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Night Songs

Creating Narratives of Enchantment and
Connection through Birdsong

It starts with a bird—a feathered dinosaur, in fact. Thirteen million years ago, Australian pied butcherbirds (*Cracticus nigrogularis*) separated from their common corvid ancestor and developed a preference for complex song (Taylor 2017: 29). This ancient vocal lineage suggests that humans are new on the block with regard to the multiple capacities and sensitivities that together comprise *musicality*.

In the spring, pied butcherbird soloists deliver nocturnal songs that can stretch to seven hours in duration. These vocalists are not predictable, passive, or robotic; they transform their phrases hourly and annually, proposing new variations and combinations. So wide are pied butcherbirds' sonic results that pinning down species-specific rules is confronting. Although occasionally a phrase may be held in common by neighbors, each soloist's overall repertoire is unique, which preloads our project with a virtually unending supply of new material. (This assumes, of course, that they continue to survive and thrive in the midst of the environmental challenges we humans carelessly throw at them.)

Our research concerns itself with paying close and longitudinal attention to these songbirds. We record, transcribe, and analyze their songs much as a musicologist/ethnomusicologist might study any human music genre. We also arrange, or (re)compose, some of our transcriptions for human musicians to perform.¹ Typically, pied butcherbird motifs must be simplified in order to be played by a human.

Assigning avian phrases to a wide assortment of instrument families (string, woodwind, brass, and percussion) as well as to the human voice allows us to test pied butcherbird musicality in terms of human assessment. For instance, does the allure of these vocalizations lie merely in their rich, crystalline timbre, or will they also find favor from a human audience when performed several octaves lower on a double bass or bassoon? The challenge of representing individual vocalists and giving them voice in human concert halls is mediated by the fact that they are doing a fine job of singing already.

For us, birdsong research and artistic practice are not separate activities, although we initially considered them as such. Each informs and nourishes the other, as Taylor (2017: 250) describes vis-à-vis the birdsong pieces she performs on solo violin:

Initially, nothing in my analytical work hinged on it being partnered with composition or performance—in fact, I did everything I could to keep them separate, lest my art should taint my science in the view of some. However, I became convinced that my ability to transcribe avian vocalizations improved with the back and forth of playing them on the violin—with me entering into the sheer materiality of the experience. I study avian vocalists, but I also study under them, so “pied butcherbird” became a performance practice, as well as an intellectual activity.

Pied butcherbird solo nocturnal songs consist of a second or two of sound, followed by several more of “silence” (we acknowledge that post–John Cage, silence is not a straightforward concept). Inter-phrase intervals run the risk of interference from squeaking chairs, rustling programs, coughing audience members, and more (music to Cage, yes, but not our aspiration for this project). To minimize the perils of such an acoustic backdrop, we settled on human musicians performing with our environmental field recordings, so as to privilege and foreground what others might ignore or relegate to background. For us, these field recordings are full chamber music partners.

Our multimedia concerts cultivate audience enchantment by striving to create as deep a listening experience as ours was in the field. We draw heavily on a range of insect and dawn choruses, as well as single-species recordings like the chilling howl of dingoes, the haunting “boo-book” of an owl, or even the rapid-fire chant of a livestock auctioneer. However, more and more we pair human musicians with the very avian chorister whose phrases they are exploring. This allows musicians to perform across a perceived divide and audiences to enjoy and benefit by making direct comparisons of avian and human musicians. Whatever the choice of field recording, the two are in dialogue. You could call this an *intermingling* (since *entanglement*, an otherwise perfectly serviceable word, has become an “it” word and to us no longer packs the punch of previous times).

