

THE UNSEEN VOICE

A cultural study of early Australian radio

Lesley Johnson

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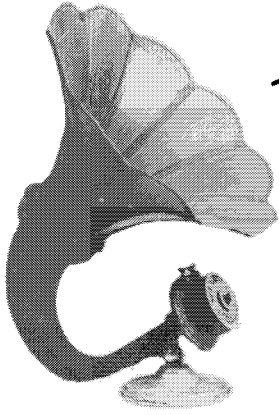
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PREFACE

I began this project in 1978 as a study of the Australian Broadcasting Commission and Australian intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s. I quickly became more interested in the beginnings of radio itself and the way in which its cultural tasks were determined for it. This topic raised a far broader range of questions than I began with. I had been interested initially in the role of intellectuals. Instead I turned to questions about the production of culture, the dynamics of popular culture, cultural hierarchies, the relationship between everyday life and the world of politics, and the changes wrought on women's lives, in particular in the two decades before World War II. This book uses those questions to analyse the first two decades of broadcasting in Australia. To do so I have drawn on a range of theoretical material from media studies, cultural studies, sociology, history and women's studies. In the introduction to the book I have discussed a selection of that material to indicate the starting points and framework for my analysis of early Australian radio. I also introduce explicitly theoretical material at times throughout the book. I have attempted to discuss the theoretical literature in such a way as to make that material comprehensible to readers who are not necessarily familiar with the theories.

Gathering material for this study was often difficult and disheartening. I knocked on countless doors and made many fruitless telephone calls, attempting to find material about the broadcasting stations of the 1920s and 1930s, as well as about programme production. Many recordings of programmes have now been rescued and preserved in the National Film and Sound Archives in Canberra, but I wanted to know about the decisions broadcasters made about programming, how they conceptualized the radio audience and how they defined the cultural tasks of radio. I could find little that was still held by the commercial stations

themselves, the production companies or the advertising firms, and often the archival material on the Australian Broadcasting Commission was sketchy and poor. The few tentative attempts I made with oral history interviews of people connected with early Australian radio succeeded only in eliciting memories thoroughly contained in the form of reminiscences about 'the golden age of wireless'. I did use some of this material in its printed form; but I decided to forgo any project of oral history myself. But the private papers of F.W. Daniell, who had been a major figure in establishing the Macquarie Broadcasting Services, held in the National Library and the early radio magazines proved to be valuable and exciting sources. This material led me to ask additional questions, such as how both listeners and broadcasters were taught to adapt to radio as a domestic companion, the significance of the radio personality, and broadcasting's role in the defining of legitimate politics. These questions did not spring spontaneously from the material itself; they were a result of my theoretical framework, but I did often find myself adapting that framework to the material and returning to the theoretical literature to find ways of understanding the debates and discussions about broadcasting about which I was reading.

For several years I was involved in a slightly different version of this project. I contributed to the 1938 volume of the bicentennial history project, now to be published as a series called *The Australians*. For that work I was able to draw on the extensive oral history collection made of people's memories of the 1930s for the 1938 study. I found the project a stimulating exercise, offering opportunities of working at a high level of involvement with other people and of using a different type of material. Again, however, I remained sceptical about the usefulness of oral history for my purposes of understanding the impact of radio on everyday life or popular consciousness. Images of the golden age of wireless and of family life before the age of television have widespread currency today, promoted in particular by the media themselves. The dominance of these images raises fundamental questions about the extent to which people's memories of early radio and everyday life in the 1920s and 1930s are shaped and mediated by these public histories. Such considerations could be left aside for the 1938 essay because theoretical issues were to be submerged as much as possible in its writings. But for this more substantial work and one which does address questions about how the media form our sense of history and our sense of identity, I felt oral history sources posed too many problems. I am not suggesting that they could not be used (on the contrary), but their use would require the

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consideration of a wider set of theoretical tasks than I felt able to address in this study. I have provided a reference to my 1938 essay in the bibliography. As well, I have listed there my other publications about radio where I have tried out some of my ideas for this book and used some of the same material.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout the process of doing this study and writing the book I have been assisted by many different people in many different ways. The two people who need the greatest credit for their work in collecting material for the study, for their exciting and insightful comments about that material, and for their continuing interest in and encouragement for my subsequent work are Pauline Johnson and Deborah Tyler. Their work as research assistants on the project demonstrated to me most forcefully the extent to which this category of work is not sufficiently appreciated or rewarded in universities. I have also been assisted by numerous librarians and archivists over the past seven years. I cannot mention them all by name, so will refer to most by their institutions only: archivists at the Australian Archives in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney; Pat Kelly, Archivist (Documents) for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (now Corporation); archivists in the British Broadcasting Corporation's Written Archives; librarians in the manuscripts section of the National Library; librarians in the Mitchell Library; and Geoffrey Holden, Curator of Communications, Museum of Victoria.

