

Edward Cowie (b.1943) BIRD PORTRAITS

1	Mute Swan	2:09
2	Kingfisher	2:37
3	Great Crested Grebe	3:15
4	Dipper	3:33
5	Bittern	2:14
6	Coot	1:36
7	Barn Owl	2:21
8	Pheasant	1:56
9	Rook	2:37
10	Magpie	3:01
11	Starling	2:46
12	Skylark	3:52
13	Tawny Owl	3:41
14	Green Woodpecker	2:16
15	Song Thrush	3:33
16	Wren	5:31
17	Bullfinch	2:05
18	Wood Warbler	3:08
19	Curlew	3:16
20	Cormorant	3:18
21	Osprey	3:21
22	Arctic Terns	2:11
23	Puffins	1:36
24	Great Northern Diver	3:40

69:40

Peter Sheppard Skærved violin Roderick Chadwick piano

Total playing time

BIRD PORTRAITS: a preface by the composer

When the Covid Pandemic began at the opening of 2020, not until the first lockdown did I realise that more or less all my accustomed patterns of living would be either disrupted or suspended completely. Planned concerts, masterclasses, workshops and recordings were all cancelled. I found myself (together with my magnificent visual artist wife and best friend. Heather) semi-marooned in a capsule of isolation where even time itself seemed to reach into atrophy and then inertia. However, fortunately for both of us, we live in a part of England - South Cumbria – that boasts one of the most spectacularly diverse, mercurial, majestic and magical habitats in the United Kingdom. We were not permitted to drive far except to fetch essential groceries, and neither could we drive to take walks along estuarine shores; round the edges of lakes; over rugged moorland or reed-bedded meres. Nevertheless, only a short walk - less than 10 minutes in any direction, we could explore wild woodland, wetland and pastures. The birdsong, in the first spring of Covid, was stunning- the more so because we didn't meet anyone else on our walks - the roads were almost silent and the skies were devoid of vapour trails. At times, we felt transported to some kind of English pastoral dreamtime and wondered if we weren't closer to the habitats familiar to IMW Turner and William Wordsworth!

Although I'd lost live performances of music (something that now, after 16 months away from it, I am desperate to be in and with), I hadn't lost connections with musicians. I began to take entirely unaccustomed forays into social media, and to my surprise and delight, began to connect with new solo and chamber musicians around the entire globe! These became conjoined with a 'platoon' of great musicians I already counted as not only good friends, but also great interpreters and advocates for my music – both solo and chamber works. It was to them that I turned for support and encouragement to write new music at that very difficult time – for them even more than for me. Their support has been unstinting and deep.

So, surrounded as I was by a verdant Spring and hosts of bird-choirs in full voice, I returned to thoughts and memories of **birds** once again as a core inspiration. I honestly can't remember how many of my compositions have been connected with birds, but I'd guess at least a quarter of them. Slowly and with a delicious inexorability, a 'procession' (or should I say, 'fly-past'), of British birds came to fill my head with fresh and refreshing inspiration. The number **24** has appeared several times in my music – the *24 Preludes for Piano* and the *24 Birdsong Bagatelles, 5th String Quartet* and my *24 Studies in Rutherford's Lights for solo piano*. Expectedly, any composer responding to birdsong with music will be linked with Olivier Messiaen! However, apart from sharing a deep interest in ornithology with that great man, my approach to music inspired by birds is substantially different from his.

I have often described myself as a *patterner*, by which I mean that since early childhood- when one of my first creative acts was to attempt to **draw the patterns made by sounds in nature** – I have been fascinated by the dynamics and shapes of things in action in time and space. Birdsong was far from being the only 'shaped-sounds' that I notated and drew. It seemed to me (then as now), that the **context** (best to say *habitat* I guess), of these natural sounds was at least as interesting as the sounds emanating from them. I also loved to notate and draw **any** moving things in any kind of habitat. By making drawings of this kind, I quickly realised that there were deep and powerful interconnections between different forms and states of things. A drawing of the coiled and melismatic patterns of water in a stream rushing under a narrow bridge were remarkably like the patterns I traced from the bark of old willow trees growing along that bank. Even before I could read or write music, I was able to see (from my 'sound drawings') the differences between the strophic song of the Song Thrush and the more improvisatory songs of its close cousin, the Blackbird.

