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A way with birds: Papageno woos his feathered friends in *The Magic Flute*; (opposite) Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* dramatised at the Royal Opera House, 2010

Animal attraction

Beasts and birds of all shapes and sizes have inspired composers in a remarkable variety of ways. Claire Jackson takes us on a zoological tour

'The duck quacked and, in her excitement, jumped out of the pond,' gasps David Bowie in his iconic narration of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, recorded in 1977. 'But no matter how hard she tried to run, she couldn't escape.' (Recent modernisations are more light-hearted: Alexander Armstrong and the London Mozart Players' 2020 lockdown video sees the duck – a dog's squeaky toy – enjoying a cocktail while reading *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Duck* by one Swan le Carré.) Just as the duck could not elude her fate – swallowed alive, destined to live out her days inside the wolf's stomach – nor could the oboe escape an enduring association with its feathery characterisation.

It's not just the oboe. Composers have often sought to depict creatures through particular instruments. The flute's timbre had been likened to twittering birdsong long before Prokofiev's evocative orchestration. Vivaldi used the instrument to hint at the woodland calls of spring and summer in *The Four Seasons*, and in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* its melodies herald the appearance of Papageno, the bird catcher. Despite a fleeting appearance as Prokofiev's cat, the clarinet tends to be better known as the cuckoo, as heard 'in the depths of the woods' in Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* (1886) and again in Delius's *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, composed in 1912.

Musical techniques are also employed to convey animalistic behaviours, such as the *staccato* sounds used to depict pecking hens and the jumping melodies to show bouncing kangaroos in *Carnival of the Animals*. Rimsky-Korsakov's famous *Flight of the Bumblebee* is packed with whirling demi-semiquavers that represent the insect in flight. (No surprise that the piece is a staple for intrepid musicians wishing to attempt to break the world record for fastest performance.) Composer Michel Gonneville's approach is more subtle. In his 1998 work *The path of the whale*, the orchestral textures suggest the slow underwater movements of the great beast, with four breaks in the phrasing to allude to the creature's cresting breaths. Similarly, his *Relais Papillons* uses timbre to represent the migration of Monarch butterflies between Mexico and north-eastern Canada.

Careful observation is essential for accurate musical depiction and, unsurprisingly, pets are a rich source of inspiration for composers. The fast-moving passages in Chopin's 'Minute' Waltz, originally called 'Waltz of the little dog', were intended to mimic a canine called Marquis, who belonged to George Sand. George Crumb's *Mundus Canis* (A Dog's World), written for guitar and percussion, is dedicated to the composer's own dogs. 'Tammy' features maracas to suggest the sound of the dachshund's scratching claws, while the scampering melodies of 'Yoda' represent a not-very-obedient rescue dog – the end of the work ends with the vocalisation 'bad dog'. But memorial music isn't a modern-day phenomenon: some of the melodies in Mozart's *A Musical Joke* bear resemblance to a starling's calls – the composer had a pet starling for nearly three years and was devastated when the bird died. He held a funeral for it, which included a specially written requiem.

Animal representation on stage is notoriously challenging, but that hasn't stopped some composers from favouring a furry cast, with

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Who knows beast?: (far left) Messiaen makes a field recording, 1964; (left) Dave Soldier's Thai Elephant Orchestra in action; (below left) soprano Lucy Crowe in Janáček's *Cunning Little Vixen*, Glyndebourne, 2012

foxes a favourite central character. Stravinsky's farmyard fairy-tale, *Reynard*, is based on a traditional Russian story about a wily fox whose sticky end is brought about by a cock, cat and goat. Like *Reynard*, Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* uses animal relationships as a way of unpicking human ones.

'The duet between the Vixen and Fox is so urgent, passionate and raw with emotion that it stands up to any of the great "human" opera duets,' says soprano Lucy Crowe, who has sung the role of the Vixen many times. 'In the winter before my performances at Glyndebourne, I was walking in the snow and spotted a bushy tailed fox, padding calmly through the trees, then frolicking and leaping with gay abandon. When she finally spotted me we held each other's gaze for what felt like hours. This is the main difference between playing a human and an animal – that sharpness of motion and intense stare.' For that 2012 Glyndebourne production, directed by Melly Still, Crowe held an enormous tail – the brush – to communicate the Vixen's feelings, 'slamming it when angry or trailing it slinkily along the floor when amorous.'

Alongside foxes, birds are favourites among composers, particularly passerines (song birds). A bird's voice box – called a 'syrinx' (Greek for pan pipes, and the title of Debussy's beloved solo flute piece) – comprises two independently functioning sections, enabling the creatures to perform polyphonic melodies. While composers had long attempted to transcribe bird song, it was Messiaen who, in the mid-1950s, first combined a serious study of ornithology and music, using transcriptions made during field work in collections such as *Catalogue d'oiseaux* and *Oiseaux exotiques*. Scholars have since

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debated the accuracy of these transcriptions, but there is little doubt they have had an enormous impact on subsequent work, inspiring collections such as Richard Rodney Bennett's *Six Tunes for the Instruction of Singing Birds*. Some composers have taken Messiaen's approach a stage further by including actual bird song in their music. Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Cantus Arcticus – Concerto for Birds and Orchestra* (1972) includes recordings made in the north of his native Finland, while Australian birds take a starring role in Hollis Taylor's 2017 *Absolute Bird – Concerto for Recorder and Orchestra*.

