

Australia/New Zealand Regional Committee of the ICTM

Statement on Indigenous Australian Music and Dance, 2011

The International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), an NGO in Formal Consultative Relations with UNESCO, is a worldwide organization dedicated to the preservation of traditional music. Recent scholarship reveals that Australia's traditions of Indigenous music and dance are in crisis. These traditions are among the oldest and most endangered in the world, and yet insufficient financial support is currently available to undertake the work that is required to protect and preserve them. The Australia and New Zealand Regional Committee of the ICTM, with the endorsement of the ICTM General Assembly, has issued this statement to draw attention to this crisis and to call for greater support and action in this domain of endangered intangible cultural heritage.

Songs, dances and ceremonial performances lie at the centre of Indigenous Australian cultures, playing a vital role in religious beliefs and practices. They are important repositories of cultural knowledge. Through song and dance, Indigenous Australians maintain social and personal wellbeing, sustain their cultures, and maintain Law and their own identity. Performance traditions also serve to strengthen Indigenous languages and provide intergenerational links between families and communities. Indigenous songs and dances are therefore essential to Indigenous culture and society.

Once found all across Australia, these traditions now only survive in a few regions, and it is estimated that 98 percent of musical traditions have already been lost. Many senior composers and performers have passed away leaving limited or no record of their knowledge. Modern lifestyles and the ongoing devastating impact of colonization are affecting the dissemination of cultural knowledge between generations. The preservation of Indigenous Australian performance traditions through recording and documenting is therefore vital for their survival.

Members of the Australia and New Zealand Regional Committee of the ICTM collaborate in projects aimed at preserving and revitalizing Indigenous Australian music and dance, including the establishment of Indigenous Knowledge Centres and initiatives such as the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia. The ICTM recognises the benefits of these initiatives, and calls for them to be supported and expanded in any way possible. Urgent action is required to ensure the protection of those living practices that remain, for the benefit of all Australians, and for cultural diversity worldwide.