Crossing Roper Bar
Young Wagilak Group
Australian Art Orchestra
The collaboration between Paul Grabowsky, the Australian Art Orchestra and the Young Wagilak musicians from Ngukurr in the Northern Territory represents a unique cultural interaction exploring challenging new creative domains while at the same time respecting the integrity of one of the world’s oldest musical traditions, that of Indigenous Australia. All of us at the ANU School of Music are delighted that these musicians are working at the School as the 2010 HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellows. We are pleased that Paul Grabowsky will also be presenting a key public lecture on his work later in the year as part of his role as an HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellow.

We have a strong commitment at the ANU School of Music to developing our engagement with the music of Indigenous Australia and offering our students the opportunity to work with highly regarded traditional songmen and leading researchers. Through a major public performance during the residency, the Canberra community will also have the opportunity to experience the history-making Crossing Roper Bar collaboration and deepen their understanding of one Australia’s most significant intangible cultural treasures.

With the appointment of noted academic and researcher Associate Professor Aaron Corn to lead the ethnomusicology program here at ANU School of Music, we are delighted to see the role that Indigenous Australian music plays within our teaching, research and community outreach programs greatly enhanced.

I hope you will have the opportunity to join us for some of these very special and important cultural events scheduled as part of the 2010 HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship.

Total is proud to support Crossing Roper Bar. In 2008 and again in 2010 I was fortunate to be able to join the tour through outback WA and gained first-hand experience of what the collaboration is achieving and how it connects with people from all walks of life whether in remote towns or large cities.

The response we have had to concerts attended by our guests has reaffirmed our decision to make an on-going commitment to this important project which offers the opportunity for a wide range of people to make a real connection with indigenous music and culture. It is the energy and respect that the AAO and the Young Wagilak Group each share with each other that has made a project that we are proud to support.

Adrian Walter AM
AOO Chair, Australia's Orchestra

Adrian Hodgson
General Manager, Total E&P Australia

Paul Grabowsky
Leader, Crossing Roper Bar

I first saw Ngukurr from a barge on the Roper at the end of the Wet in 2004. Flocks of black cockatoos flew overhead as dusk fell over the mighty river. I had never seen such a beautiful place. The barge was lifted onto the back of a truck and we drove into town. An unusual beginning to an unusual chapter in my life, one which has proven to be the most exciting musical collaboration of my career.

Within hours of being in the town, I had met my friend and mentor Kevin Rogers, as well as the man destined to become the co-director of Crossing Roper Bar, Benjamin Wilfred. We talked about music, and about our interest in joining forces to create something brand new based on the Wagilak manikay which Benjamin had learnt from his grandfather, the great lawman Djambu Burbarura. We played our music to each other, me via a CD, Benjamin and Roy Wilfred via the only real way to do it: an impromptu performance in the room where I slept.

As improvising musicians, my mob are interested in expanding the tonal palette of our instruments as far as we can. In the manikay, the textures of the voices, yidaki and clapsticks, the complex rhythms, and the intensity of the expressive moment, with its strong statement about the relation of sound and silence, music, time and place: these are the things which excite us.

Working together, we are proud to present our music as many visions, one voice.

Adrian Grabowsky
Crossing Roper River is a magnificent waterway flowing from Mataranka, 100 km south of Katherine, and out across the land of the Manggarayi and Yungman people. Before it reaches the Gulf of Carpentaria, it passes the remote town of Ngukurr, which is isolated by the Wet each year from November to April when the Roper engulfs all but the highest land.

In 2004, the artistic director of the AAO, Paul Grabowsky, made the journey across Roper River with Stephen Teakle who had lived in Ngukurr for several months while he was with Charles Darwin University’s Remote Music Delivery Unit. In the AAO’s mission statement written in 1993, Paul spoke of the desire to work with Indigenous Australians and here there seemed to be a chance of finally achieving that goal as Paul outlined his ideas to Kevin Rogers, community leader, former school Principal and Vice-President of the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council.

2005
AAO tours to Ngukurr to kick-off the collaboration with a performance of Ruby’s Story, featuring Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach.

Postscript: At Aunty Ruby’s memorial ceremony in Barmera SA, 5th March 2010, Benjamin Wilfred and the Young Wagilak Group sang a Wagilak farewell song as funeral procession left for the cemetery.

