

SINGING THE WORLD

A Dawn Chorus at Cheeseburn The Stables Gallery 26-28 August and 2-3 September 2017

Expanded background to the project with source material: Part One

*Imitating with the mouth the fluid voices of birds
came long before
men were able to sing together in melody and please the ear.*

Lucretius (94-55BC): De Rerum Natura

This exhibition was initially inspired by listening to the Dawn Chorus at Cheeseburn – a choir of sixteen birds heard early one morning in May 2016. Together their songs, represented variously as digitally manipulated sonograms and musical transcriptions, form the basis of this exhibition of screen prints, music, digital prints, relief sculpture, poetry and glass.

I have wanted to make work based around the dawn chorus for sometime. Like many ideas (some of which come to fruition and some of which don't), it sat there at the back of my mind for three or four years, occasionally surfacing and then filed away again in that space marked 'future projects'. For some reason, this 'idea' was always accompanied by a 'feeling' that the work should be predominantly yellow. I imagined a yellow 'bloom' of colour and rhythm – a multi-layered visual choir.

The offer of an exhibition at Cheeseburn this year enabled me to realise this long-held ambition. The show approaches the experience of the dawn chorus in a number of different ways and I have collaborated with a glass artist, a printmaker, a composer and musicians and a natural history sound recordist when completing the project.

My ideas for artworks often begin as nebulous propositions; I like to work collaboratively ... to float an idea with friends and colleagues and see what happens. Separately, I began to talk to painter Siu Carter, composer and musician Bennett Hogg and printmaker Alex Charrington about how to realise a project based around this experience of the dawn chorus.

Our dawn chorus at Cheeseburn in 2016 started slowly between 4.00 am and 5.00 am, listening to Robin, Blackbird, Mistle Thrush and Wren; gradually the sound built ... a choir of 'voices' singing through the thin morning air; Dunnock, Chiffchaff, Song Thrush, Blue Tit, Great Tit – Nuthatch, Redstart, Goldcrest, Greenfinch, Spotted Flycatcher ... and in the background, the soft, repetitive 'coo coooo coo cu cu' of the Woodpigeon.

At the height of the chorus – from 5.00 am to 6.00 am – I could hear all the voices together ... what I described as a *bloom* of sound. Listening carefully, I could unpick the sounds of individual species – the liquid song of blackbird;

the operatic wren; songs that weaved texturally in and out of each other. Rhythms and melodies (and, yes, there are melodies) merged, forming complex and rich sonic patterns.

Bennett, Alex and I discussed the complications of re-presenting this experience – both visually and sonically – in a gallery; about how to re-invoke, and not just literally illustrate, something of the experience of listening to the dawn chorus outside. I had thought about overlaying a series of visual notations of birdsong in a way that was equivalent to my luminous, sonic experience of the dawn chorus.

Our conversation explored the very idea of birdsong as music; was it music? Was this anthropomorphising bird behaviour or was it recognising that birds do indeed have a sense of themselves as unique and individual ... and that such a thing as bird culture does exist? This is a question taken up by soundscape composer Michael Rösenberg who suggests that 'however bird 'songs' may sound like music, they cannot be music – unless, of course, we ascribe to birds a mental life comparable to our own, which few of us will want to do' ¹.

Bennett and I discussed this question with natural history sound recordist Geoff Sample. Geoff had previously worked with artists Marcus Coates and Hannah Tuulikki and written a fascinating exploration of birdsong in a book and collection of CDs for Collins which included a short chapter titled 'Is it Music' ². Exploring this question further (Is it Music? – a question which is almost impossible to answer), Geoff says that 'what is staring-in-the-face remarkable is that so many musical figures are shared between our music, in a traditional sense (i.e. not including what might be more accurately described as sound art), and bird song. For instance, consider how many bird songs and calls use note intervals that strike us as melodic, particularly the major and minor third and the slides between (blue notes)'. Consider, too, the fact that birdsongs have regional dialects; does this suggest the possibility of cultural adaptation?

Geoff, Bennett and myself then looked at visualisations of birdsong in a book by W. H. Thorpe ³ and the rough, printed symbols taken from a 1950s oscilloscope illustrated there bore a superficial resemblance to handwritten "neumes", a medieval form of musical notation.