Now it's true that Messiaen's great 'bird-cycle', the *catalogue d'oiseaux*, **does** contain treatments of habitat by means of what I consider to be a characteristically 'French' form of 'tone-painting', such as we find in the music of Debussy and Ravel. Nevertheless, my interest in habitat is, (on one level at least), more literal than that. The **shape** and **dynamics** of landscape fascinates me and often suggests forms of

rhythmic variation, and of 'phrase-patterns'. It's perhaps for this reason that I always take several different sketchbooks with me into the field. Each is concerned with a different kind of focus on the dynamics of things happening around me. **One** deals with the shapes of forms; **another** with colour notations which take account of tones that dominate yet blend but of others that clash and disrupt the *colour-harmony* of the place where I am collecting experiences. **Yet another** will be devoted to 'straight' drawings of the habitat but also drawings of birds, plants, insects and other life forms that are close or still enough to be drawn there and then. A **fourth** type of sketchbook may be devoted to musical notations: some close to the original sound wherever possible, but many being in the form of a **translation** or **relocation** of those natural sound-sources into a potentially musical outcome.

The approach to the creation of nature-inspired music by Messiaen and me, becomes more divergent and different then. Messiaen, I suspect, **took music to nature**, by which I mean that Messiaen's approach to the 'music of nature' was fired by his own experience and theory of music. At the harmonic level, for example, he **applies** his own idiosyncratic harmonic procedure – even to the harmonisation of birdsong. In a composer who was also deeply interested in *exotic* rhythms in general and Indian ones especially, the pulse-flow and rhythmic paradigms are distinctively and characteristically **his** own. His knowledge of music and the compositional stance he took with that knowledge, enabled, (or facilitated), a music in which he **applied** his techniques in the registration and translation of natural sounds to his own musical settings.

My own 'nature music' is born of a process in reverse to that of Messiaen. Rather than taking music to nature, I take nature to music. Before I knew how to write music, I was drawing sounds from nature. These drawings took account of the contours (pitch-changes) of those natural sounds by means of undulating lines (melodies and motifs). Breaks in those lines together with changes in emphasis (thickness of markings on paper) enabled me to acquire an intimate and memorable sense of the rhythms of things in nature – rhythms of anything that moved, including sound. Even textures of sound together with distinctive 'colour-changes' could be drawn by means of cross-hatching; varying the thickness of pencils or brushes used, and using variations of colours to indicate timbral power

and complexity. By **drawings towards music**, I was in fact creating a distinctive musical language of my own and at every structural and dynamic level. Whilst I later became aware (through performing, conducting and analysis), of the multiplicity of formal and stylistic 'laws' of music as a language apparently abstracted from nature, I soon realised that composing music where those established paradigms came first wouldn't give me scope for a personal 'voice' and language! My motifs; my 'melodies'; harmonies; rhythms and even forms are a direct response to **how I perceive such things in a natural setting**. It is perhaps for this reason that I feel musical composition – in the way that I practice it – must have biological, evolutionary and behavioural roots and causes.

However, as I began to sketch *Bird Portraits*- taking many of my sources from my sketchbooks – I realised that I **was** going to take a moment or two in each piece to respond to birdsong more directly than usual. Of course, it's impossible to notate birdsong into musical notation without a mediated alteration in some form or another. Although I was to follow this enormous violin and piano duo-cycle with another equally large-scale set for flute and piano (*Where Song was Born*), I was not affected by the violin being less akin to the *timbre* of birds than a flute. In almost all cases of (quasi)-quotation of an actual birdsong, I have adhered to the actual pitch and shape of that song: (Messiaen often took many songs **down** at least one or two octaves and 'harmonised' them too). However, the *patterner* in me takes centrestage in musically portraying the **drama** of these birds in a state of song.

Messiaen too, imbued his bird-pieces with **dramatic** events such as steam-trains exploding from a tunnel or a chorus of frogs suddenly muting, *en messe*, as a falcon suddenly flies over their wetland habitat. However, Messiaen's approach is much more solely sonic than visual. There's something inherently 'literate' or poetic in his bird music. *Bird Portraits* is as much drawn from observations of the entire experience of a wild place as of a specific living and sounding creature alone.

Every one of the very short *Bird Portraits* **is** focussed however, at some point, on the actual song of the 'subject' of each study. In a way, each one is like a tiny sonic *icon*, with each bird taking the role of a Saint or Angel! But like some of the great

Icon Painters, such as the early 15th century Russian painter Andrei Rublev, the central 'subject' is placed in a **context** (habitat) of equal importance.



