

Crossing Roper Bar
Young Wagilak Group
Australian Art Orchestra



The cover illustration depicts birrk birrk (plover) and wata (wind) — both must be present before ceremony can begin.

Left: Djambu Barra Barra
Dead Ones 2005, synthetic polymer paint
on canvas, 295 x 130 cm
Courtesy of Ngukurr Art Aboriginal
Corporation and Total E&P Australia

Total E&P Australia purchased Dead Ones on behalf of the Ngukurr community so that it could be returned to their ownership.

Djambu Barra Barra was a revered Elder and renowned painter who sanctioned the Crossing Roper Bar collaboration. He was born in Wagilak country, near Nilipidgi on the Walker River west of Blue Mud Bay, about 200 kilometres north east of Ngukurr.

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Crossing Roper Bar Collaborators

Paul Grabowsky Leader/Keyboards
Benjamin Wilfred Leader/Voice
Tony Hicks Assistant Musical Director/Reeds
Daniel Wilfred Voice
Stephen Magnusson Guitars
Erkki Veltheim Viola/Violin
Philip Rex Double Bass
Evan or David Wilfred Didjeridu
Niko Schäuble Drums
Wesley Wilfred Dance

Ann Moir, Project Manager
Dr Aaron Corn, Ethnomusicologist
Tobias Titz, Photographer
Peter Friedrich, Filmmaker
Samuel Curpatrick PhD student ANU/NCIS

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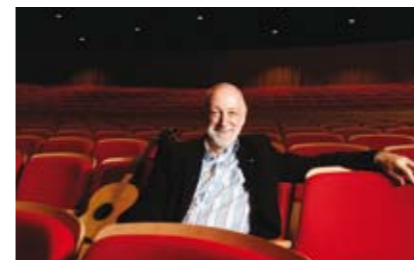
Adrian Walter AM
Head, ANU School of Music

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.



Adrian Hodgson,
GM, Total E&P Australia

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 it a project that we are proud to support.



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 Burraburra. 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.



Kevin Rogers and Paul Grabowsky in Melbourne 2007
Photograph: Julien Wilson

Crossing Roper Bar

The 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.

Crossing Roper Bar is the focus for an equal exchange of knowledge through a dialogue centred on music. Benjamin Wilfred the grandson of Djambu Barra Barra, and his young Wagilak Group have worked closely with the AAO to create a contemporary rendering of the Wagilak Manikay or song cycles, a spirit of collaboration symbolised in the many crossings of the Roper River which have taken place since and from which the name of the project originates.



Crossing Roper River May 2010
Photograph: Tobias Titz

Crossing Roper Bar Performance History

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, Gulkula, 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.



Archie Roach and Ngukurr children singing Took the Children Away
Photograph: Jeff Wassmann



Crossing Roper Bar Tour 2010
Photograph: Tobias Titz



Darwin Entertainment Centre May 2010
Photograph: Tobias Titz



With the Hon Jenny Macklin, Parliament House 2009
Photograph: Ann Moir

Marnti Warajanja
we're travelling

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.