Below, we review our recent interspecies collaboration between human musicians and avian ones entitled *Night Songs*. Our preference is to celebrate avian achievements rather than focusing on the human

arranger/(re)composer in question and any “improvements” they might initiate. Yes, we do draw upon human musical models that highlight aspects of a bird’s musicality, especially counterpoint—but counterpoint is just one of the many mutualisms between pied butcherbird vocalizations and human music genres. These overlaps also take in sonic objects and strategies like syncopation, trill, fanfare, melisma, and ostinato. Structures like repetition and variation, shape and balance, canon, and combinatoriality (which contemporary audiences associate with minimalist composers like Philip Glass and Steve Reich) are well known in pied butcherbird songs. Other correspondences include familiar musical activities and behaviors like warming up, rehearsals, and vocal contests, as well as singing lessons and musical activities for certain times and seasons. These similarities do not end with singing but extend to listening. Neuroscientific evidence of brain activation in both humans and songbirds indicates that mirror neurons link what is perceived with what is performed (Prather et al. 2008; Tchernichovski and Wallman 2008).

In light of these correspondences, the stunning, varied, and often familiar-sounding vocal culture of pied butcherbirds prompts a rethink of species boundaries, particularly the widely held assumption of human uniqueness in music. Warning: prestige differentials operating in this area. Western art music habitually seizes authority to make claims about all sonic experience. However, as songbird aesthetics emerge in the concert hall, they challenge long-standing hierarchies and assumptions concerning the nature of music. Musicology is indeed a “political act” (Bohlman 1993), as scholars choose what sounds to study and what to ignore, what to praise and what to dismiss; we would add the update that, in this, musicology is also a speciesist act. Any number of composers and musicologists hold that songbirds and humans inhabit mutually exclusive sonic categories. Inherent in most definitions of music is that birdsong is *not* music. However, Val Plumwood (2009: 115) coined the term *hyperseparation* to describe how human-centeredness “damages our ability to see ourselves as part of ecosystems.” Moreover, an excessive amount of argumentative weight is (mis)placed on issues of intentionality, consciousness, language, and function vis-à-vis animal music and has been for centuries. The dominance of the linguistic model obscures the contributions music, sound art, and environmental field recordings more generally make to human life and sidelines potentially fruitful cross-species comparisons and even collaborations. To this point, Kathleen Marie Higgins (2012: 9) rejects “philosophical models

that see the structure of language as the structure of thought” and argues for music’s place in the philosophy of mind.

As the foundation of all sorts of violence and injustice, human exceptionalism keeps close company with other hierarchies of domination, including those germane to our purposes: speciesism, anthropomorphism, and anthropocentrism. In confronting the contentious problems of knowledge production, theorists in critical animal studies, among others, have called into question such prejudices (see, in particular, Best 2009; Weitzenfeld and Joy 2014). How we imagine continuity and separation impacts birds and their vocalizations. The cosmologies of Indigenous people embrace birdsong (Feld 1990; Brabec de Mori and Seeger 2013; Descola 2013; Gannon 2023). Similarly, Roberto Marchesini (2016: 113) debunks the fallacy that humanity is separate from animality, underlining the “extensive animal loans [made to] . . . human culture in terms of activities, behaviors, and skills,” including music. In addition, Plumwood (2009) suggests that “insights of continuity and kinship with other life forms (the real scandal of Darwin’s thought) remain only superficially absorbed in the dominant culture, even by scientists.” We have taken on this topic in detail elsewhere (Taylor 2017; Rose, n.d.); suffice it to say that most of the push-back for considering birdsong as music shows itself to be a flawed assessment of both human music and birdsong and is instead founded on the sand of human uniqueness. Again, the quotidian model of comparison winds through the narrow confines of Western art music as a basic category error, since there are plentiful older and “other” human musics that serve better in this debate.

First and foremost, we need not settle for an impoverished notion of birdsong. Granted, *chez pied* butcherbirds, musical phrases are untouched and untutored by a conservatory in Moscow, London, or Paris. The species is a sedentary one, so no avian songster is sourcing their hip licks from downtown New York improvisers. Yet *pied* butcherbird vocal repertoires fascinate human (and avian) audiences worldwide.

Night Songs calls into question binary oppositions so fundamental to Western thought. Human/animal, nature/culture, art/science, hard/soft—but we refuse to be stuck in a binary rut. We find no need for dualisms in order to make sense of a bird’s song. Neither are we searching for an overarching theory. “Works of art and culture are living experiences, not abstract doctrines. They are sensuous, delicate, uniquely individual,” Terry Eagleton (2004: 74) observes. “Theory is general,” he maintains, while “culture is specific.” We commend individual birds and their songs, fully acknowledging their agency, worldly engagements, and shared sense of musicality with humans.