Bennett explained that early musical notation from the Middle Ages (neumatic notation) was a more embodied, if less complex and scientific, form of musical notation – a form that might lend itself well to the kind of visual layering I had in mind – where the complex rhythmical patterns and structure of the dawn chorus could weave its magic across the surface of the print. In this way, we could also explore the concept of the palimpsest as both a metaphor and model in responses to the natural world stretching back to the early Medieval period and beyond.

¹ From Geoff Sample in *Bird Songs and Calls*

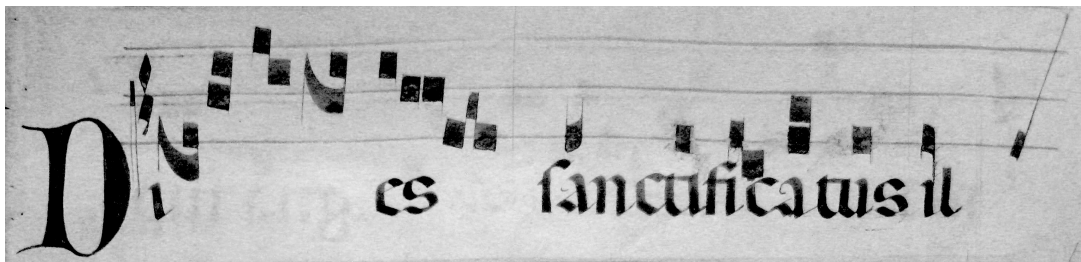
² Geoff Sample in *Bird Songs and Calls*

³ *Bird Song* by W. H. Thorpe

As Prof Elizabeth Leach explains: ⁴

Dating from early medieval times, the 'earliest neumes were inflective marks which indicated the general shape but not necessarily the exact notes or rhythms to be sung. The monks learnt the songs by heart, but the choirmaster still needed a form of written notation that gave him an expressive set of instructions (to do with emphasis, length of note, pitch/energy of note sung etc). Later developments included the use of heightened neumes which showed the relative pitches between neumes, and the creation of a four-line musical staff that identified particular pitches.

To represent musical sounds on a page is very different to writing down language. So, early neumatic notation depended almost entirely on the singer's recall of the music being represented.



An example of early Medieval neumes from 'Investigating Italian Gradual leaves'; a project by Tessa Cernik

'However', says Tessa Cernik, 'the introduction of time signatures in the 13th and 14th centuries as mensuration devices for music helped to define the relative rhythmic values of notes. Notations on the page were no longer just representations of pitch but a more comprehensive expression of the expressive sound of the particular melody'. ⁵

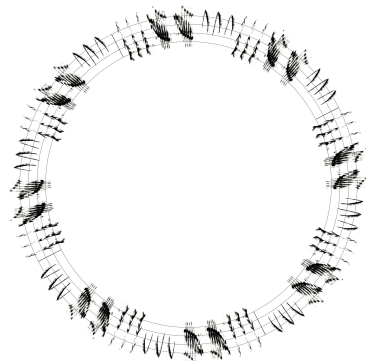
In subsequent discussions about the links between these neumatic notations and language with Bennett and Alex, we developed the idea of making a multi-layered screen print using visual patterns of individual birdsong from the dawn chorus. We aimed to use the process of layering both opaque and transparent colours, creating rhythmical surface patterns - neumatic representations of notations in print – which could reflect the sonic complexities of birdsong in the dawn chorus.

The key question now for Bennett, Alex and myself was how to neumatically notate birdsong? Was this possible? To address this problem, we enlisted Geoff's help. Together, we interrogated a series of sonograms of bird recordings he had made in Northumberland. Aware that 'the sonogram is a mere black and white still of a rainbow coloured fountain of sound that defies

⁴ Elizabeth Leach in *Sung Birds: Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages*

⁵ From 'Investigating Italian Gradual leaves'; a project by Tessa Cernik

capture and imprisonment'⁶, we stretched and pulled, squeezed and pinched these visual scientific notations and slowly they actually began to look like early neumatic musical notations. We searched for rhythm, tone, pattern, pitch, colour and melody. This was a delicate process – finding that 'sweet spot' between science and art.