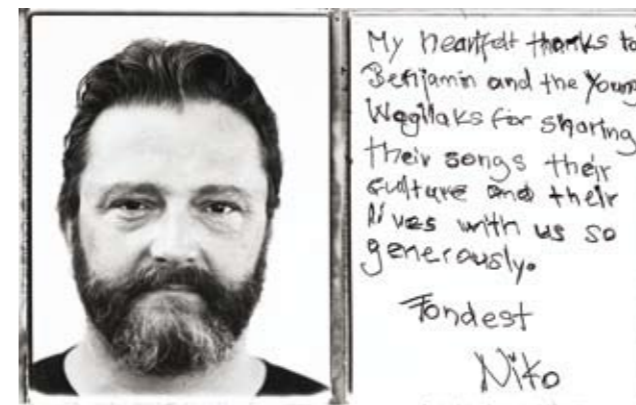
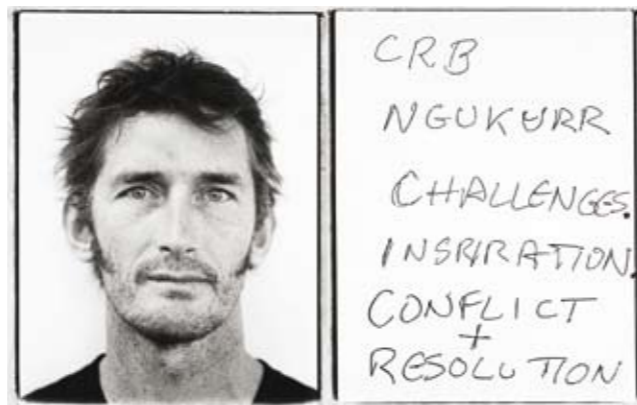
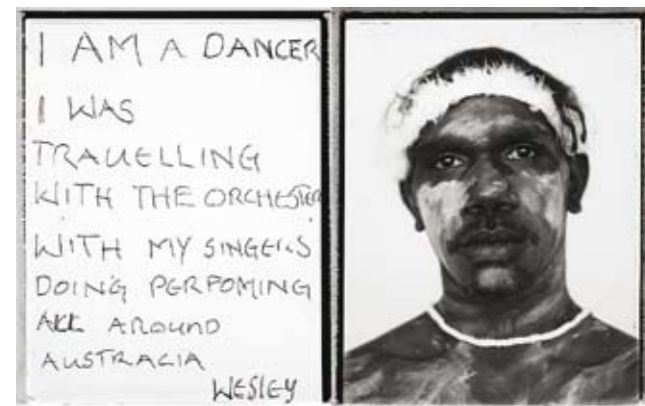
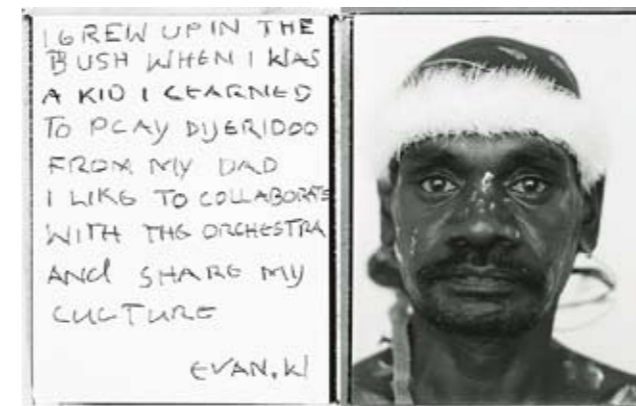
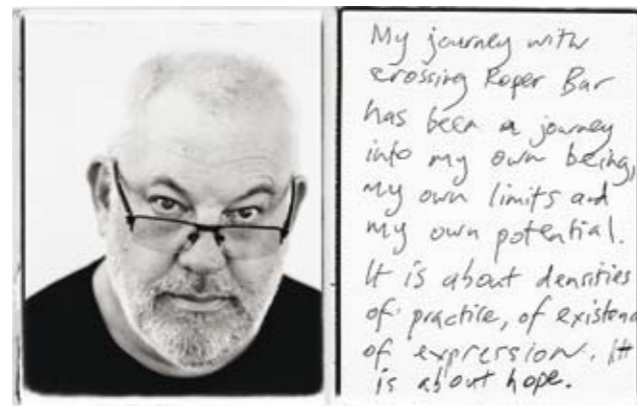
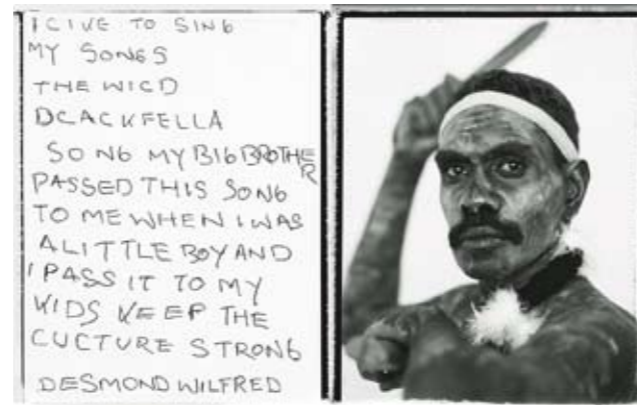
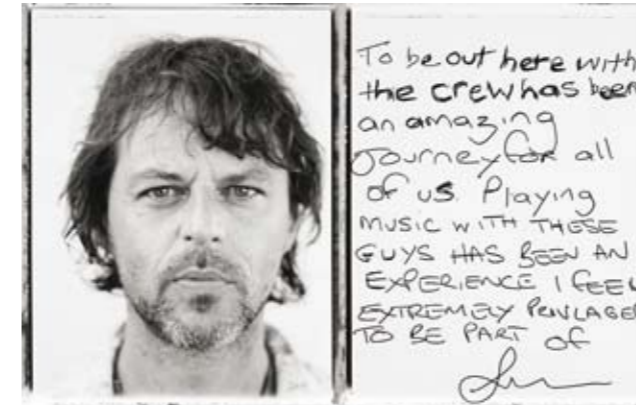
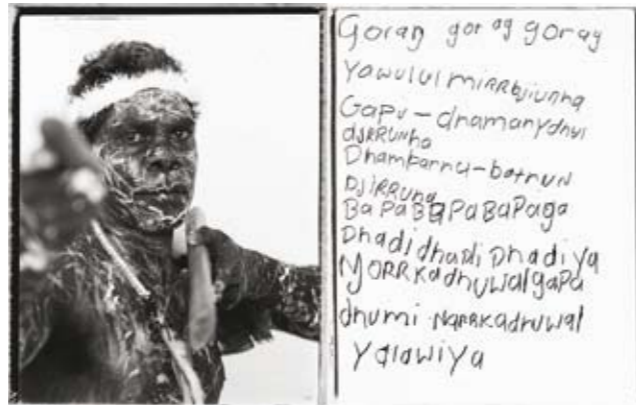
In Tobias Titz's unique collaborative portraiture process, each person is photographed with a large format camera using Polaroid Type 665 film. He then photographs the same space without the person in it. Following this, the subjects write something of their choice into the wet 'empty' negative. The 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



