

Note perfect

How composers were inspired to write some of their finest pieces by listening to the beauty of birdsong

WORDS CLAIRE JACKSON

A fluttering violin melody gathers pace, soaring over the orchestra, as it reaches its highest notes and spinning into a gentle downward spiral. Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending* mimics a bird in flight as it embarks on a morning journey across a waking landscape. The musical style is described as pastoral; an idyllic depiction of rural Britain. It's an exceptionally beautiful piece, and offers 15 minutes of pure escapism – the next best thing to the bird's own song.

The *Lark Ascending* was composed in 1914, at the start of World War I. Legend has it that the English composer was walking in Margate when the germ of the melody first came to him.

He was put under a citizen's arrest as he made a note of the tune, accused of documenting the coastline for the enemy.

The music was recently voted number one in Classic FM's annual survey of the nation's favourite pieces.

Composers have long been inspired by birds. While the likes of Vaughan Williams sought to create an idealised view of a lark in flight, others prefer more literal sounds, often attempting to recreate birdsong through musical instruments. ('Birdsong' is used broadly in this article to encompass all sounds produced by a variety of birds, not just passerines.)

This mixing of science and art has led to a new area of creative study. Composer-ornithologists such as Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) gathered field recordings and attempted to match the bird's sounds with the musical pitches used in Western classical music, in order to transcribe them on to the staff (the five lines used for writing scores).

Greek pan pipes

This was a lengthy task in the mid-20th Century (one wonders what Messiaen would make of the various bird call tracking apps available today), made further complicated by the fact that birds can produce polyphonic melodies, i.e. more than one line of sound at the same time. A bird's voice box (called a syrinx; Greek for pan pipes) is split into two independently functioning sections. These allow the reproduction of multiple melodies, something that only certain musical instruments can achieve.



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Ralph Vaughan Williams



Olivier Messiaen

GRANGER HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/ALAMY



Reed Warbler

LAURE ADAMS/ALAMY

MIKE LANFAL/ALAMY

Troubling the charts...

The singles chart is no stranger to bird-themed entries: Keith Harris and Orville showed that birds (of a sort) could achieve pop success when they had a top 10 hit in 1982 – and the Birdie Song reached number two in 1981. But novelty acts are eclipsed by the real thing. Last year, the RSPB's Let Nature Sing, a mix of British birdsong featuring warblers, woodpeckers and Blackbirds, was released to coincide with International Dawn Chorus Day (5 May).

The piece reached number one on the UK Singles Sales Chart and number 18 on the UK Singles Chart.

So, when it came to reimagining birdsong in his compositions, Messiaen needed an instrument that could do justice to the complexity of the natural sound. He turned to the piano, and his Catalogue d'Oiseaux, a collection that recognises 13 different birds from his native France, was completed in 1956-8. It wasn't just songbirds that fascinated Messiaen, although several feature in Catalogue d'Oiseaux, such as the Blue Rock Thrush and Reed Warbler.

He also included the Curlew and Tawny Owl, as well as the Black-eared Wheatear and Alpine Chough. The resulting two-and-a-half hours of music is an incredible hymn to the natural world.

That's not to say that Catalogue d'Oiseaux is an easy listen. Unlike Vaughan Williams, Messiaen was a modernist, and the transference of birdsong to piano results in an avant-garde musical



Curlew

NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS LTD/ALAMY



Black-eared Wheatear

SANERIO GANTO/ALAMY



Alice Springs

GENEVIEVE VALLEE/ALAMY



language. The score's dedicatees are 'the birds'. There is a lively academic debate around how precise Messiaen's transcriptions are. The composer himself was often unclear on his position, claiming on occasions they were exact replicas and then that the original material was 'malleable'.

Field recordings

Today's composer-ornithologists are taking advantage of advances in recording technology to incorporate birdsong in their work. Australian-based Hollis Taylor has been using Pied Butcherbird vocalisations in her compositions since 2005. Taylor analyses birdsong via sonograms, as well as transcribing them into notation. Her '(re)compositions' blend field recordings and human-made music to evoke the vibrancy of the Australian avian world. In pieces such as Owen Springs Reserve 2014, cheery chirping is combined with solo

vibraphone to create a unique timbre. "My priority is to first document what the bird had achieved, before I compose," says Taylor. "This species has been around for some 13 million years, so I'm sure they don't need me to improve on their phrases. Instead, I commend and showcase what they have accomplished."