Michael Counihan's Master of Arts thesis is a substantial and innovative study of Australian broadcasting in the 1920s. I have noted where I have specifically drawn on his study or where our analyses have overlapped, but I wish to acknowledge more generally the power and clarity of his analysis. I have benefited enormously from reading his thesis, reading his published work and from brief discussions with him.

I have also gained stimulation and encouragement from reading the work of and talking to the following people: Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, John Potts, Stuart Hall, Ken Inglis and Judith Brett. Gwyneth Dow read the draft manuscript and gave me many useful suggestions. In

1980 I participated for two terms in the media working group of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England. Though the group was in the doldrums about their work for much of that time, I benefited from that contact and from reading their group presentation from the previous year. I thank most sincerely Richard Johnson for his warm welcome each time I have visited the Centre as well as for his interest in my work.

Two people have been crucial to my retaining the belief that my project was worth pursuing, particularly in the last few years. Geoff Swanton has constantly expressed enthusiasm for the project and quickly read the first draft of the manuscript. As the manager of 3CR radio he made me feel that the book could be of interest and value to a broad audience and that I should write the book with this in mind. But it is his continuing encouragement that has helped me most in the last two years. Similarly, I have appreciated Henry Mayer's constant interest in and support for my work. It has been of great assistance to know that he believed my efforts were worthwhile, and I was grateful to receive his comments on my work.

I received a grant from the Australian Research Grants Scheme over a period of two years in 1982 and 1983, for which I am grateful. I received research funds at various times from the Department of Education, University of Melbourne, to help me make my numerous visits to archives and libraries in Canberra and Sydney. I wish to acknowledge the work of Gloria Johnson, and in particular that of Dorothy Rowlands and Gita Grimaud in typing the many drafts, as well as the final version of this manuscript. I appreciate and thank them for their great skill, patience and constant readiness to assist. I also thank Gerard Lier, Chief Technical Officer in charge of the photography section of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, who took the photographs of the wireless sets.

To friends and family I owe the warmest gratitude. Friends connected with the sociology research group at the University of Melbourne have been a great support: Helen Bannister, David McCallum, Gary Wickham and, again, Debbie Tyler and Geoff Swanton. They have been terrific companions, intellectually and emotionally. Others who have been helpful and encouraging are Marion Kosak, Michael Apple, Dick Selleck and Richard Teese. My family, Betty Johnson, Pauline Johnson, Terry Johnson, John Grumley and Martin Sullivan, have always been interested and sympathetic. Martin has given crucial editorial advice on various drafts and helped me in many other ways.

Introduction:

RADIO AS POPULAR CULTURE

In his inaugural address to listeners, Charles Lloyd Jones, the first chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), described radio as 'this unseen voice'.¹ Broadcasting had been officially in operation for almost nine years, but he employed this image to create a sense of excitement and wonder about radio. The use of this rhetoric in 1932 reveals the extent to which people were not yet accustomed to the new cultural institution of broadcasting nor to this new phenomenon in their daily lives. This book examines the transition – the way in which people stopped treating radio as a marvellous if slightly mysterious piece of technology and became accustomed to the 'unseen voice' as domestic companion, a normal and necessary part of their daily lives.

The book studies the first two decades of broadcasting in Australia. During the 1920s, not everyone agreed that its potential as domestic companion was the best or only way to make use of this technology. Alternative ideas about its usage and social purpose were proposed in these early years, but by the end of the first decade, they had virtually disappeared from the field of public debate. The Australian population was being persuaded to accept radio into their homes and to make it central to the pattern of their daily lives. By the end of the 1930s it clearly played that role.

In the course of this transition, clear assumptions began to emerge about the type of broadcasting style and programme content appropriate to radio, many of them deriving from the definition of its use as domestic companion. Programmes such as the early family serials, women's sessions and music programmes relied upon and added to that understanding of its use, just as the intimate style of the radio personality, which began to be exploited in the 1930s, was predicated on

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the image of an audience ensconced in the comfort and privacy of their homes. News and information programmes were based on similar expectations and these broadcasts were celebrated as a means of bringing 'the outside world' to listeners in the context of their world – their domestic, everyday life.

