philharmonic Society was re-established, most likely following the lead of the newly formed Melbourne Philharmonic Society, now the Royal Melbourne Philharmonic. An advertisement in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 9 March 1854 stated that a “Society has been established by a number of musical gentlemen, for the cultivation and performance of the most approved Vocal and Instrumental Music.”23 Although the purpose of this Sydney Philharmonic Society was vaguely described in this advertisement, later historic records suggest that the performances of the ensemble usually featured large choral works, mainly cantatas and oratorios.24 However, no works matching this description were advertised or performed in the opening seasons of the Society, unlike its Melbourne counterpart, which performed Haydn’s *Creation* and Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus* and *Messiah* in its first season.25 In order to perform works from these genres, a large portion of the ensemble would have to have been female. While this was the case in Melbourne, it

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24 Barton and Thompson, 2.

was not so in Sydney. Although the exclusion of women from membership was not explicitly stated in the publicity for the Sydney Philharmonic Society, many advertisements and concert reviews implied that women were not admitted to the Society as members. Furthermore, there was an emphasis on orchestral music at these concerts. In this way, the 1854 Sydney Philharmonic Society was more closely related to the London Philharmonic Society than earlier versions of ensembles with that title in Sydney.26

Although women were prohibited from joining the Society as either performing members or subscribers, visiting women soloists were invited to perform with the Philharmonic. These women, predecessors to the *prima donnas* of the likes of Dame Nellie Melba, were often considered “cultural heroes”27 in a musical world dominated by men. Frequently the stars of the theatrical and musical stages, these women, especially those visiting from overseas, were widely sought after by many choral societies in Sydney, including the Philharmonic Society. This practice of relying on professional musicians, both male and female and often from overseas, would become a trend also adopted by the Philharmonic Society established in 1885. It is unfortunate and somewhat ironic that the success of an amateur choral society was often dependent on the talent of professional musicians.

This Sydney Philharmonic Society continued to perform regularly until 1858, when historic records suggest that the Society dissolved and was replaced the

26 “Sydney Philharmonic Society,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 August 1854; “Sydney Philharmonic Society,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 1854; Wentzel, 117. With the Australian gold rush of the 1850s, the demographics of the Colony had changed significantly from earlier years. By the time the Sydney Philharmonic Society was re-established in 1854, there would have been a sufficient male population in Sydney to allow the governing members of the organisation to restrict membership in the Society to men, thus more closely reflecting the characteristics of the familiar cultural institution of the London Philharmonic Society.

following year by the Sydney Harmonic Society.28 However, an ensemble with the name Sydney Philharmonic Society did continue to give concerts on a casual basis through to 1870. This organisation was often conducted by John Deane, the son of John Philip Deane.29 Although these later Sydney Philharmonic Societies occasionally performed large choral works, such as Handel’s *Messiah*, most of the concerts through 1870 were “miscellaneous” in nature and very closely resembled concerts of the Sydney Philharmonic Society from the 1850s. Even so, these Philharmonic Societies of the 1850s through 1870 were later recognised as the predecessors of the Sydney Philharmonic Society formed in 1885, despite the former Societies rarely performing the large choral works that were characteristic of the latter Society.

Aside from these early Philharmonic Societies, the Sydney Philharmonic Society of 1885 considered many amateur choral societies formed in Sydney after 1858 to be part of the Society’s heritage. Philharmonic Society historians G. Marr Thompson and Robert B. Barton in 1903 and James K. Gill in 1935 made note of the establishment and performances of the following organisations in their respective histories of the Philharmonic: the Sydney Harmonic Vocal Society, the Civil Service Musical Society, the Sydney Choral Society, and the Sydney Musical Union. The Sydney Musical Union, formed in 1877 and later conducted by Sydney Moss, was very strongly emphasised in the Philharmonic histories.30 Many of the founding members of the 1885 Philharmonic were involved in the Sydney Musical Union, and the ensemble performed music from the same genres as the Philharmonic Society.

28 Barton and Thompson, 2.

29 Gill, 6.

30 Barton and Thompson, 3; Gill, 6. According to Wentzel, the Sydney Musical Union was founded in 1876. Wentzel, 197.
primarily oratorios and cantatas. Furthermore, the programmes from the concerts of the Sydney Musical Union, in addition to those of the early Philharmonic Societies, are bound with the programmes of the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney in the Mitchell Library collection at the State Library of New South Wales.\footnote{This programme collection, which also contains Sydney Philharmonic Society programmes from 1858, 1864, 1869, and 1870, is found at call number 780.6/R.}

Despite the fact that the performances of the later Sydney Philharmonic Societies featured more instrumental music than vocal music, the title “Philharmonic” continued to imply a strong tradition of quality music performances to the members of Sydney’s music community. This tradition, coupled with the oratorio and cantata performances by the subsequent amateur choral societies, laid the foundation for Sydney’s next major choral society, the organisation that would become known as the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney.