



26 September 2025

To whom it may concern:

2025 CORE SKILLS OCCUPATIONS LIST (CSOL) CONSULTATIONS

1. Background

Symphony Services Australia ("SSA") provides services to Australia's six symphony orchestras (the Adelaide, Melbourne, Queensland, Sydney, Tasmanian and West Australian Symphony Orchestras), on whose behalf we make this submission. The data and views expressed in this submission are representative of the views of these members.

In December 2024, changes were made to the Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL) which were designed to replace "complex, out of date and inflexible occupation lists" with one consolidated list of job codes. At that time, a key code used by Australia's symphony orchestras, code 211213 (Musician: Instrumental) was removed from the CSOL, severely impacting the organisations that rely on that code.

The ANZSCO 2022 code 211213 is equivalent to OSCA 2024 code 231633, Musician (Instrumental). Where we refer to job code 211213 in this document we are including both the ANZSCO and OSCA codes.

We request that JSA reinstate ANZSCO code 211213/OSCA code 231633 (Musician: Instrumental) to the Core Skills Occupation List.

2. The Issue

Orchestras are a highly specialised workplace. Roles for musicians and senior arts administrators are specific and require the highest level of skill to maintain the professional reputation of the orchestra, domestically and internationally. While local recruitment is always the first preference, there are limitations on the number of locals who have the skills and experience to fill each particular role at any one time.

Changes announced to the Core Skills Occupation List (CSOL) in December 2024 have resulted in consequences that we believe were unintended for the Australian orchestral sector. The removal of job code 211213: Musician (Instrumental) from the list has severely impacted our ability to engage non-Australian musicians in key ongoing roles within the orchestra, on the rare occasions this is required.

Compared to other industries and sectors, the Australian orchestras employ an extremely small number of international candidates to fill highly skilled positions. A local recruitment process is always held either prior to, or concurrent with, the international process. International candidates are only appointed after local options have been exhausted. There is no possibility of the number of international employees ballooning or getting out of control.

In the infrequent cases where international candidates are appointed to a position in an Australian orchestra, they are offered either a permanent position or a long contract to provide the stability the orchestra needs in order to operate at the highest level and to match the long planning cycles of the orchestra. This also provides the candidate with a reasonable incentive to leave an existing stable position in Europe, the UK, USA or other country and move to Australia.

The removal of job code 211213, Musician (Instrumental) from CSOL has jeopardized the orchestras' ability to recruit appropriately and engage overseas musicians on the Skills in Demand (SID) visa.

Orchestral musicians are employed in a variety of roles, some in leadership positions (Concertmaster, Co-concertmaster, section leaders and principal players) and others in "rank and file" or "tutti" positions. For many of these positions the salary ranges from \$100,000 to \$133,000 per annum and therefore the orchestras are unable to use the Specialist Skills Stream of the SID visa which has a salary requirement of \$141,210.

The orchestras collectively engage nearly 3000 musicians and administrative personnel each year¹. At present, there are fewer than five musicians or management employees on TSS visas, although this increases from time to time depending on need. The COVID period essentially stopped the process of appointments (both local and international) due to cancelled performances and the inability for musicians to travel, but the need for musicians for the orchestras is now on the rise. There are currently a further half dozen recruitment processes underway that may result in an international appointment (personnel currently on 408 visas). These international personnel, though extremely small in number, are vital to the success of the Australian symphony orchestras.

We recognise that to Jobs & Skills Australia, the number of applications using job code 211213 is negligible and may explain why the code was dropped from the CSOL. However to the orchestras (and Australia's cultural life), dropping the code could have catastrophic results. The small number of applicants makes it difficult for us to present quantitative data with any real impact, so we therefore rely on case studies and qualitative data to outline the importance of this code being included on the CSOL.

Current employment process

Symphony orchestras are truly globalised businesses, with each orchestra continuously striving for internationally recognised artistic excellence and reputation. To ensure their artistic aspirations are met, Australian orchestras recruit only the best musicians to vacant positions through a rigorous and lengthy audition and trial process of peer review and assessment. Only musicians of outstanding musical excellence are offered a permanent position in one of our orchestras. If successful at audition and trial, a musician will be offered a tenured position in the orchestra. Where a musician fails to exhibit the highest artistic standards they will not pass the lengthy trial period and proceed to tenure.

Each of the Australian orchestras is committed to supporting Australian and New Zealand musicians by restricting their initial rounds of audition to Australian and New Zealand ("local") musicians only. It is only when a local musician cannot be identified at audition and/or does not pass the trial period that the audition process is opened up to international applicants. When this occurs, generally after two local rounds have been held, the process is opened to local and international musicians concurrently.

Under the previous TSS employer sponsor visa program an international musician who was offered a permanent position in one of our orchestras could, subject to immigration requirements, commit themselves

¹ Including full time, part time and casual employees (taken from Creative Australia reporting, 2024)

and their families to making a lasting contribution to Australia's artistic and community life. Many have committed to the orchestra and gone on to apply for permanent residency and then citizenship.