2006
Performance at Garma Festival of Traditional Culture, Culkula, NT

2007
Opening of the FINA World Championships at Birrarung Marr, Federation Square, Melbourne

Performance at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

2008
Tura New Music WA tour to Darwin Festival, Katherine, Timber Creek, Kununurra, Warmun, Fitzroy Crossing, Broome, Lombadina, One Arm Point, Beagle Bay, Perth Concert Hall

2009
Apollo Bay Music Festival, Victoria

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Melbourne Recital Centre, Elisabeth Murdoch Hall

At the invitation of The Hon Jenny Macklin to mark Australia’s signing of the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights, Parliament House, Canberra

Performance for Australian Music Centre Awards, Sydney Opera House. Tura New Music and AAO awarded Outstanding Contribution to Australian Music in a Regional Area for CRB

2010
Australian Performing Arts Market, Adelaide

Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, for the opening of Colour Country, Art from Roper River curated by Kath Bowdler, Wagga Wagga Art Gallery

Darwin Entertainment Centre

4WD tour to Ngukurr for a week of workshops and performances

’Crossing Roper Bar’ CD released; recorded Alan Eaton Studio, March 2009

Llewellyn Hall, ANU School of Music in association with the prestigious ANU HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship for 2010 awarded to members of the AAO active in the CRB project working in collaboration with the Young Wagilak Group.
Is a collaboration between Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, photographer Tobias Titz and the Museum of Australian Democracy. In their own words Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians bear witness to momentous historical movements and reflect on their ongoing work for social and political change at a community and national level.

In Tobias Titz’s unique collaborative portraiture process, each person is photographed with a large format camera using Polaroid Type 665 film. He then photographs the same space without the person in it. Following this, the subjects write something of their choice into the wet ‘empty’ negative. The texts relate to questions about major events such as the Pilbara Strike of 1946, the 1967 Referendum and the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations.

Tobias says that providing a place where often long-buried stories can be told "allows us to understand where we come from and how to move forward.”

www.moadoph.gov.au

Top to bottom
Benjamin Wilfred
Desmond Wilfred
Paul Grabowsky
Wesley Wilfred
Tony Hicks

Adelaide Festival 2010 commissioned CRB collaborator, Erikki Veltheim, to write Tract for the combined forces of the London Sinfonietta and the Young Wagilak Group. The work incorporated traditional, ceremonial Manikay from the Yolngu song men with an orchestral score drawing on elements of their singing style.

Tract was premiered at the Adelaide Town Hall and was described as an ‘intense piece’ representing a ‘courageous step forward in developing a fusion between these two distinctly different musical traditions.’

(Graham Strahle, The Australian 20th March 2010)

Top to bottom
Stephen Magnusson
Philip Rex
Evan Wilfred
Niko Schäuble
The journey towards this collaboration

The Australian Art Orchestra (AAO) enjoys a
2000 in steeped in the rich traditions of
Matthew Passion by J S Bach, while Sita
Ngukurr in 2004. There he found a
Balinese gamelan music and shadow
A Work of Rare Integrity
Dr Aaron Corn

musical wayfarers had adopted blues and
many gifted musicians. These fellow
permutations of traditional Manikay to
Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.
tradition of ceremonial songs from eastern
Ngukurr, the Wagilak Yolu, had retained its
traditional repertoire of songs and dances
Co-directed by the gifted young ceremonial
leader, Benjamin Wilfred, from the remote
town of Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land,
this adventurous new musical work
marries the complex fluidity of
experimental jazz with the nuanced
permutations of traditional Manikay to
create a cross-cultural experience of rare
artistry.
The people of Ngukurr had been among the
earliest causalties of the pastoral wars in
Arnhem Land that commenced with the
construction of the Overland Telegraph
Line at Roper Bar in 1872. Over the following
decades, numerous pastoral ventures
turned the surrounding district into a
bloody killing field on which police,
prospectors and pastoralists shot many
local people on sight, and those who
survived were forced to labour on cattle
stations. The mission's establishment at
Ngukurr brought an end to this slaughter,
but not to the attrition of local languages
and traditions. Strict regimes of work,
school, prayer and dormitory life were
imposed on local residents, alongside an
active program of assimilation that
discouraged them from speaking their own
languages and performing traditional
ceremonies.

Eventually, only one resident group at
Ngukurr, the Wagilak Yolu, had retained its
traditional repertoire of songs and dances
for performance in public ceremonies.
Wilfred inherited responsibility for this
repertoire from his father’s father, Sambo
Barabara, who was the Wagilak leader at
Ngukurr until his sad passing in 2005. It
was these very songs that initially inspired
Grabowsky to collaborate with Wilfred, and
have since become the beating heart of
Crossing Roper Bar. Drawn from the
Manikay tradition, these songs capture the
observations of the original ancestors who
founded the remote Wagilak homeland of
Nyilapidji and all the innate beauty found
therein.