Top to bottom

- Stephen Magnusson
- Philip Rex
- Evan Wilfred
- Niko Schäuble

Erkki Veltheim
Composer, Tract

Adelaide Festival 2010 commissioned CRB collaborator, Erkki 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)

Dr Aaron Corn
A Work of Rare Integrity

Dr Aaron Corn charts the resonances of Crossing Roper Bar

The Australian Art Orchestra (AAO) enjoys a long history of crossing musical and cultural boundaries. Founded in 1994 by the enigmatic pianist, Paul Grabowsky, the band comprises some of Australia's most visionary musicians whose deep roots in jazz and avant-garde experimentation have frequently inspired them to explore new musical possibilities with a diverse array of other artists. Their collaboration with musicians of the southern Indian tradition led to the creation of Into the Fire (1996). Passion (1997) was inspired by the St Matthew Passion by J S Bach, while Sita (2000) is steeped in the rich traditions of Balinese gamelan music and shadow puppetry.

Crossing Roper Bar has built on these successes through a long process of dialogue with Indigenous owners of a uniquely Australian music, the Manikay tradition of ceremonial songs from eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. 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 journey towards this collaboration began when Grabowsky first visited Ngukurr in 2004. There he found a community with a vibrant musical life, and many gifted musicians. These fellow musical wayfarers had adopted blues and rock in the 1960s as a release from the austerity of the Roper River Mission founded at Ngukurr in 1908. However, of their own Indigenous music and dance traditions, little remained.

The people of Ngukurr had been among the earliest casualties of the pastoral wars in Arnhem Land that commenced with the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line at Roper Bar in 1870. 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 accompanying 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 complacency 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 rare 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.

Dr Aaron Corn is an Australian Research Council Future Fellow and Associate 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.



Aaron Corn in Ngukurr
Photograph Tobias Titz 2010



Rehearsal Space in Ngukurr is limited
Photograph: Tobias Titz 2010



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, Didjeridu
Adrian Sherriff (1993)

*Saxophones, Flute, Clarinet,
Oboe, Cor Anglais*
Lachlan Davidson (1995—)

Alto Saxophone, Clarinet, Bass Clarinet
Paul Cutlan (1998—)

Saxophones, Flute
Sandy Evans (1995—)

Saxophones, Bass Clarinet, Sopranino
Elliott Dalglish (1993—)

Saxophones, Bass Clarinet, Flute
Tony Hicks (2007—)

Violin
Erkki Veltheim (2007—)

Guitar & Electronics
Carl Dewhurst (2000—)