Our social lives are multispecies ones; *Night Songs* proposes we conduct our musical lives in similar fashion. As human musicians play with pied butcherbirds across the divide, they narrow it. *Night Songs* features our birdsong recordings and transcriptions from Centralia, Western Australia, and Far North Queensland, shrinking not just geography but also time: vocalizations across a twelve-hour period are condensed into a one-hour audiovisual encounter with thirteen linked sections.² Australia's premiere new music group, Ensemble Offspring (with eight human musicians under the direction of Claire Edwardes), debuted the work at Performance Space in Sydney in October 2022. Although we were not aiming at a music theater experience, we did attempt to emulate our nighttime recording and filming fieldwork, where our heads and ears are aimed upward into the treetops and sound descends from on high. So, for this event, we perched our human musicians on scaffolding as high as the venue could accommodate, with the audience focusing skyward from chairs and beanbags.

Night Songs privileges the aural over the visual. However, although we initially planned to feature only ten minutes of the rare video Rose shot over four nights (recording a black-hooded bird in the dark is highly problematic), once an image is introduced, the eye misses it when absent.³ So, throughout the entire performance, we project upon the large wall stable but evocative images of pied butcherbird territories, the moon transiting across the darkness, sunrise emerging to the sound of a morning chorus, or rare glimpses of birds going about their business. We have referred to pied butcherbirds as feathered dinosaurs for years, but upon seeing a vocalist loom so huge on the wall of the hall, this truth hit us in a visceral way.

In some of our sonic vignettes, human musicians play a detailed birdsong transcription, or they complement the recorded birdsong with sonic strategies such as melodic inversion (upside down), retrograde (backward), augmentation (time-stretched), transposition, and counterpoint. Often, the original bird recording is heard in its pure state. Sometimes, the bird's song is substituted with an instrumental voice; thus, the original is transformed through the sonic constructs of an instrument and instrumental technique into another kind of musical expression altogether. *Night Songs* is multispecies sound. Here, narratives of enchantment and connection replace those of exceptionalism.

Beyond whether birdsong is music, one can contemplate what birdsong means. While bird *calls* are understood by ethologists to carry semantic meaning (indicating distress, pleasure, alarm, and aggression as well as feeding, greeting, mobbing, flying, and more), birdsongs do not. Nonetheless, a song at minimum communicates I am me, I am

here, and I am a pied butcherbird. Beyond that, we do not know. Much ink has been spilled on how to parse musical meaning versus extramusical meaning in “program” versus “absolute” (or abstract) human music. We accept that this topic is thorny and unresolved. In any case, pied butcherbird songs are able to be transcribed and analyzed much as one would any genre of music.

Gary Snyder helpfully interrupts any hairsplitting on this topic, expanding meaning beyond text and even sound. “Other orders of being have their own literatures. Narrative in the deer world is a track of scents that is passed on from deer to deer with an art of interpretation which is instinctive,” Snyder (1990: 112) imagines. “A literature of blood-stains, a bit of piss, a whiff of estrus, a hit of rut, a scrape on a sapling and long gone.”

Without having settled on what a bird’s song means to the bird, we might shift our focus to what it means to us. The pied butcherbird is our way to illuminate not just birdsongs and bird lives but also our place in the world. Animals enhance a conviviality of place, which our stories about them underpin. “Their stories are *our* stories. . . . We respond to the sheer exuberance of birds and recognize our encounters with them as sites of exchange” (Taylor 2017: 269).

Ursula K. Heise (2016: 5) reflects on the signal consequence of multispecies stories (and not merely academic texts):

However much individual environmentalists may be motivated by a selfless devotion to the well-being of nonhuman species, however much individual conservation scientists may be driven by an eagerness to expand our knowledge and understanding of the species with whom we co-inhabit the planet, their engagements with these species gain sociocultural traction to the extent that they become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons.

In the vein of thinkers like Mary Midgley, Paul Shepard, Vinciane Despret, and Dominique Lestel, Heise understands the key role animals play in the construction of our identity, which is central to her model of multispecies justice.