Beyond the stunning virtuosity of the
musicians who recreate it with each new
performance, Crossing Roper Bar succeeds
artistically because it observes the very
structures that drive musical interest within
the Manikay tradition. Performed with
voices, bilma 'sticks' and yidaki 'didjeridu';
Manikay are structured in epic series of
short songs. Each individual song ebbs into
being with a gently hummed introduction,
builds in intensity with the entry of the entry
of the bilma and yidaki; and flows
out of being with a return to
unaccompanied voice. This ebb-and-flow
creates a natural sense of tension and
release, just like breathing in and out, or the
lapping of the tide. Songs at the beginning of
a Manikay series typically start slowly,
and intensity builds as faster and faster songs
are gradually introduced with greater
frequency.
The AAO exploits these overarching
structures in its accompaniment of Wagilak
Manikay to searing dramatic effect. Their
beginning is slow and contemplative, and
gradually builds into awesome wall of
sound. The spaces in between each
musician on stage are electric. They are
filled with the kind of ensemble and
intuition that can only be held among
musicians who are masters of aural and
improvisatory traditions, who are attuned to
listening to others and exploring the musical
possibilities of a central idea as it unfolds.

It is difficult to comprehend how so few
musicians can create such an effect. But
again, this is the beauty of the Manikay
tradition, which weaves individual lines into
a unified whole creating one voice made of
many that seems to dissolve the shroud of
reality itself. Here, there is no complicity
to simply accompany the Wagilak Manikay
with a conventional progression of chords,
or to insist that it conforms to Western
ideals of tuning and timing. Nor is there any
musical apartheid where the Wagilak and
the AAO take turns to play their respective
parts due to some perceived incompatibility.
Through deep listening, they have cracked
each other's codes to create a work that gels
musically at a deep structural level.

Crossing Roper Bar is nothing less than a
collaborative and artistic triumph. Seldom
in Australia do traditional Indigenous
performers find ways to explore their
talents with such dedicated collaborating
artists, and share the beauty of their songs
and dances with audiences elsewhere. This
alone is an achievement of which all
involved in creating and supporting this
work can feel especially proud. Crossing
Roper Bar is a work of care integrity that
sets an exciting new benchmark for artistic
dialogues with Australia’s traditional
Indigenous musicians, and in this one vital
regard, it stands alone on the musical
landscape.

As Aaron Corn in Ngukurr

Photograph Tobias Titz 2010

In rehearsal space in Ngukurr

Photograph Tobias Titz 2010

Professor of Ethnomusicology at the
Australian National University. He is a
Director of the National Recording Project
for Indigenous Performance in Australia,
and his recent book, Reflections and Voices
(2009), explores the cultural and political
legacy of Yothu Yindi. He has worked to
support the on-going development of
Crossing Roper Bar since 2005.
Founding Artistic Director, Piano
Paul Grabowsky (1993—)
Trumpet & Laptop
Phillip Slater (1999—)
Trumpet
Scott Tinkler (1993—)
Trumpet
Eugene Ball (2007—)
Trombone
James Greening (1995—)
Trombone
Shakuhachi, Adriaen Sherriff (1993)
Didjeridu
Adrian Sherriff (1993—)

Violin
Vanessa Tomlinson (2001—)

Niko Schäuble (1993—)

Benjamin Wilfred and the Young Wagilak Group
Erkki Veltheim (2007—)

Saxophones, Bass Clarinet, Flute
Lachlan Davidson (1995—)

Saxophones, Clarinet, Alto Saxophone, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet
Eugene Ball (2007—)

Phillip Slater (1999—)

Sandy Evans (1995—)

Oboe, Cor Anglais
Scott Tinkler (1993—)

Adrian Sherriff (1993—)

James Greening (1995—)

Alister Spence (1995—)

Guitar & Electronics
James Greening (2007—)

Drums
Steve Gunning (1995—)

Double Bass, Tuba
Stephen Magnusson (2007—)

Elliott Dalgleish (1993—)

Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani

Associates
Into the Fire with South Indian master percussionist Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani and the Sruthi Laya Ensemble. (Collaboration 1996 —)

Ruby’s Story with Ruby Hunter and Archie Roach whose life stories are told in a series of specially commissioned songs. The extended version for the whole orchestra is Kura Tungar River Songs and Stories. Ringing the Bell Backwards a suite of songs from 1900s to 1940s popular European culture such as Lili Marlene and Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien, interpreted by Paul Grabowsky. Passion. Adaptations of JS Bach’s St Matthew Passion from which four composers have taken key passages as points of departure employing the language of contemporary improvisation. Miles Davis, Prince of Darkness: A Tribute featuring Anthony Pateras’ Ontrededagorn.