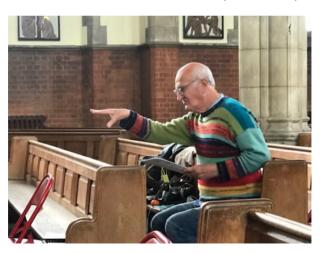
Peter Sheppard Skærved, the great violinist for whom this cycle was composed and who has made this recording (with the equally astounding pianist, Roderick Chadwick), during the process of learning the pieces, noticed elements – melodic and harmonic motifs – that reappear (or surface) throughout the entire cycle. This is due to the use I make of sketchbooks in which an experience of **one** sonic episode and **another** are nevertheless gained in the **same** environment even though the central subject, (bird), might be a different one. Nature is both **variable** and **invariable** and it is this delicious dichotomy that I continually explore and develop through almost 70 minutes of 24 different birds in at least four different habitats.

CODA: 21.05.2021

Exactly three days ago, *Bird Portraits* was recorded. It was the first **live music** I had seen-and-heard in almost 17 months of enforced exile from its wonders and marvels. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the impact of hearing Peter and Roderick realise this very big cycle of pieces!

Composers' reactions to their unperformed music can be very varied. I must say that from the first days of working on this cycle, I knew that I'd reached into a new domain in the energy, sensuality and flow of my chamber music. However, such rare feelings of *getting it right* can so easily be undermined when musicians play a new piece and when the composer might begin to feel those anguished doubts. Such is the brilliance of this performance; such is the deep commitment to the music by the players and such is the quality and depth of their imaginations- that I send this recording out into the world with powerful and vivid feelings of wonder and awe. My gratitude to Nature, the salve and soul of my music goes hand-in-ear with the greatness of the playing and the subtle care taken in recording *Bird Portraits*.

Edward Cowie, South Cumbria, 21.06.2021



On playing Edward Cowie's 'Bird Portraits' - a view from the violin

A constant companion while working on Edward Cowie's 'Bird Portraits' was Geoffrey Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*. Most of my personal practice takes place at night, and as winter turned to spring this year, the grey light and singing of early dawn has often been signal to stop work and sleep. This is the opposite of the poet, who wrote:

'Me thought thus; that hy was May, And in the dawenynge I lay (Me mette thus) in my be all naked And loked forth, for I was waked With smale foules a great hep That had affrayed me out of my slep Thorgh noyse and swetnesse of her song.'

It has been my privilege to perform and record Edward Cowie's music since 2013. In that short time, his vision has become key to my outlook on music and nature. Our collaboration stretches from quartets, solo works, a violin concerto, and most recently this extraordinary cycle for piano and violin, *Bird Portraits*.

This is not the first cycle of bird pieces of Cowie's that has filled my imaginative world. The very first recording of his music that I made, for NMC, was *Birdsong Bagatelles/String Quartet No 5*^{ij}. It's a testament to the depth of his response to the natural world, that, despite the fact that both these works are 24-movement sets, and have birds in common, there's no similarity between the pieces, conceptually or sonically.

The composer and I are both outdoors people, which means that my response, not only to the avian creatures in the cycle, is as personal as his was in writing it. I know that my collaborating pianist, Roderick Chadwick, has different associations

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P.20, The Book of the Duchess, Geoffrey Chaucer, Hesperus Press, London, 2007

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with the birds that we play together. So, here are some reflections from the chinrest and practice-desk.

One aspect of studying this music might seem prosaic: the making of lists. *Bird Portraits* is what Umberto Eco would call an 'infinity of lists'. In the book of Genesis, the animals in the garden are named. Classification is, etymologically, the grouping by 'classis', group or fleet (I love the idea of fleets of birds). And medieval scholars brought order and meaning to the natural world through the making of bestiaries (in this case, aviaries). Here's a 12th century example:

'UNUM: Now all BIRDS are called Birds, but there are a lot of them – for, just as there differ from one another in species, so do they in diversity of nature.'

Even shorn of subject matter, the number and order of Cowie's 'aviary' is alluring. There are 24 movements: in the previous collection, *Birdsong Bagatelles*, this number, corresponding to major and minor keys, reflecting the books of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. This new cycle is not by key; instead Cowie reflects on the capricious tendency of the beginning of the 19^{th} century, to either keep, or abandon, the cycle of fifths, whilst preserving the power of 24 movements. Nicolo Paganini's *24 Capricci* eschews it, whereas Pierre Rode's contemporaneous *Vingt-Quatre Caprices* adheres to the key-cycle religiously.

Not ordering by key (which is not to say that there are NO keys to be observed), prompts a complex set of internal armatures, or *staffage*. Before I lay this out, it's worth reminding myself of the allure of '24'. This is, of course, is the product of 2 squared (4), and a 'perfect number', 6. 6 is the <u>first</u> perfect number- a positive integer equal to the sum of its positive divisors, excluding the number itself. The next three perfect numbers are 28, 496 and 8128.