We align ourselves with a number of other scholars and artists who would open out justice beyond the human. While efforts to tackle multispecies justice emphasize value, meaning, and emotion inherent in storytelling, not all stories are equal: some stories are part of the problem.

Adam Weitzenfeld and Melanie Joy (2014: 20) warn of animal representations that *perpetuate* interspecies injustice:

Speciesism is not mere prejudice but a composite of interspecies injustices within material institutions, discursive regimes, and embodied affects. Speciesism is a complex of material institutions that systematically, non-criminally sacrifice the lives and interests of animals . . . as well as cultural discourses and narratives, speech and stories that circulate misrepresentations of animal others as inferiors and proper objects of sacrifice.

Further, comparisons with animals on the Meta website are meant to moderate online discussion and censor hate speech, but the message coming through denigrates animals even as it would elevate humans:

Do not Post: Dehumanising speech or imagery in the form of comparisons, generalisations or unqualified behavioural statements (in written or visual form) to or about: Insects (including but not limited to: cockroaches, locusts); Animals in general or specific types of animals that are culturally perceived as intellectually or physically inferior (including but not limited to: Black people and apes or ape-like creatures; Jewish people and rats; Muslim people and pigs; Mexican people and worms).⁴

A pied butcherbird stereotype resides in its name. The British focused on pied butcherbirds' eating habits, not their songs. What a miss! The French, however, in *corbeau flûteur-pie*, acknowledge what comes out of the beak, rather than what goes in. Who knows if pied butcherbirds have a derogatory stereotype about us humans?

Can we do better? How can the law justify and protect non-human animals and nature more broadly? "The river, the trees, the macaws—let's call these natural entities," itemizes Simon P. James (2022: 1). He expands this perspective to include "systems, processes, and events" (5). James argues that beyond mere instrumental value, many natural places and entities have constitutive value—they have meaning as part of something larger: nature's cultural values. As he writes, "We must come to see that natural entities can benefit us, not just as causally-efficient means to certain valuable ends, not just as resources and service-providers, but as parts of traditions, narratives, and cultural identities—as parts, that is, of various meaningful and valuable wholes" (2).

As parts of narratives . . . James's alternative way to understanding meaning pages back to Uexküll (2010), who championed the active role that all creatures play in shaping their *Umwelten*. For Uexküll, the organism is not merely subject to ruthless environmental selection pressures but instead plays an active part in shaping the environment in a coevolving situation. Moreover, any discussion on the topic of coevolution requires a nod to the work of Richard Prum. In line with Darwin's theory of sexual selection, Prum (2017: 8) argues that art is a form of communication that coevolves with its evaluation—that “desire and the object of desire coevolve.” He understands humans are only one of millions of species with elaborate and integrated sensory systems. No biological reason leads us to assume that animals lack the sensory capacity for aesthetic experience. Prum (2013: 813) distinguishes biotic advertisements, which “share with human art a common mechanism of coevolving with their evaluations,” from abiotic ones. For example, a rainbow or the night sky arise from “abiotic optical physics alone,” while flowers, fruits, and animal courtship displays are products of “functional physiology resulting from millions of years of genetic and cultural evolution” (815). He makes a strong case for a “more inclusive, ‘post-human’ view of art” (Prum 2017: 337). Specific to our project, Uexküll's concept of *Umwelten* describes how meaning is made everywhere all the time, thus detaching meaning from language's vise grip. Likewise, we must pry apart language and music. True, there are areas of overlap and liminal space between the two, but music is not a language nor does music require language to process it. Ethnomusicologists like Timothy Rice (1997: 115) have documented how “highly sophisticated nonverbal musical understanding” may exist despite a performer's inability to verbally express it—and those with anecdotes about a substandard music teacher who could perform well understand this as well. In short, music does not depend on words at any point in its invitation.

