

SYDNEY FESTIVAL

Inspired songs of the lost and profound

MUSIC

Murundak

Performed by The Black Arm Band. Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, January 22.

At first glance *Murundak* (which means alive in the Woiwurrung language) could be mistaken for a slightly altered edition of the triumphant Sydney Festival tribute to Aboriginal singer-songwriter Kev Carmody two weeks ago. There was a similarly diverse line-up of musical talents exploring the indigenous experience through song, and it featured a similar use of film clips covering, among other imagery, the political struggles of several decades.

To further underline the similarities, two of the performers, Dan Sultan and Stephen Pigram, had also appeared in the earlier concert. Certainly when the familiar chords of Carmody and Paul Kelly's anthem *From Little Things Big Things Grow* rang out, with the evening's signers joining in on the chorus, there was a certain *deja vu*.

For all that, this was an inspirational concert in its own right, and with significant differences. The Opera House setting gave the evening a heightened sense of occasion and perhaps even historical significance. The origins of the Black Arm Band — a collective name for all of the evening's performers — lay in the desire to eventually create what artistic director Steven Richardson calls a musical equivalent to the Bangarra Dance Theatre, a permanent resource centre and ensemble of the nation's finest indigenous musical performers.

This, then, was not a multicultural tribute to an individual but a celebration of collective experience by some of the nation's finest indigenous singers from across the generations: from veterans Jimmy Little, Jimmy Chi, Bart Willoughby, Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter to Peter Rotumah, Joe Geia, Shellie Morris, Dave Arden and honorary blackfella Shane Howard (Arden and Howard also served as music directors). The arrangements of Aaron Choulai and Eugene Ball, which made astute use of string, brass and the former's piano contributions, also played an important role.

In a concert without any weak moments it's hard to select highlights, but a few moments particularly impressed. One was Mark Atkins's pair of extraordinarily virtuosic solo didgeridoo pieces. Another was Kutcha Edwards, a member of the stolen generations, walking away tearfully after singing the moving *Is This What We Deserve?*, aware that his parents were not around to see him on stage at the Opera House. Moments such as these and a bittersweet *Over the Rainbow*, performed by Ursula Yovich and Pigram as one of a trio of encores, helped make this a concert that will be hard to forget.

Lynden Barber