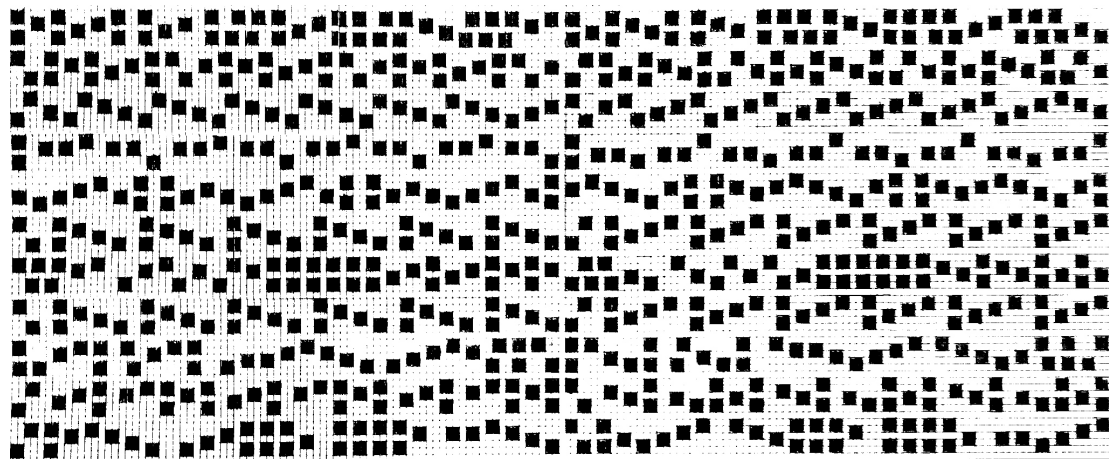


Song of the Blackbird



Song of the Wren

We now had the basis for developing our visual and musical ideas.



Early drawing of birdsongs translated from sonograms using a basic neumatic variation of musical Medieval transcription (detail) - Mike Collier 2017

As Bennett says:

We decided early on in our project that there was little point trying to imitate birdsong in the music - not only is this artistically uninteresting, but you are surrounded by the real thing at Cheeseburn.

Geoff, Mike, and myself spent several days transcribing and refining the digital transcriptions of birdsong until something close enough to a

⁶ Loye Miller (biologist) 1952; in Hollis Taylor *Is Birdsong Music*

*medieval musical notation emerged*⁷. This was then transcribed again into modern musical notation, so that contemporary singers would be able to turn the notes into sound. However, there was always a sense that the human voices, singing in chorus, somehow didn't "fit" the images. In a sense, Mike's prints operate on a level twice removed from the original birdsong; the digital visualisations, and then the further refining and stylisation of these images into the prints you see on the walls. I decided to do the same, recomposing the original choral music into a complex and multi-layered piano piece (by co-incidence, Mike's prints have seven layers to them, and there are seven pianos overlain in my piece). This extra distance from the original sound of the birds was just what was needed to connect to Mike's image'.

Expanded background to the project with source material: Part Two

'Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark'.

Rabindranath Tagore

Whilst working with Geoff, Bennett and I talked about the subtle differences between the dawn chorus and the evening chorus which has a more 'laid back', spacious feel to it. The idea for a musical and visual pairing of dawn and evening pieces grew from this discussion. I settled on blue as the dominant colour for this part of the project, whilst Bennett's score for two voices and piano moves into a slower, more thoughtful and reflective phase as his new piece, accompanying the Evening Chorus print, draws to a close. The writer and philosopher David Abram describes this liminal period of the day:

*As dusk dims into night, the choral abundance fades into a quietude much deeper than the muted talk of the day the light's edge is now gliding almost imperceptibly across the disk, leaving a radiance in its wake: the bright bow slowly thickening into a crescent of luminous blue. Soon other colours (white, brown, green) shape themselves within the blue ...*⁸

Furthermore, we began to realise that the dawn chorus actually begins in darkness often around 3.00am - just before the sun rises ... when a few of the birds begin their song (often accompanied by the sound of a Tawny Owl). From here, the full choir of voices gradually grows.

