Despite being all but forgotten by history, the story of the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney is fascinating and intriguing. Today, whilst the performing arts scene is centred on professional organisations and ensembles primarily supported by the ABC, it is difficult to envisage an amateur musical society dominating concert life in Sydney. Yet, for more than forty years during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that was the reputation of the Philharmonic Society. Although the details surrounding the Philharmonic’s successes are significant, the factors that led to the collapse of the organisation are equally important and demanding of documentation and analysis. A study of the issues that contributed to the Philharmonic’s demise, including the Society’s inability to maintain consistency in their leadership in later years, a change in general musical trends from amateur vocal performances to professional orchestral concerts, an increase in competition from other entertainments, the establishment of the ABC, and an ongoing lack of support from the city and state governments, offers insight into the areas of concern that faced other amateur music organisations of the era.

Although it is conjectural to argue that the Philharmonic deserved to survive to the present day because of the organisation’s strong tradition and contributions to musical development in Sydney, it is important to recognise that the Society is a significant part of Sydney’s music and cultural history. Granted, some of the factors that contributed to the ruin of the Philharmonic were beyond the organisation’s control. Nevertheless, by taking notice of the general factors that led to the decline of this amateur choral society, present-day organisations have the opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the Philharmonic Society.
Despite the large collection of programmes and detailed records of the Philharmonic extant in the State Library of New South Wales and the National Library of Australia and the documentation of the activities of the Society in the local press, there are still a few details that are unclear. For example, why was the Philharmonic unable to secure financial support from the Sydney City Council despite three of the Philharmonic’s presidents serving as Lord Mayor of Sydney? What led the leadership of the Philharmonic to programme works that were known at the time to be not what the audiences and critics wanted to hear? And finally, what specifically led the ABC to choose the Hurlstone Choral Society over the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney? Although definitive answers to these questions may never emerge, the fact remains that the collapse of the Philharmonic was the result of a complex intersection of time and circumstance.

This study of the rise and fall of the Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney has opened many avenues of further research. The Philharmonic was only one of several amateur musical organisations thriving in Sydney during the pre-ABC years of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these music societies, including the Sydney Musical Union and the Sydney Choral Society, also have a story worth telling, each with details that would provide further insight into the culture of the concert life during this period. A second area requiring further study and comparative research is the impact of the development of amateur music in England on the British colonies. The growth of amateur choral societies in Australia demonstrated the desire of those in the colonies to recreate the familiar cultural institutions of England. As this was a successful venture in Australia, it was likely the case in other parts of the British Empire as well. A further aspect of this study that merits additional research is the involvement of women in the performance of music
during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia. In other parts of the world during this era, women were often excluded from musical organisations. Yet in Australia, the participation of women in orchestras and particularly in choral societies was encouraged and, in some cases, assumed. In the case of the Philharmonic Society, the involvement of women was paramount in the success of the organisation, as it was one of the key factors that set the Philharmonic apart from other choral societies of the day, namely the all-male Liedertafels. As with other comparable projects, this study into the history of the Philharmonic Society contributes to a deeper understanding of music and the culture of music performance in Sydney and across Australia during the colonial era and in the twentieth century, especially prior to the arrival of the ABC.

The Royal Philharmonic Society of Sydney existed in an era when amateur choral organisations often represented the best in music performances. Although times have changed and concert life in Sydney is now very different from a hundred years ago, the story of the Philharmonic Society is one worth telling. Perhaps James K. Gill put it best: “[The Philharmonic Society’s] path has not always been strewn with roses....[Yet] its...undimmed and unbroken services in the interests of the citizens has won for it an honoured place in the historic scheme of things. Its proud and dignified position commands respect.”¹

¹ Gill, 33.