So, Edward divides his 24 into 4 books of 6. We have Water, Field, Wood/Garden, and Sea birds. These four groups can be grouped into two 'wet' and 'dry' alliances,

iii P.103, 'The Book of Beasts', Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the 12th Century, Trans/Ed. T.H.White, G.P. Putnam's Sons. New York. 1954

arranged across the cycle thus: 'Wet-Dry-Dry-Wet'. The 'waters', it can be seen surround, 'land', like the encircling sea of the ancient and medieval worlds, or Tolkien's. 'Ekkaia'.

But there's another division of two, less visible/audible, but very present for the players and composer: the bar numbers. These do not, as might be expected, begin afresh with each bird, but run https://doi.org/10.10/. These do not, as might be expected, begin afresh with each bird, but run https://doi.org/10.10/. The implication of the reset to 1 for the opening of Book Three (Wood and Garden Birds). The implication of these overlapping groupings is that the cycle is actually circling, never ending or landing. But this points to more dramatic, meaning-laden symbolism: the end of the whole set, the Great Northern Diver, is profound in every way. I have never seen a Great Northern Diver in Europe, but all my Midwestern friends and family are filled with nostalgia at the idea and song of the 'Loon', as they call it (it's a 'Ring necked Loon' in Cork and Scotland). For them, it's summer by the lake, at the Cabin, or kayaking the Boundary Waters. My closest encounter was the Diver I saw on the Reservoir of Central Park.

The Diver is prefigured, for this violinist, by the astonishing 'per ardua ad astra' of the Skylark, which, of course, particularly for a British musician, is freighted, fraught. This Skylark, 'bravely singing', ends Book 2, at the bar-number-stop, 547, mentioned above. Cowie is one of the very few composers to face the reality, the arduous ascent, the ever-distancing-diminuendo-ing fury of the Skylark: anyone who has walked along Grim's Ditch, at the northern tip of the Chiltern Hills, on a late spring morning, will have been assailed by the cacophonic spleen of multiple, territorial, Skylarks. Cowie sets the ascent in a doomed passacaglia.

These darknesses offer me clues into the 'lightness' of the endings of the first and third books, where the bar numbers do not break. Such 'légèreté' is far from lacking in meaning or import, but offers the corollary, even a safety valve, for pressures which build up and around lark and loon. The Coot and the Wood Warbler are perfect in this role – feathered jesters in the flock.

For all of us, our association with birds and animals is personal, most particularly when they are the creatures that say 'home'. Here are a few of my avian familiars, from the cycle:

One night, about 3 am, as I was practising *Bird Portraits*, the Wren that roosts in the Blackthorne bush under our window here in Wapping, began to sing so extravagantly, that it drowned out the violin under my ear. This particular 'Wrannock' or 'Tintie (as it is sometimes known in this part of England) is the great singer I try to evoke, playing Cowie's wren.

I had one very close and alarming encounter with a Tawny Owl in the Oak and Beech of Epping Forest, the public woodland that borders my native East London. Pushing through the undergrowth (Bracken, Wild Garlic, and Bramble) of Thames Marsh at the northern end of the Forest, I almost trod on an unsuspecting 'hoolet'. It burst from under my feet in fury and feathers.

For me the Curlew will always be the creek on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall, where I spent my summers as a child. Day's end was marked by the melancholy droop of that wader's evening song, as the shadows of waterside oak trees lengthened on the sand and mud. But the Osprey is far from this land, but also reminds me of summer in the Midwest USA, swimming in the St Croix River (the western limit of Wisconsin) as Ospreys sail overhead. There's always the slight anxiety, that they might not be able to distinguish a Walleye from my head in the water...

Arctic Terns bring to mind morning on board ship off the coast of Alaska, looking East, at the 15,000 ft pink pyramid of Mount Fairweather shouldering the dawn, while Arctic Terns loop around the ship, steaming north *en route* to Sitka and the Aleutians. And, from a ship's deck seen from above, Puffins, in flight, are just ridiculous: the essence of panic, wings whirring bizarrely fast as they scud over the swell. Cowie's music is <u>genuinely funny</u>. A couple of takes in this recording were lost, because we ended up laughing at the frantic flapping of the 'Londoner' (as these birds are known, in Cornwall).

I have seen more kingfishers at home here in East London than in the countryside. My first 'halcyon' encounter was in Limehouse, when I was a penniless young musician, subsisting on couscous and yoghurt. This was before the 'topless towers' of Canary Wharf had risen: I had taken a book and a flask of tea to read on the river wall of Limehouse Reach. Nobody was about, but I became of a splash of colour eight inches to my right. I looked down, and a brilliant Kingfisher looked up, as surprised as I was, to find Homo Sapiens on its fishing perch over the Thames flood tide.