As a means for the dissemination of mass messages from a central source to listeners in their private homes or domestic environments, radio both reflected and contributed to fundamental cultural changes occurring in the 1920s and 1930s. Radio, through its programmes and through the discussions that took place around it, promoted a specific image of people's daily lives. It glorified the everyday and the satisfactions to be found there. This world of the everyday was portrayed as separate from the world of work and the world of the political – the latter appeared as the domain only of politicians and public figures. The everyday revolved around the domestic, family life of individuals. Radio spoke to its listeners in this context as consumers, whose sense of themselves, or means of self-identification, was to be found through the exercise of individual choice in the market-place. But the history of the early years of radio also demonstrates the contested nature of social and cultural change. This study examines the gradual and at times contradictory development of these ideologies of the everyday, the political and the relationship between the individual and society.

In the late 1980s many of the assumptions and conventions about broadcasting established in the 1920s and 1930s may be challenged by the commercial success of video, cable and satellite technologies. Indeed many of them seem to have disappeared already or to have been transformed in the world of modern radio. For a time apparently usurped by television, radio has now once again overtaken television in popularity.² Talk-back programmes, music and news dominate the air, rather than the family serials of the 1930s. Official discussions of broadcasting over the past ten years have turned to questioning the viability and value of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (or Corporation as it has been called since 1983) as a public institution, or to the possibility of seeking commercial sponsorship for the ABC's programmes. The new system of public broadcasting stations introduced in 1974 has challenged the concept of the public previously embodied in the ABC, and encroached on its audience and territory of serious programming. The impact of the introduction of FM broadcasting in the 1970s continues as commercial concerns become increasingly interested in FM rather than AM

licences as profitable investments. Finally, a trend begun in the 1950s and 1960s (assisted by the invention of transistor radios and portable record players) towards private and individual consumption of media products now appears to have reached its logical limit as young people, at home and in the streets, are cocooned in the private world of their 'Walkman' sets, listening to the throb of their favourite rock bands. This latter image seems to illustrate dramatically Baudrillard's warning that the most profound social and political effect of the modern media is that people are 'no longer speaking to each other'.³

This history examines the assumptions and conventions about radio programming and its significance in our daily lives established in the first two decades of Australian broadcasting. It thus provides a basis to assess the extent to which those assumptions still remain with us, but, more importantly, to assess their social value and political consequences in the past and the present. It offers, too, an insight into how such assumptions become established and are made to appear natural and necessary to the technology itself. This analysis is relevant not just to our understanding of broadcasting, but to a critical evaluation of current usages and understandings of new developments in communication and information technologies. This study does not enter contemporary debates explicitly, but has been conducted in the belief that an investigation of early radio will serve to highlight the profound cultural and political consequences involved in the development of these technologies and the way in which we can and should be far more aware of the steps involved.

Further, this history addresses contemporary discussions about popular culture. In Australia, as elsewhere, analyses of culture frequently resort either to celebratory accounts or moralistic condemnations of popular radio and television. An examination of early Australian radio raises crucial questions about the concept of popular culture. The history of the first two decades of radio is a history of the re-forming and re-working of the notion of the 'popular' and the setting up of and legitimating of distinctions between the culture of the élite and the culture of popular tastes. In Australian broadcasting, this opposition between high culture and popular culture may appear at first glance to have been institutionalized and arisen of necessity with the establishment of a dual system of broadcasting: the ABC, set up in 1932 to pursue cultural excellence, versus the commercially based radio stations of the 1930s, whose viability relies on the capturing of mass

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markets. This study suggests that the difference did not (and does not) lie here, but is a question of the fabrication of distinctions, the manufacture of cultural hierarchies and their legitimation through institutions like broadcasting.⁴ Superior cultural tastes become the preserve of, and grounds for unity of, a limited social group, while the tastes and preferences of the masses are said to demonstrate their inferior intellectual and moral stature.

The celebratory approach to popular culture has dominated contemporary analyses in this field in Australia. In part it is a reaction to these traditional distinctions made on the basis of taste and superior moral worth, but it is also a reaction to radical critiques that have interpreted popular culture as the false consciousness of the masses.⁵ Two commentators on Australian culture, Keith Windschuttle and John Docker, have in recent years analysed popular Australian television, or popular culture more generally, in terms of its providing an authentic reflection of people's daily lives. The popular media, says Windschuttle, sells Australian working people a culture they themselves have created – it is a matter of 'selling them themselves'.⁶ To clarify the stance taken in this study on matters such as these and, more generally, the questions that organize this history, the following discussion examines a number of theoretical issues in cultural and media studies.