The AAO has shown it can do a lot with very little.
We have a small group of individual donors who would love some company. If you are interested in making a donation or assisting in other ways please call
Graeme Geraske, Director 0407 610 393
Helen Symon SC, Director 03 9640 3172
James Heuson, Director 03 9419 5444
Ann Moir, General Manager, 03 9320 1956

The AAO Fund is a tax deductible fund listed under the Register of Cultural Organisations.
Donations to the AAO are tax deductible.

The Robert Salter Foundation supports the AAO.

The AAO is supported by Australia Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

Meat Market Arts House
18/5 Blackwood St North Melbourne, Vic 3051
ph: (03) 9349 0936
E: mail@aao.com.au

Crossing Roper Bar’s Major Sponsor is Total E&P Australia.

If you’d like to be part of our journey you can start by visiting our website and subscribing to our occasional e-news bulletins http://www.aao.com.au

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

The AAO is supported by the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship, Dr Aaron Grabowsky.

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

Our Members and Supporters

If you’d like to be part of our journey you can start by visiting our website and subscribing to our occasional e-news bulletins http://www.aao.com.au

The AAO has shown it can do a lot with very little.
We have a small group of individual donors who would love some company. If you are interested in making a donation or assisting in other ways please call
Graeme Geraske, Director 0407 610 393
Helen Symon SC, Director 03 9640 3172
James Heuson, Director 03 9419 5444
Ann Moir, General Manager, 03 9320 1956

The AAO Fund is a tax deductible fund listed under the Register of Cultural Organisations.
Donations to the AAO are tax deductible.

The Robert Salter Foundation supports the AAO.

The AAO is supported by Australia Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

Meat Market Arts House
18/5 Blackwood St North Melbourne, Vic 3051
ph: (03) 9349 0936
E: mail@aao.com.au

Crossing Roper Bar’s Major Sponsor is Total E&P Australia.

If you’d like to be part of our journey you can start by visiting our website and subscribing to our occasional e-news bulletins http://www.aao.com.au

The AAO has shown it can do a lot with very little.
We have a small group of individual donors who would love some company. If you are interested in making a donation or assisting in other ways please call
Graeme Geraske, Director 0407 610 393
Helen Symon SC, Director 03 9640 3172
James Heuson, Director 03 9419 5444
Ann Moir, General Manager, 03 9320 1956

The AAO Fund is a tax deductible fund listed under the Register of Cultural Organisations.
Donations to the AAO are tax deductible.

The Robert Salter Foundation supports the AAO.

The AAO is supported by Australia Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

Meat Market Arts House
18/5 Blackwood St North Melbourne, Vic 3051
ph: (03) 9349 0936
E: mail@aao.com.au

Crossing Roper Bar’s Major Sponsor is Total E&P Australia.

If you’d like to be part of our journey you can start by visiting our website and subscribing to our occasional e-news bulletins http://www.aao.com.au

The AAO has shown it can do a lot with very little.
We have a small group of individual donors who would love some company. If you are interested in making a donation or assisting in other ways please call
Graeme Geraske, Director 0407 610 393
Helen Symon SC, Director 03 9640 3172
James Heuson, Director 03 9419 5444
Ann Moir, General Manager, 03 9320 1956

The AAO Fund is a tax deductible fund listed under the Register of Cultural Organisations.
Donations to the AAO are tax deductible.

The Robert Salter Foundation supports the AAO.

The AAO is supported by Australia Council for the Arts, the Commonwealth Government’s arts funding and advisory body.

The AAO is supported by the Victorian Government through Arts Victoria.

Meat Market Arts House
18/5 Blackwood St North Melbourne, Vic 3051
ph: (03) 9349 0936
E: mail@aao.com.au

Crossing Roper Bar’s Major Sponsor is Total E&P Australia.
Crossing Roper Bar

"A major musical statement" – Ashleigh Wilson, The Australian, July 2010

CD available online at www.aao.com.au/shop

The T-Shirts in the striking Wata / Birrk birrk design are high quality cotton and wash well. Telephone sales only ($30)

T-shirt, CD and combo: telephone sales only (03) 9329 0936 ($50)

If you prefer not to use your credit card online the CD Order Form is available on our website for orders payable by cheque, money order or credit card.

Any further enquiries regarding merchandise can be directed to mail@aao.com.au

[ Top: Philip Rex in tshirt]
[Bottom: Wesley Wilfred in tshirt]