

The Australian

A Fusion of Black and White

Ashleigh Wilson, July 19, 2010



Paul Grabowsky on keyboards performing with Daniel Wilfred at a concert in Ngukurr.
Picture: Tobias Titz *Source: The Australian*

CLOSE to the Roper River, on the southern reaches of Arnhem Land, a new musical creation was stirring.

It was 2005, and a group of musicians from the Australian Art Orchestra were in Ngukurr with Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter to perform Ruby's Story, a collaborative work that had won them a Deadly Award the previous year.

While there, the orchestra was quietly exploring another idea. There had been talk of joining forces with Ngukurr musicians, to somehow fuse their own sounds with the traditional song cycles of remote Aboriginal Australia. But it was early days; they were there to listen and to learn.

"I remember the looks of delight on people's faces when they heard James Greening play the melodies they were so familiar with - on the trombone," says Paul Grabowsky, the orchestra leader. "Looks of amazement all round. But the big question mark at that point was whether Djambu (Sambo) Burra Burra would give this project his blessing."

Burra Burra, who died later that year, was an artist and ceremonial leader with great cultural authority in Ngukurr, a former Christian mission east of Katherine. He barely spoke to the visitors and Grabowsky wasn't sure what he thought about the work.

During their concert on a makeshift stage in front of the Ngukurr swimming pool, the orchestra performed some of the music they had been working on.

"We reluctantly agreed to do it because we didn't feel we were anywhere near the point where we'd be taken seriously," Grabowsky says. "But we played and at one point, I turned and there was Sambo Burra Burra on stage with us, singing these songs."

Grabowsky was delighted, seeing the old man's presence as a gesture of approval and acceptance. From there, the project took off and a collaborative musical effort, crossing cultural and musical barriers, took shape.

The musicians travelled several times between Melbourne, Ngukurr and beyond before a tour of the Top End led to a remarkable CD, to be released next month, Crossing Roper Bar.

"I have to say it's been one of the most satisfying musical things I've ever done," Grabowsky says.

There have long been multiple dimensions to Grabowsky's musical output. Last week he was in the French city of Avignon, checking out shows for the Adelaide Festival, of which he is artistic director. As a pianist, he recently released *On a Clear Day*, a CD of jazz standards with saxophonist Jamie Oehlers in which both leaders are in fine form. He also steers the Australian Art Orchestra, a versatile, innovative ensemble of improvising musicians that has been bending genres since 1994.

In recent years, Grabowsky has found himself drawn to the idea of working with traditional Aboriginal musicians. But apart from that general desire, he had no idea how to make such a thing happen; the logistics alone were a mystery.

A trip to Ngukurr with a friend in 2004 proved fruitful. Among those he met was Benjamin Wilfred, a leading Yolngu songman and Burra Burra's grandson, who was open to collaboration.

During that visit, Grabowsky played some local musicians his most recent CD, *Tales of Time and Space*, an album featuring jazz heavyweights Branford Marsalis and Joe Lovano. He then raised the idea of returning to Ngukurr with a few of his musical partners.

"It was very clear to me that we had to learn their music before we could start to think about a collaboration," Grabowsky says. "The first thing was to have some kind of an idea about what it was they do."

The orchestra's first taste of Ngukurr was in 2005, for the Ruby Hunter show. It was the start of a long collaboration with this artistically vibrant region, sharing ideas with Wilfred's Young Wagilak Group and developing a common musical language. The two groups decided to base their project on manikay, or the traditional song cycles of Arnhem Land. But at the start, it was all about listening.

"It was very important, that first trip," Grabowsky says. "These men had never heard their music played on Western instruments before, and being improvisers we weren't trying to just play the notes in a Western sense. We were trying to kind of evoke something of the texture and dynamic and rhythm of what they do."

"They would sing, and just as they would teach their own people their music, they taught us pretty much the same way. The only difference perhaps is that these songs are very much about certain locations too, and some of those are very difficult to get to, so we haven't done that part of it - singing up country, in country - yet."

The significance of the project was on display during a performance at Garma, an annual Aboriginal cultural festival held in a stringybark forest in northeast Arnhem Land. It happened after a few members of the orchestra performed some of the music with the Young Wailak Group: an old man from a nearby community approached Wilfred and said, according to Grabowsky: "I knew that song existed but I hadn't heard it before. It described the land between [two locations in Arnhem Land]. We were wondering where that song was."

Over the past few years, the groups have continued to tour and develop this music, performing in major city venues as well as small, remote communities. They visited several communities across the Top End in 2008, stretching from Broome and Kununurra to Darwin and Katherine, before spending two days in a Melbourne studio making *Crossing Roper Bar*.

The recording was critical, Grabowsky says. In May, the two groups gave a series of workshops and performances in the Top End, including the communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar. The performance of the song cycle at Ngukurr had a similar structure to the album, and the community "totally got it". "Part of

the importance of this project is conservation as much as anything else," he says. "It's giving these songs an opportunity to be preserved." The emphasis of Crossing Roper Bar is one of the factors that sets it apart: this is traditional Aboriginal music featuring Western musicians, not the other way around. "It's the inversion of the usual paradigm. Most Aboriginal music that we know in Australia that is available to people is a version of Western music . . . this is exploring the relationship from the other direction," Grabowsky says.

The project depended on the enthusiasm and musical imagination of Wilfred, the leader of the Young Wagilak Group. Grabowsky also credits Aaron Corn, an ethnomusicology expert at the Australian National University, for helping the orchestra understand the musical and linguistic complexities of manikay.

Referring to the particular features of manikay, Grabowsky says: "You can hear it in the sense that there are short bursts of intense energy, there's a rhythmic cadence at the end and often there's a trailing off of the vocal line, which goes into silence. Then people will sit around, do something, talk, have a cigarette or whatever, and then it will start up again. That's the structure of manikay: stop, start, stop, start, and each place where it starts it's this incredible thing.

"Over the course of a cycle the intensity grows and grows, and the pitch frequencies of the melodies get higher and higher."

The project also helped Grabowsky grasp what he says is the true role of the yidaki, or didgeridoo. The instrument provides a rhythmic pulse, not a drone note beneath the melody.

"Thinking about the yidaki as a kind of tonic, like a fundamental note, is not right," he says. "That's a complete misconception about what that thing is. It's really a drum. In the absence of any other drums, that's the drum in Aboriginal music, and you can hear it in the way that it's played. It's a collection of incredibly complicated, very groovy rhythmic patterns, somehow held together by the bilma, the clapsticks."

Recorded live, Crossing Roper Bar is an intense, moving listening experience. Short fragments of music spread over six tracks represent one complete song cycle, with musical duties divided evenly between the four Ngukurr songmen - led by Wilfred, with his relatives Desmond, David and Wesley on vocals, yidaki and bilma - and the orchestra, including Grabowsky on keyboards, Niko Schauble on drums, Stephen Magnusson on guitar, Philip Rex on bass and Tony Hicks on reeds.

The music is absorbing; this is not an album that relies on concept over substance. At once solemn and energetic, reflective and frenetic, Crossing Roper Bar is a major musical statement. It appears to have found a balance, too, between the different perspectives of Western improvising musicians and Arnhem Land songmen.

"It hasn't been a forced process from a musical point of view putting this together," Grabowsky says. "It hasn't felt like an unwilling pairing of two things that really have nothing to do with each other. It's been remarkably cohesive and very joyful and positive as a musical experience."