Theoretical matters⁷

Raymond Williams's approach in his seminal book *Television. Technology and Cultural Form* provided the starting point for this study. He argues that the technology of broadcasting was devised and developed with certain practices and purposes – certain social needs – already in mind. Decisions had already been made before the official development of wireless broadcasting was undertaken that directed the commercial and social exploitation of the technology.⁸ This book examines, in the Australian context, the way in which broadcasting was defined as a means of one-way communication to a mass audience in the privacy of their homes. The material gathered in the course of this investigation elucidates the steps in this process, while also revealing that despite decisions already taken to develop the technology of wireless in this manner, this definition of broadcasting's social use was by no means guaranteed from the outset. Rather, it was a question of this definition becoming increasingly dominant during the first decade of Australian broadcasting.

By the mid-1920s, this social use of wireless had begun to appear inevitable and even necessary to its technology; but an important critique of broadcasting had emerged that attempted to keep alive the suggestion that its technology could be exploited for quite different social purposes. A section of the labour movement in Australia challenged the dominant understanding of and use to which wireless technology was being put (their political analysis of wireless and their suggested alternative ideas about communication form part of the material of this study), while in the international context, a number of critics also appeared whose similar attacks on the form and definition of radio broadcasting have achieved a more lasting recognition and have been incorporated into contemporary theoretical debates about the media and popular culture. The writings of Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno remain pertinent today to discussions of the media, but it should be realized that the debates between them were first formed in the context of the early years of broadcasting. Their ideas and their disagreements will be discussed with this in mind.

Writing in the 1930s, Brecht argued that it should be possible to transform radio in the interests of 'proletarian communication': in the interests of working people communicating with each other and developing a sense of shared experiences and goals. This did not entail simply altering the content of the programmes sent out by radio, but changing the relationship set up between speaker and listener. Brecht attacked the form in which radio had developed, the one-sidedness of its communication; he saw radio's mode of operation at that time as purely an instrument of distribution of messages or content for which the listener was made a passive receiver. The listener, he declared, should be able to speak, not only to listen – to join in an active relationship with other listeners-speakers.⁹

The social and political context, Brecht acknowledged, would have to change if such an alternative social use of wireless technology was to become possible, but he remained committed to undermining its present functioning or social use. He sought to achieve this end by speaking publicly of his different conception of radio's potential, as well as by experimenting with programmes that attempted to break down the categories or boundaries placed between the roles of speaker/broadcaster and listener.¹⁰ Brecht thus attributed a positive value to the technology of broadcasting, but he was hopeful too that, even within the restrictions that had already been placed on its social uses, wireless

could be utilized for progressive social purposes.

Walter Benjamin echoed and extended Brecht's optimistic assessment of the possibilities of this new technology. In his essays on Brecht's work and, more generally, in his discussions of cultural production, Benjamin celebrated the potential held by such technology (though not necessarily its current social use) for breaking down the 'aura' of cultural objects, objects of 'art'. Through the new means of technical reproduction (whether photography, movie camera or broadcasting), the art object, Benjamin argued, is detached from its history and from the rituals that customarily attest to its authenticity, its unique existence. These processes of mechanical reproduction bring the art object into its listener's or viewer's own world, reactivating or renewing these cultural products and shattering their reliance on tradition or cultural heritage for their meanings. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger draws heavily on Benjamin's work and illustrates this point in his discussion of how the modern teenager covers the wall of his or her room with posters and prints of famous paintings. Juxtaposed with other items of personal significance, these reproductions of paintings acquire particular and private meanings for their owners that do not rely or depend on the history or traditions that surround the original objects of art.¹¹ Benjamin believed these new technologies of reproduction and dissemination, with their potential to change the social function of art, opened up the possibility of its use in political struggle or practice.¹²

Benjamin, like Brecht, warned of the forces that moved to obstruct this potential of the new means of cultural production. He pointed to the creation of movie stars and the building up of the cult of the personality by film studios as an attempt to replace the desiccated aura of the art object with the artificial aura of the commodity.¹³ Such developments set out to create a distance between the new cultural products, in this instance films, and their consumers, thus mystifying their means of production. The role of the consumers was thereby contained or diminished. They were to be discouraged by the new aura being built up around films and movie stars from determining their own uses for and meanings to be given to these products. The mystique built up around a movie star suggests to the audience that there is only one set of meanings to be attributed to a film in which they appear: that determined by producers and agents. Similarly, the rituals and traditions surrounding an object of art imply that it has a unique value and authenticity whose meaning and significance can only be determined by the accredited few.