In considering how stories can add value to or devalue animals, James (2022: 12) asks a question of particular relevance to birdsong: “Do any entities have constitutive value precisely because they are (or are taken to be) natural?” (by which he means “*largely unshaped by human intentional actions*”). Birdsong can be (and often is) construed as authentic, exotic, original—as “other.” However, pied butcherbird phrases are sufficiently robust and striking without requiring any romanticization on our part. These days, birdsong field recordings lend relevance and even eco-anxiety more than exoticism, but James's point is well taken.

We make every effort to work with animals in a noninvasive way, recording them as unobtrusively as possible. Thus, we are able to avoid “all the ‘harmless’ daily humiliations that are visited on nonhuman animals—being forced to perform in circuses, used to sell products, forced into movies for ‘our’ amusement, and being subject to speciesist terminology and jokes” (Pedersen and Stanescu 2014: 263). Similarly, those who invade a bird’s territory with their musical instruments are likely interfering during the crucial mating season. Like others in critical animal studies and diverse scholars more widely, we join Pedersen and Stanescu in seeking to instead “endorse a worldview that accords dignity and worth to nonhuman animals” (263). We eschew playback in order to locate birds and make no attempt to engage with them musically in the field.

Notable progress has been made on how multispecies justice might look in theory and practice. Chief among these efforts is David Schlosberg’s *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (2007), which comprehensively connects theorists, philosophers, and activists in the fields of environmental justice and environmental conservation. He distills the leading projects seeking multispecies justice (distributive, recognition, capabilities, and participatory justice). Schlosberg imagines a community of justice that would converge *environmental justice* (between human populations) and *ecological justice* (which operates across any supposed species divide to embrace the entire natural world). For our work, justice is not formal and institutional but rather a number of representational and epistemic propositions. We imagine justice as affective and embodied (through an encounter or a series of encounters with others) rather than as the establishment of a set of principles or propositions or even reasoned argument. Our work is to engage an audience and to offer them a transformative experience.

Night Songs relies on musical tools rather than conceptual ones. In addition, given that birds, like many other species, are in steep decline, animal welfare is never far from our minds. Since we are not able to share royalties with pied butcherbirds in a more direct manner, we give generously to BirdLife Australia and encourage others to do the same. We are animal advocates in the sense that our birdsong (re) compositions link citizenship and scholarship with creative endeavors. However, since our soloists are on the concert program, not the menu, this project chiefly concerns itself with fostering joy and wonder rather than eliminating oppression and domination.

We are struck by what Martha C. Nussbaum (2022: 2), as part of her capabilities approach to multispecies justice, identifies as three human emotions “which commend animals to our attention and care: wonder, compassion, and outrage.” Of the three, wonder is the standout: “Wonder is more active than awe, more connected to curiosity. As Aristotle said long ago: wonder involves first being impressed by something, brought up short, and then being motivated to try to figure out what is going on behind the sights and sounds that impress us. He links wonder closely to the recognition of sentient life” (10). We cleave to a wonder that is, like music, not simply an emotion but also an imaginative speculation. “Wonder, like love, is epistemic: it leads us out of ourselves and awakens a nascent ethical concern,” Nussbaum adds (12). Every new pied butcherbird song brings to us a glimmer of wonder.

Like other music, environmental field recordings can arouse strong emotions (Dowling and Harwood 1986; Gabrielsson and Juslin 1996). Daryl Jamieson (2021: 213) believes nature field recording “affords reconnecting its audience with the enchantment of the ignored world surrounding them.” Epistemic interactions with sound spark ancient evolutionary systems (bottom-up processing) that complement top-down functions (Reybrouck 2013). As David Dunn (2008) observes, “I am willing to contend that this capacity to hear the soundscape as music is simultaneously one of the most archaic ways of listening and the most modern.” Enthralled listeners instinctively construct narratives in a multispecies contact zone, whether they are proposed or not. When *Night Songs* carries us to another place and time, it offers us the potential to lose ourselves or find ourselves. Beyond evoking emotion, it can provoke environmental reflection and inspire new environmental commitments. Ross Westoby, Rachel Clissold, and Karen E. McNamara (2022: 1) found that “nature is both the trigger for, and answer to, our ecological grief, anger, and anxiety, and, as such, is at the epicentre of human emotions.”