'Birds are musical masters,' says Quebec-based Michel Gonneville who, in works such as *Oiseaux migraeurs*, combines recordings of local birds including a Hermit Thrush with soprano; 'their virtuosity forces us to imagine new technical means, be it intonation or rhythm.' Technology has helped in this respect: Gonneville and colleagues can slow recordings down to achieve a remarkable level of accuracy, while an array of bird identification apps make it possible for the uninitiated to unravel the mysteries of a call with a single tap.

Composer-recordists such as Bernie Krause and Chris Watson (who has captured many of the animal sounds heard on David Attenborough's *Life* series, as well as *Frozen Planet*) have done much to further the artistic credentials of natural soundscapes. Krause's recordings of gibbons, tree frogs, beavers, gorillas and others feature in Richard Blackford's *The Great Animal Orchestra – Symphony for Orchestra and Wild Soundscapes*, which premiered at Cheltenham Festival in 2014. Jonathan Harvey's *Bird Concerto with Pianosong* – a piano work composed in 2003 that features recordings of Californian species such as the Orchard Oriole, Golden-crowned Sparrow and Indigo Bunting – turns the pianist into avian accompanist. The title is more than witty word play: over the past few decades, a new branch of study has emerged that emphasises the intrinsic value in animal-made music. French composer and former Messiaen student François-Bernard Mâche has compared Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* with songs of the Blyth's Reed Warbler and argues that musical processes can be directly traced to the natural world. Zoomusicologists such as Gonneville and Taylor, alongside David Rothenberg and the pleasingly named Emily Doolittle, have shone a light on the musicality of crickets, whales and seals, among others.

Composer Dave Soldier takes a different approach to animal musicality. Rather than capturing sounds made in the wild, he creates man-made environments for animals to make music using instruments. Working with Richard Lair at an elephant conservation centre in Thailand, Soldier founded the Thai Elephant Orchestra, where 14 elephants play heavy-duty versions of traditional Thai instruments using a pentatonic scale. (This isn't the first time that elephants have been used in musical performance; Stravinsky's *Circus Polka* was written to accompany an elephant 'dance' for the Barnum & Bailey circus. The piece was premiered in 1942 with 50 elephants in Madison Square Gardens, New York.) A similar idea led to Céleste Boursier-Mougenot's 2010 installation at the Barbican: an aviary filled with electric guitars for zebra finches to 'play'. In 2014, Aldeburgh Festival hosted Lily Green Hunter's *Bee Composed*, a work that used sounds taken from a hive established in an upright piano.

A further sub-section of creature-based composition is music that is written for an animal audience. Periodic studies reveal the benefits of playing classical music to pets – dogs, for instance, are thought to be less stressed after listening to calming instrumental music. This has led to new compositions such as *A Dog's Tale* by Iain Jackson, which was premiered at Crufts (where else?), as well as Lisa Spector and Joshua Leeds's *Through a Dog's Ear* series.

At a time when we are increasingly aware of the fragility of the natural world, it is likely that animals will become further intertwined with music. 'Animals show us who we are,' says Gonneville; 'their behaviours – imagined or humanised – and songs are a source of endless artistic inspiration and a reminder of how close we are to these "other beings".'

The birds and the B flats

A celebration of fauna in song

For *A Musical Zoo* (left), his new disc with pianist Joseph Middleton, bass-baritone Ashley Riches has explored how composers over the centuries have celebrated a range of creatures, from the flea and the cockroach to the cow and the crocodile, in song.

'I did at some point count the number of animals that appear in *A Musical Zoo*, and it is somewhere around 50,' Riches tells *BBC Music*. 'As a massive animal fan – I'm very much a cat person, in particular – I have spent some time thinking about what exactly they represent for us as people. I then thought I'd explore that in musical terms and see where it got me. There are songs about our relationship with them and to what degree they are our companions and helpers – Barber's *The Monk and his Cat* is a lovely, friendly manifestation of that, Schumann's *Die Löwenbraut* (The Lion's Bride) decidedly less so! And then you have songs about how animals act as inspiration for human activity when we see and hear them out in the world: Brahms's *An die Nachtigall* (To a Nightingale), for instance, or Howells's *King David*, which also features a nightingale.

'Another type of song, meanwhile, investigates the nature of the animals themselves. The prime example here is Ravel's *Histoires naturelles*, in which all of the writing is designed to evoke the movement and behaviour of animals. And finally, you have animals used as images of human nature, as in the beautiful romantic relationship portrayed in Fauré's *Le papillon et la fleur* (The butterfly and the flower) or the futility of human striving expressed in Shostakovich's *Once there lived a cockroach*.

'As I explored, I became aware of a relationship between animals and music – namely, that each of them represents life in its non-verbal form. Both of them display emotions, movement, directions and intentions, but somehow remain elusive and mysterious to us.'

A Musical Zoo is out now on Chandos

Winged words: creatures sung about by Ashley Riches (top) include the cockroach and the nightingale (left)

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