This history of early Australian radio examines the way in which a

particular relationship between broadcaster and listener was eventually defined as necessary to broadcasting. Using the insights provided by Brecht and Benjamin, it does not assume that this development was inevitable, but rather seeks to elucidate the processes by which one particular concept of the relationship between the listener and the material broadcast came to dominate public discussions about radio as well as the practices of broadcasting stations. This course of events is shown to be complex and often confused. One articulate group within the labour movement resisted this definition of the social use of the technology of broadcasting; nor did purchasers of wireless equipment necessarily adopt the passive listening attitude required of them – the public had to be taught how to be ‘listeners-in’; and throughout the 1920s considerable uncertainty existed about what the content of the broadcasting messages should be – there was no clear concept at first of programming.

Further, this study employs Benjamin’s argument about art and cultural tradition to examine critically the distinction reasserted in the field of broadcasting between popular tastes and authentic culture. The attempts made by the ABC to create a sense of specialness and superiority for the traditional cultural items broadcast – classical music, plays by well-known dramatists, talks on scholarly subjects – mystified the differences between these programmes and those deemed ‘popular’. The setting up of such distinctions between ‘culture’ and ‘popular entertainment’ discourages people from attributing their own meanings and significance to works of opera or serious drama. And lively debates exploring these issues frequently erupted in the popular radio magazines of the 1920s and 1930s.

Brecht and Benjamin formulated their views in opposition to the cultural pessimism of Adorno, and more generally of members of the Frankfurt School. Adorno and Horkheimer in their joint essays referred to the new mass media in derogatory terms as the ‘culture industry’. The new means of cultural production, they argued, duped their consumers into becoming reliant on the marketplace for the goods and commodities provided for them. Adorno and Horkheimer developed some powerful criticisms of the functioning and social effects of the cultural industries; but they insisted upon the superiority of the traditional works of art compared with those of popular culture. The latter, they claimed, simply represented the manipulated consciousness of the masses.

Adorno and Horkheimer diagnosed the social effects of radio as derived from its form: 'the gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere', they declared, 'replaces its content'.¹⁴ They rejected all hopes of radio assuming any other form or of its technology being used in any other way than to manipulate the very manipulable masses. All popular art, popular music and popular literature, they claimed, is bad art. Listening to music on radio, Adorno added, whether classical music or jazz, is commodity listening: listeners respond to the music as quotations of itself, enjoying only what is comfortable, familiar.¹⁵ The only point that Adorno and Horkheimer would concede in favour of popular culture was that it formed, they believed, the bad conscience of serious art. The existence of 'light art' and the very distinction itself arose only because there were those whose lives made it impossible to appreciate real art.¹⁶

Adorno in particular provides some valuable insights into the development of radio's cultural form that will be used and discussed in the body of this text. But this critique of broadcasting needs to be placed in the context of his writing during the early decades of broadcasting. In contemporary culture theory debates, the opposition between Brecht and Benjamin on one side and Adorno and the Frankfurt school on the other, is all too readily assumed to be recoverable in terms of contemporary stances. In the Australian context, this opposition has at times been reduced (and trivialized) to a question of being basically either for popular culture or against it: for Benjamin or for Adorno.¹⁷

This stance fails to acknowledge the extent to which Benjamin (and Brecht) believed popular culture to be a contradictory arena, a site of struggle.¹⁸ The history of radio is the story of one important period in modern history in which we can trace the emergence of a new definition of the people. Radio and the publicity language that surrounded it presented its audience with a picture of themselves, of their daily lives and the social world, that excluded or marginalized such identifications as working class or working people. It spoke to its listeners as consumers, individuals, whose personal troubles – the realm of everyday life – were separate from public issues – the sphere of news and information programmes about the 'outside' world.¹⁹ But this message was not clearly or consistently delivered at first, nor was it uncontested. Contradictory consequences would also emerge in the way in which radio spoke to different sections of its audience.

Radio, it will be argued, defined one section of its audience as more than a collection of individuals, as a group with shared fundamental

experiences in common: women. In the 1930s, this message became crucial to the commercial stations, for women were seen as a major market by advertisers. Day-time programming set out to persuade women that they should understand themselves as having interests in common that would be satisfied by these programmes (and the items they advertised) and that they should think about their lives and experiences in terms of their being women. Thus, while at one level the radio audience was being taught to see personal troubles as private ones only, women's programmes were showing women that their troubles were shared by a vast, though as yet invisible, public. This defining of one section of the population as a group by institutions such as radio took on a new significance in the late 1960s when women began to mobilize this sense of being a group, of having fundamental experiences in common, to form a political movement.