"My (re)compositions feature my various field recordings as chamber music partners – some are birdsongs, but also the songs and sounds of frogs, mammals, and insects; the sound of the wind blowing through an outback fence; a livestock auctioneer; a car trundling across an old wooden bridge – whatever I encounter in my travels."

Taylor has conducted fieldwork throughout Australia, but now focuses on central Australia, in and around Alice Springs. "To record, I set up shotgun microphones on a tripod, and I also set out a number of all-weather recorders to check

where and when birds are singing so I can be as productive as possible each night," she explains. "Pied Butcherbird soloists sing nocturnally for up to seven hours in the spring. All soloists sing differently, and they change their phrases annually, so I have a regular source of new material as long as the climate crisis does not silence them. I spend at least three months every year in the field."

Promoting conservation

Recording technology is helping to shape education projects around birding, too. When Lowestoft's First Light Festival launched in 2019, local charities were understandably keen to make the most of the high numbers of visitors. But how best to promote wetland conservation projects at an event held on a beach?

Suffolk Wildlife Trust commissioned sound artist Mike Challis to create a recording that was shared with attendees

LISTENING LIST

Bird concerto with Pianosong (2003) by Jonathan Harvey

Forty Californian birds, including the Indigo Bunting, Orchard Oriole and Golden-crowned Sparrow inspired this 30-minute work that fuses together recordings and abstract piano melodies to create a vibrant homage to Messiaen.

On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring (1912) by Frederick Delius

Composed in the same pastoral style as Vaughan Williams's The Lark Ascending, Delius's music is centred around the much-loved cuckoo call, which is passed around the orchestral instruments and is particularly effective in the clarinet part.

The Birds (1928) by Ottorino Respighi

Based on early attempts to transcribe birdsong, this orchestral work includes references to doves, cuckoos, nightingales and hens (the original transcription also inspired Saint-Saëns's 'Hens and Cockerels' in Carnival of the Animals).

Absolute Bird: Concerto for Recorder and Orchestra (2017) by Hollis Taylor

Field recordings of Australian birds are melded with a complex solo recorder line that blurs the boundaries between human- and animal-made music in this remarkable work, commissioned by recorder player Genevieve Lacey, who premiered it with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra.

Oiseaux exotiques (1955-56) by Olivier Messiaen

Written in a similar vein to catalogue d'oiseaux, oiseau exotiques is scored for piano and chamber orchestra and is based on the songs of birds from Asia and North and South America, such as the Baltimore Oriole, the Greater Prairie Chicken, Red-whiskered Bulbul and the Wood Thrush.

at sunrise (First Light Festival marks one cycle of midsummer sun setting and rising at Britain's most easterly town).

At 5am, the dunes were filled with the sound of Sedge and Cetti's Warblers, Cuckoos and Tawny Owls recorded near Sprat's Water in Carlton Marshes, in an unrivalled advertisement for the neighbouring reserves.

In her book *Is Birdsong Music? Outback* ▶

COMPOSERS AND BIRDSONG

In 2016, Pierre-Laurent Aimard performed concerts from dawn to midnight, accompanied by birdsong



MATT JOLLY

Encounters with an Australian Songbird Taylor argues that it is wrong to see birdsong as separate from human-made music. Taylor is a zoomusicologist: an academic who specialises in the study of music in animal culture. It's a young field of study, but one that is attracting growing interest.

Early concert

The close connections between birdsong and human music is reflected in how performances are presented. In 2016, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, then artistic director of Aldeburgh Festival, played Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux* over the course of a single day and night.

The concerts were timed to coincide with the bird's own recitals: the day began at 4am as attendees gathered in the reed beds outside Suffolk's Snape



Pierre-Laurent Aimard

MATT JOLLY

Maltings to listen to the dawn chorus before the first piano recital at 6am.

One of the evening performances was held at Whin Hill – a joint venture

between Aldeburgh Music and Minsmere RSPB, one-time hosts of BBC's *Springwatch* – to celebrate the dusk chorus. The piano was positioned outside so that the Messiaen's music could merge with the birds' own.

And while you might think that the sound of a piano is far removed from a bird's timbre, composers are continuing to prove that it's not just woodwind instruments that can reproduce birdsong. "Pied Butcherbirds sing with a gorgeous, flute-like tone, but playing their vocalisations on a tuba means their human audience cannot be accused of being swayed just by timbre; the phrases sound musical on every instrument I assign them to," says Taylor.

Whether it's an orchestral ode, transcription or recording, music will continue to take inspiration from birdsong – and perhaps our feathered friends will one day be recognised as composers in their own right, too.

BW



Pied Butcherbird

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