These leadership roles are not unskilled labour positions, rather they are highly skilled roles at the upper end of a musician's capability. They require the highest standard of musician who is not only a master of their own instrument, but is a fine soloist, an expert ensemble player and has the leadership skills to lead, direct, and manage the rank and file musicians in their section and in some instances the entire orchestra. As any recruiter would attest, when the right person is found they need to be retained, as orchestral recruitment is a lengthy, resource intensive and costly process – more so than a normal employee recruitment process.

Previous advocacy

In 2018, changes were made in the Immigration process that saw the job code 211213 (Musician: Instrumental) placed on the STSOL (Short Term Skilled Occupation List). Successful advocacy, very similar to the arguments made in this briefing note, saw the code removed from the STSOL and placed instead on the MLTSSL (Medium/Long Term Strategic Skill List). At that time government and Jobs & Skills Australia recognised the significance of the code to our Member orchestras, despite the small number of individuals that use the code each year. We were grateful for their flexibility and acknowledgment of the importance of the change, resulting in some musicians achieving permanent residency. Those musicians and their families now contribute to Australian culture and society in many ways, including participation in community, music education and teaching activities that deliver outstanding results.

In February 2024 we responded to JSA's Skills Priority List survey, not realising that job code 211213 would be dropped from CSOL later that year. Although that survey was specifically about skills shortages, in our submission we outlined the vital importance of the code. We were therefore shocked when it was left off the CSOL just months later.

We once more request that JSA reinstate ANZSCO code 211213/OSCA code 231633 (Musician: Instrumental) to CSOL.

3. The impact

If the code is not reinstated to CSOL, it is likely that many international musicians successful at audition and trial would refuse permanent positions in the orchestra. International musicians will not be attracted to working with Australian orchestras if we can only offer them the possibility of up to 4 years work using two consecutive two-year terms under the subclass 408 visa, with no pathway to permanent residency.

An international musician will usually accept a position in an Australian orchestra at the expense of resigning from a permanent position with an overseas orchestra. Not only will an international musician forfeit that permanent position in order to accept the Australian offer, but they also will forfeit their ability to take on regular additional work with other orchestras in the northern hemisphere. It is common for tenured players in the northern hemisphere to undertake such additional work, which adds to their reputation and fee earning capacity.

The reality of our geography means that international musicians commit solely to their Australian orchestra and Australia's musical life when they accept a position with one of our orchestras. Without the ability to offer tenure and a secure position in Australia, the end result will be a negative impact on the artistic quality and standards of our Australian orchestras.

Alternatives to CSOL

Although we are currently in the process of applying for Individual Labour Agreements for the symphony orchestras, this option is less ideal than returning the code to CSOL because the labour agreement processing is experiencing long delays. Further, Individual Labour Agreements do not provide an opportunity for a highly skilled musician who is able to obtain a skills assessment to apply for permanent residency under the Direct Entry stream.

Why do orchestras need international players?

Unlike some industries, roles within a symphony orchestra are highly skilled and specific (eg a flautist cannot fill a role as a cellist). Leadership roles such as Concertmaster and section principals require skills that may not be available among younger or less experienced musicians. If the right person isn't identified through the local audition process, the global market generally provides a pool of appropriately qualified applicants who are willing to come to Australia, often bringing their family with them for an extended period of time. To maintain their excellence, orchestras tend to be highly stable with low turnover and a strong commitment to the artistic goals of the company.

Truly excellent orchestras inspire and retain their musicians (whether Australian or international) through ensuring they work with the best guest artists, conductors and orchestral colleagues. If Australian orchestras are unable to attract the best musicians they will struggle to attract the best guest soloists and conductors, who ensure we continue to offer musical excellence in Australia, which in turn enhances our reputation on the world stage.

The current artistic standards of Australian orchestras are such that we attract the highest calibre of artists. Australian audiences, corporate sponsors and donors expect a high-quality concert experience in return for their support, which helps the orchestras remain financially viable in the face of static government funding. This quality will decline if the orchestras are unable to attract international musicians to roles when there are no appropriate local candidates.

4. Case Studies

To demonstrate the impact of the removal of job code 211213 (Musician: Instrumental) from the CSOL, two recent examples of international appointments are outlined below. Previously each of these musicians would have been eligible under the TSS visa program to transition to permanent residency. Since job code 211213 was removed from the CSOL, we are no longer able to nominate them for a Subclass 186 visa.

Reinstating ANZSCO code 211213/OSCA code 231633 (Musician: Instrumental) to CSOL would solve this problem.