Guitar
Stephen Magnusson (2007—)

Piano & Laptop
Alister Spence (1995—)

Double Bass, Tuba
Philip Rex (1993—)

Drums
Niko Schäuble (1993—)

Drums
Simon Barker (2007—)

Percussion
Vanessa Tomlinson (2001—)

Percussion
Alex Pertout (1993—)

Associate Members

Guru Kaaraikkudi Mani

Benjamin Wilfred and the Young Wagilak Group

**Australian Art
Orchestra**

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The Australian Art Orchestra, Australia's premiere contemporary music ensemble, mines the rich ground between jazz and classical traditions and between western and non-western music.

Formed in 1994 by Paul Grabowsky the AAO is a collective of 'musical wayfarers' from modern jazz which is recognised worldwide as a bold leader and pioneer in contemporary Australian music.

The AAO plays a vitally important role in commissioning and developing music that is reflective of Australian culture and others of our region. The AAO has a vision of Australia as a nation in constant and meaningful dialogue with the world around us; a nation open to new ideas, interested and critically engaged. For the AAO, music is a language which establishes and builds connections between people, whether as individuals, societies, cultures or as nations.

Key Projects

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.

Ring the Bell Backwards a suite of songs from 1920s 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' Ontetradecagon.

**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:

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Helen Symon SC, Director 03 9640 3174
James Hewison, Director 03 9419 5444
Ann Moir, General Manager, 03 9320 0936*

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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

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SCHOOL OF MUSIC

ANU School of Music: A World of Ideas

The ANU is an internationally-recognised centre for research and postgraduate study into the diverse and vibrant cultures of Asia, the Pacific and Indigenous Australia. The ANU School of Music supports a range of research projects and graduate programs that contribute significantly to this expertise, and provide important outcomes for different communities of cultural practitioners throughout Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

The School of Music currently hosts the Secretariat of the International Council for Traditional Music. Adminstrated by Dr Stephen Wild as Secretary-General, this organisation exists to further the study and dissemination of musics from all over the world.

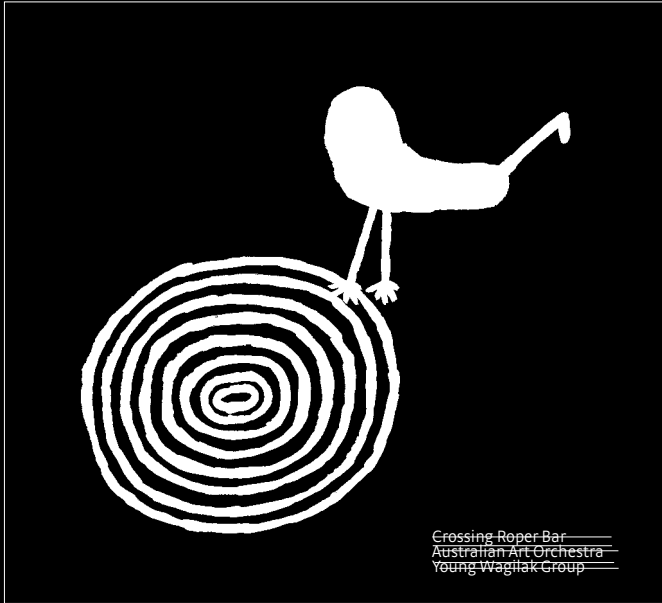
The School also hosts the Australian Research Council Future Fellow, Dr Aaron Corn, who directs the National Recording Project for Indigenous Performance in Australia, and whose work also contributes

to the Pacific & Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures. These visionary initiatives not only provide a unique new context for collaborative research with talented musicians and dancers from throughout our region, but also stand at the forefront of shaping the digital media collections of the future and safeguarding this rich cultural heritage for all.

From further information about research and postgraduate study at the ANU School of Music, or undergraduate study options in world musics, please visit www.music.anu.edu.au

The HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship was established in 1965 at the instigation of Dr HC Coombs, ANU Pro-Chancellor at the time, to encourage creative work in the arts in Australia. The ANU HC Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship 2010 is supported by the Research School of Humanities & the Arts and the ANU School of Music. The support of the ANU National Centre for Indigenous Studies is also gratefully acknowledged.





Crossing Roper Bar

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

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

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

