

## Music and sound collections deteriorating

# NLA suffers severe lack of funds

The National Library of Australia's new Music Library and Sound Recordings Unit is suffering a chronic shortage of staff and funds.

Behind the impressive new feature wall the collection of 100 original music manuscripts, 65,000 music scores and 350,000 sound recordings lies in disarray on metre upon metre of shelving, virtually unsorted and uncatalogued.

The Music Library and Unit, located on one of the lower ground floors of the NLA, was officially opened by the Director of the Canberra School of Music, Mr E. Llewellyn, on February.

An article by Brian Jeffrey in the *Canberra Times* of 24 February, says, 'Certainly, the new accommodation is more commodious than the back rooms and packing cases the collection has been used to.

### Disappointment

But disappointment could well await members of the public who seek out the unit and ask to hear a recording for no other reason than that they like it. For one thing, some of the technical trappings (including the listening room) are not yet fully operational. More importantly, however, the unit has neither the staff nor the organisation to service such requests. "We don't want to refuse anybody", the librarian-in-charge, Mrs Prue Neidorf, said. "But to protect everybody from too much disappointment we will have to restrict access even when we have a fully equipped listening room - especially while we have only one technician".

In practice, "recreational" listeners are being referred to the Canberra Public Library service, which has a recording collection designed for that purpose, though its size and range are comparatively limited.

The National Library facilities are being reserved for researchers, academics and the

like, and for activities such as copying for public broadcast (which at least enables a wide audience to hear selected items).

### Task force disbanded

'What little has been accomplished has been done largely on an ad hoc basis. Even the shelving program was undertaken by a small "task force" drawn from various parts of the library and employed on unpacking and shelving on a part-time and after-hours basis. That task force was disbanded last December, with only about two-thirds of the material shelved.

The next task, that of cataloguing the collection, is mammoth. Only 5000 recordings have been catalogued so far - less than 1.5 percent of the total collection.

'Even when the five-member task force was there to assist, it was estimated that the cataloguing would take 14 years to get "under control".

'Now, with the task force gone, cataloguing has virtually ground to a halt. Of the unit's six regular staff, none is employed to perform cataloguing duties, and those who have some idea of how to go about the task are faced with the truly herculean challenge of catching up on the backlog in their spare time'.

### Deterioration

Almost two years ago, Brian Jeffrey reported in the *Canberra Times* that 'restraints on government spending were hampering the preservation of a number of the National Library's so-called "temporary recordings".'

Shortly after that article appeared, the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Ellicott wrote to Jeffrey acknowledging that the National Library has a statutory responsibility in respect of the music and sound collection, but added that "current constraints on the resources presently available . . . have affected the fulfilment of this responsibility over the

past few years". The Minister offered no comment on the deterioration of items in the collection.

Brian Jeffrey says 'It appears that none of the archives' endangered items has been attended to; nor has there yet been any allocation of funds for the purpose.

In fact, the unit is not even sure how many endangered items there are. Mrs Neidorf is concerned that the task force members, none of whom was trained in sound recording archival procedures, may have shelved material in need of urgent attention.

The state of the National Library's music and sound archives is almost certain to be a topic of discussion when the recently-formed Australian Branch of the International Association of Sound Archives (IASA) holds its first annual conference later this year.

'Among its activities IASA acts as watchdog on what is being done to preserve sound recordings throughout the world.

Members of the Australian Branch include some of the country's top private collectors; people who may one day be looking for a permanent home for their own collections.

'Should they find the National Library's archives wanting, they could well turn to other repositories. One alternative would be the Performing Arts Museum of the Victorian Arts Centre; its decision to establish a sound collection may well be the precursor to rivalry with the national sound archives'.

## Relations are big business

Business is booming at the State Archives Office and the Australian Society of Genealogists as more and more people are chasing information about their ancestors.

The Director of the Society of Genealogists, Nick Vine-Hall, says that visitors to their headquarters at Millers Point, NSW, are running at the rate of about 15,000 a year. At the State Archives Office, situated at 2 Globe Street in the Rocks area of Sydney, inquiries from people seeking information about their forebears are at the rate of about 30 a day.

The Archives Office has microfilmed a vast amount of the major papers used regularly in genealogical research. The main sources being: shipping records, convict records, census statistics, land records and the like.

The Society of Genealogists has approximately 70 million names on microfilm, covering people whose forebears lived in Australia, Great Britain, the US and many European countries.

The Society charges inquirers a fee of \$5 a day. Inquiries at the Archives Office are free of charge.

The phone number for the Archives Office is (02) 237 0100, and the Society can be contacted at Richmond Villa, Millers Point, Sydney, NSW 2000.

Today the cardboard boxes have gone, but the music collection still lies in a state of disarray.



NLA photograph