The process

After two unsuccessful rounds of auditioning Australian and New Zealand musicians for a particular role, orchestras invite overseas musicians to Australia for the audition process. Auditions usually around a fortnight and the applicant uses a Subclass 408 visa for up to three months duration. If successful, the musician's trial period with the employing orchestra is around one year. Again, they use a Subclass 408 visa for this trial period. If the musician passes the trial, the only current option is to continue with a Subclass 408 visa for up to two years (renewable once to allow a total of 4 years' employment).

Each orchestra has its own pay rates and in a very small number of instances we may be able to lodge a 482 visa under the specialist skills stream. However the majority of musicians around the country do not meet the minimum salary requirement (\$141,210 per annum).

Case study 1 – Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) Principal Timpani

MSO advertised for a Principal Timpani in July 2017 and December 2019. After the two rounds of auditions for local players, no local player was acceptable, and an international audition process commenced in 2022 before an appointment was made. Prior to December 2024 CSOL changes, the successful American applicant applied for Skills Assessment as a Musician (Instrumental) with the plan to apply for a subclass 186 Direct Entry visa. He currently holds a two-year 408 visa. He obtained a positive skills assessment with 8.5 years of work experience.

Due to changes in December 2024, the musician can no longer apply for the 186 Direct Entry visa nor a subclass 482 visa, without the MSO applying for a company specific labour agreement to be able to sponsor a Musician (Instrumental) for a subclass 482 visa. Then he will need to wait two years on a 482 visa before transitioning to permanent residency.

This is suboptimal because it results in delays for permanent residency opportunities for musicians. They must first apply for a subclass 482 visa and then use the 186 Temporary Transition pathway for permanent residency. This involves significantly more costs for the orchestras, which are government funded not-for-profit charities. Temporary residence visa holders are restricted in the types of property that they can purchase, they have limited rights and benefits such as reduced access to healthcare, education for children and social services, and generally face stress and uncertainty until they have permanent residency.

Case study 2 – Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) Principal Oboe

MSO advertised locally for a Principal Oboe in August 2021 and March 2022. Following an unsuccessful round of auditions for local players, the position was opened again to local and international candidates, and an international appointment was made. The successful French applicant completed his trial period in June 2025 and was offered a permanent role. He currently has no long-term visa prospects unless the MSO is successful in applying for a company specific labour agreement.

Now that the musician has passed the trial and has a permanent role, his partner is moving to Australia to be with him. Not having the security of permanent residency (or the surety that this could be achieved through a relatively simply process) means stress and frustration for both the musician and the orchestra due to the uncertainty of establishing roots in Australia.

Case study 3 – Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (MSO) Principal Trombone

MSO advertised locally for a Co-Principal Trombone in 2016 and Principal Trombone in July 2019. No local musicians was identified with the appropriate skills so after two rounds of locally advertised auditions, MSO made an international appointment. The player, from Brazil, commenced his trial period in February 2025. His partner and children accompanied him to Melbourne, and he successfully completed his trial period in June 2025. The musician's current salary (including allowances) is approximately \$10,000 per annum below the Specialist Skills Stream Income threshold. Due to industrial agreements this salary cannot be increased. There is currently no pathway for a 482 or 186 visa unless MSO successfully obtains an Individual Labour Agreement.

This, like the examples above, is inadequate and leads to stress and frustration for both the musician and the orchestra due to the uncertainty of establishing roots in Australia, including difficulties navigating education options for their children while on a temporary visa.

Case study 4 – Sydney Symphony Orchestra (SSO) Tutti Double Bass

SSO advertised for a Tutti Double Bass player in January 2018 and October 2018. After the usual two rounds of auditions for local players, no local player was acceptable and an international appointment was made to an American musician in May 2022. The salary level for the role (negotiated through an enterprise bargaining process) was lower than the Specialist Skills Stream Income threshold. There is therefore no pathway for 482 or 186 visa unless SSO successfully obtains an Individual Labour Agreement.

Case study notes

As outlined above, we are currently working through the extensive process of requesting Individual Labour Agreements for Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Sydney Symphony Orchestra. There is no guarantee that these will be successful, and they only last a limited period before needing to be re-applied for. There are also limitations that may affect our ability to appoint the best musicians for the job, including age limits and minimum salary requirements.

Before job code 211213 (Musician: Instrumental) was removed from the CSOL without warning in December 2024, on the rare occasion that an international musician was appointed to a role in one of the six symphony orchestras, we were able to offer them a pathway to residency through the TSS visa process or the 186 Direct Entry stream. For all the reasons outlined in this submission, that was a straightforward process and allowed us to maintain the excellence of our member orchestras. The removal of 211213 from the CSOL has the potential to be catastrophic.

5. Conclusion

We are grateful to JSA for providing us with the opportunity to outline the impact that the removal of job code 211213 (Musician: Instrumental) from the CSOL has had on our members. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have, or provide further information if required.

We request that JSA reinstate ANZSCO code 211213/OSCA code 231633 (Musician: Instrumental) to the Core Skills Occupation List.

Yours sincerely,

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