When science struggles to tell a story, *more* science is not the remedy. “Modern ecologists may have reached a limit on how effectively they can convey messages to the public,” notes Mark Moffett (quoted in Chadabe 2016: viii), “and they may now need to draw upon the emotional vibrancy offered by the arts.” We need not only truth but nuance. Telling the story of things relational and cultural is something we believe our creative interventions can do. This is not merely a musician’s hunch. An expanding body of studies confirms how psychological connectedness to the natural world (including nature-based

soundscapes and even digitally mediated nature experiences) benefits well-being as well as encourages proenvironmental behavior (Taylor 2023). Matilda Annerstedt et al. (2013) found a link between the sounds of nature and stress recovery. Similarly, Ryan Hammoud et al. (2022) demonstrated that encounters with birdlife and birdsong improved mental health, although the lack of birdsong in anticipated places was detrimental to well-being. Alexander J. Smalley et al. (2022: 2) extended “creative storytelling as a successful way to involve the public in modern ecological issues” via audio podcast. They found that respondents were more likely to protect natural sounds if they thought they offered therapeutic outcomes. Far from championing instrumentalism, we interpret these studies as powerful confirmation that metaphysics and the natural world are not separate ontological categories.

In connecting art and activism (and in forging academic and creative alliances), *Night Songs* fosters ecological reflection and even a heightened existence in the face of crisis. It folds concepts of justice into storytelling, and it joins a growing body of work that stimulates urgent public conversations concerning environmental awareness but also action.

Night Songs was nominated for chamber work of the year by the 2023 Australian Art Music Awards; the anonymous nominator wrote in part:

What struck me was the way in which birdsong was used as a *springboard to explore varied and compelling sound worlds*, from dance-like and intense to spacious and nuanced. Stunning video footage of Pied Butcher Birds is projected in the space to make it a multi-sensory experience. A captivating *structural arc* is mapped out through the music, sounds, and video taking the audience *on a journey* from evening and through the night all the way to dawn. The work effortlessly sustains itself over fifty minutes, and each of the movements is beautifully scored for soloists and various instrumental combinations that *interact with birdsong*. Through the high degree of craft and inventiveness in forming connections between instruments and birdsong, the work powerfully highlights *our relationship with nature*. For this reason, *Night Songs* goes beyond being an outstanding contribution to chamber music by also embedding *important and timely messages regarding our environment*. I left the performance feeling deeply inspired with a *renewed sense of awe and respect for the world around us*.

We include this not for its positive assessment but to provide what one member of the audience experienced (potential links to the keywords *storytelling* and *multispecies justice* are italicized). By situating us not just *in* nature but *of* nature, this multimedia (re)composition underlines the kinship between human and nonhuman musicians. Pied butcherbird individuals are social beings who reside within worlds of meaning, and they are musical beings of high order. Our intention is to spark engagement and not to institutionalize it—significant work that we leave for others (see, for instance, Schlosberg 2007: 187).

Night Songs brings witness, encounter, celebration, and obligation so as to heal us from the poverty of anthropocentric assumptions. It is our text and discussion.⁵ *Night Songs* has program notes, but the experience does not rely on them. The story that resides in our work is emergent from the material itself. It starts with a bird, but it also ends with a bird.

Notes

1. See, for instance, the ReR Megacorp catalog entry for Taylor's *Absolute Bird*, http://www.rermegacorp.com/mm5/merchant.mvc?Screen=PROD&Product_Code=ReRHT1&Store_Code=RM (accessed June 26, 2024); and Rose and Taylor, n.d.
2. See the *Night Songs* program info at Performance Space, <https://performance.space.com.au/program/night-songs/> (accessed June 26, 2024).
3. *Night Songs*, excerpts from live performance at LiveWorks Festival, Sydney, October 26–28, 2002, YouTube video, 4:24, uploaded by Jon Rose, December 29, 2002, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE53KQSEilw>.
4. “Hate Speech” policy details, Meta, <https://transparency.fb.com/en-gb/policies/community-standards/hate-speech/> (accessed June 26, 2024).
5. For a broadening of the term *discussion*, see Latour and Porter 2004: 62–70.

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