The opportunity to show work in the darkness of the hayloft at Cheeseburn presented us with a unique opportunity – to represent this transition from night to day, moving from darkness through to light. The idea of a glass chandelier of birdsong developed in my mind ... a piece that would signal the dawning of a new day. I have worked with glass artist Ayako Tani before and discussed my thoughts with her.

⁷ For anyone interested in a more detailed examination of early musical notation, I recommend *The Notation of Polyphonic Music 900 – 1600* by Willi Apel

⁸ David Abram in *Becoming Animal*

It transpired that Ayako had wanted to make a work utilising the optical effect of a collection of partially painted glass threads for a number of years, and this technical idea perfectly suited our idea of a chandelier of birdsong. It also resonated with her major new piece for the International Glass Biennale 2017, based on a Starling murmuration. Ayako visited Geoff with Bennett and myself and developed her own set of neumatic notations for each of the sixteen birds in the Cheeseburn dawn chorus, which she transferred on to glass rods of different lengths. These were then fixed into sixteen glass tubes (one for each bird) at the National Glass Centre made to be lit and hung in the hayloft as a chandelier and called *Pre-dawn Light*.

The piece of electro acoustic music that accompanies the chandelier was developed organically by Bennett, who explains that:

I wanted to create a parallel sound piece for Ayako's chandelier hanging in the hayloft next to Mike's prints. Because sound travels, it was crucial that this piece was synchronised exactly with the piano music to avoid one sound work interfering with the other. To achieve this, I radically simplified the piano piece into a "skeleton", in which only the absolutely essential notes remained.

This skeleton served as a template around which to compose a separate piece, in which the recorded sounds of Ayako's glass are digitally infused with birdsong, transformed, and then recombined with the bell-like original glass sounds to form a gradually changing soundscape that evokes the material of Ayako's chandelier (the glass), but also reintroduces the sound of birds that are encoded into the chandelier itself.

In this way, the sound piece and the chandelier use the same materials but in different sensory dimensions. The two pieces - the restored piano piece and its electroacoustic "ghost" in the hayloft - can be heard together, or separately, depending on where you are in the gallery. In any event, they should work together with Mike's prints and Ayako's chandelier to form a single, composite experience for the visitor.

The final elements of this show – a multi-media exploration of the dawn chorus – came together following conversations with Andrew Richardson and the poet Jake Campbell. It is surprising how often ideas I have overlap with those being developed by friends and colleagues. It turned out that Andrew had been separately working on a digital programme to re-present the sound of birdsong in sonic, concentric rings – rings that radiate from the centre of an image in much the same way that the rings of a tree grow. For this exhibition Andrew has had these images laser cut into wood.

I have also worked with Jake Campbell on a number of previous projects. His poetry fuses lyricism and a sense of place within a wider social and political landscape. For this show Jake has written a new poem about the dawn

chorus, heard early one morning near his home in Cleadon. It speaks of a very personal experience that gently weaves together culture with nature, reflecting and complementing the approach taken by each of the artists in this show, as the following second stanza from *Dawn Chorus, Cleadon Village* illustrates:

Somewhere in the smudge
 beyond high-rises
 and docks of the city
it gathers momentum
 much like a storm
 whose palms
 caress energy
from each node and fissure
 of this brittle earth.

Mike Collier, August 2017

I have written below a list of some of the other books I referred to whilst working on this project:

- *A Sweet Wild Note: What we hear when the birds sing* by Richard Smyth
- *Why Birds Sing* by David Rothenberg (worth reading although I don't fully subscribe to his philosophical approach)
- *The Great Animal Orchestra* by Bernie Krause
- *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram (essential reading!)
- *Bird Sounds and their Meaning* by Rosemary Jellis
- *Birdwatching with your eyes closed* by Simon Barnes
- *A Study of Bird Song* by Edward A Armstrong
- *Birdsong in the Music of Oliver Messiaen* by David Kraft
- *Tweet of the Day: A Year of British Birds* by Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss
- *Birdsong* by Catchpole and Slater



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