Radio as an institution of popular culture further demonstrates the extent to which this is an arena of tensions and contradictions in its re-working of and re-creating distinctions between the popular and the serious. In the twentieth century, all culture has increasingly assumed the form of a commodity, produced and distributed by the minority for the majority.²⁰ Developments in early Australian radio demonstrate the way in which this process progressively undermines traditional distinctions of quality and merit. They also reveal the way in which those distinctions can be speedily re-drawn, as can the political function they play. Finally, it raises questions about how needs and desires for popular pleasures are produced.

Early Australian radio

Broadcasting was officially established in Australia in September 1923. In July 1924, the Postmaster General announced the setting up of two sets of broadcasting stations and the basis was laid for today's system of a combination of public and commercially operated stations. These stations, however, went through some major changes in the first two decades of Australian broadcasting. At first, the two sets of stations, designated 'A' and 'B' class stations, were differentiated primarily on the grounds that the former were to receive funding from licence fees collected from listeners. In 1929 the government decided to co-ordinate the activities of the 'A' class stations through a single national company. The Australian Broadcasting Company made the successful tender. But in July 1932 the running of these stations was again taken over; this time

by the ABC established by act of parliament. The 'B' class stations remained on an uncertain footing throughout the 1920s, but at the end of the decade new and more powerful bodies began to acquire their licences. They changed from being small amateur operations to commercially based organizations relying on attracting advertisers for their financial success. Signalling this development, the new licensees sought official recognition for a change of name from 'B' class to commercial stations. Though this was granted a number of times in the early 1930s, they continued to be called 'B' class in many official documents as well as popular publications.

Though the history of these changes forms the background for this study, the book does not proceed by telling the story of radio's early years in straightforward, linear terms. The first two chapters deal with the 1920s. They examine the way in which broadcasting was discussed in these early years, how it was conducted, the confusions and debates that existed about what to do with this new means of communication and the way in which people had to be taught to be listeners-in (this attitude or relationship to wireless was not automatically accepted by its consumers as desirable or necessary, and the owners of broadcasting stations themselves did not necessarily understand their audiences in this way). The next three chapters examine the dominant understandings of radio and its audience that were beginning to prevail over all other alternatives by the late 1920s and early 1930s. This investigation discusses the emerging assumptions about what was appropriate content for radio programmes, what differences in style there should be between programmes, how broadcasters should speak and present themselves on radio, what the audience would like and why, how people should be divided into different audiences and what the relationship should be between the broadcasting stations and the state.

This history draws on an analysis of official statements such as those by politicians and public servants; statements or discussions of a more popular kind, such as those in newspapers, magazines and the popular radio journals; the actual practices of the broadcasting stations themselves (including the recordings of some programmes from this period) in so far as they reveal how conceptions about wireless broadcasting were developing or changing; and the private papers and official documents of various people and organizations involved in broadcasting in its early years in Australia.

A GIFT OF SCIENCE

Wireless was a wonder. Celebrated as a new science for the universal benefit of humanity, broadcasting officially began in Australia in September 1923. The magic, the marvel, the romance, and most frequently, the wonder of wireless were the terms in which the commercial beginnings of this culture industry were hailed. For the first few years this rhetoric was to dominate popular and official declamations about radio. It was claimed to be part of the exciting new age of modern electricity through whose bounty the everyday lives of the entire population would be made radiant. Opening the 1923 Radio and Electrical Exhibition in Sydney Town Hall, Dr Earle Page, the acting Prime Minister, was widely quoted as proclaiming ‘the wonders of wireless’ and expressing the belief that soon there would be ‘wireless for all’.¹

Popular science versus a domestic commodity

This language of excitement and wonder resembled in part a circus ringmaster announcing a thrilling new act. Audiences were shown the marvels of the new radio science at exhibition concerts or demonstration performances at the yearly electrical exhibitions. Newspapers and magazines kept their readers informed of recent advances, in Australia and overseas, of the successful transmission of concert performances from hundreds of miles away or of the new miracles of beam wireless. Wireless was a stunning trick: “Broadcast music” is by way of being a simple and intelligible label for a magic as marvellous as any that could be imagined.²