In medieval Europe, it was the birds who were the first to be represented with what we might recognise as scientific verisimilitude. In the second quarter of the 14th century, 'Jehann Lenoir, enlumineur de pincel' on the west side of rue Erembourg de Brie, Paris, illuminated a Book of Hours, for Jeanne, Queen (regnant) of Navarre. The margins and borders of this astonishing book, are filled with *basde-page* vignettes. Some of these reflect, or jest, about the central religious message of the central scenes, with 'sujets humoristiques'. Some have a darker undertow, dragons and monsters. But most of the *marginalia* are birds, painted, unlike the human subjects and mythical beasts, with almost photographic vividness: woodpeckers, owls, swallows, goldfinches counterpoint the religious drama with glimmering iridescence.

We can't imagine life without the birds. They certainly can imagine their lives without us. And that, perhaps, is their power; a power which Edward Cowie taps ... naturally

Peter Sheppard Skærved, June 2021

Scattered thoughts about Bird Portraits, by Roderick Chadwick

SONG

Performing *Bird Portraits* is more like playing Robert Schumann's *Dichterliebe* than Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*. Each portrait has its own independent musical sense; they would be musically satisfying even if not a specific evocation. Given this, the frequent mini-repetitions (such as at the end of No. 1, 'Mute swan') are fascinating: they acknowledge that repetitions and cycles are a familiar aspect of nature and – often – suspend the music's customary flow; they provide a focus or summation for a portrait, analogous perhaps to Schumann's piano postludes; and/or they simply add to the collection of possible ending-types, showing that orthodox closure is not always necessary...

PERSPECTIVE

Ed and I share a teacher: Alexander Goehr. My encounters with him were relatively few – when I was writing about Webern as an undergraduate – but his ideas about the great composers of the twentieth century, grounded in traditions that he and his father were very much part of, have left their mark and I often find myself passing them on to students, colleagues and friends. Amongst his music's many qualities is an acute sense of perspective – i.e. a clear vision of how sonic materials relate – and I immediately perceived this in the Bird Portraits too, even in the *ppp* gliding of the mute swan, which is not merely an object positioned in space but a living, breathing variable. Overall in this cycle the piano portrays landscape, but here as elsewhere the sounds also evoke movement, ambiance, character, texture, viscosity and transparency as well as, of course, colour and outline.

EXTREMES OF LATITUDE

Due to the speed of Peter's work as editor, we could already hear first edits two or three days after the sessions. The second 'note' he plays in Portrait No. 24, the Great Northern Diver, asks searching questions about what music is. The composer's vision is contained in the evolution of a sound.

A USEFUL COMPARISON

I'm currently preparing several books from Messiaen's Catalogue d'oiseaux to be recorded for Divine Art, as well as the Portraits and Where Song was Born. The implicit and explicit timelines of the Catalogue make Messiaen's pieces frieze-like; his Petites esquisses d'oiseaux are sketches but lack a clear timeline or backdrop. The Portraits avoid drama such as the crows/buzzard confrontation in 'La Buse variable', but there are times where the birds engage in action (as we discovered during the sessions): perching on a new branch, singing from a new acoustic vantage point.

COLLABORATION

Music of such high quality – of inspiration, craft and understanding of instruments' possibilities and players' potential – establishes a working relationship before everyone meets for the first time.

MINDFUL MUSIC

This is meditative music, not courtesy of being 'ambient' *per se*, but because each musical idea has ample space in which to be experienced.

MIMICRY

You may hear strains of music that you recognize – sudden, playful, concealed, or suggested by atmosphere or idiom. Here is a point of contact between Messiaen and Cowie: composers who listen intently to the natural world are immersed in human music, too. For them to ignore this would be the needless restraining of a limb.

Roderick Chadwick, July 2021

The Musicians

Peter Sheppard Skærved is known for his pioneering approach to the music of our own time and the past. Over 400 works have been written for him, by composers Laurie Bamon, Judith Bingham, Nigel Clarke, Robert Saxton, Edward Cowie, Jeremy Dale Roberts, Peter Dickinson, Michael Finnissy, Elena Firsova, David Gorton, Naji Hakim, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze, Sıdıka Özdil, Rosalind Page, George Rochberg, Michael Alec Rose, Poul Ruders, Volodmyr Runchak, Evis Sammoutis, Elliott Schwartz, Peter Sculthorpe, Howard Skempton, Dmitri Smirnov, Jeremy Thurlow, Mihailo Trandafilovski, Judith Weir, Jörg Widmann, Ian Wilson, John Woolrich and Douglas Young.

Peter's pioneering work on music for violin alone has resulted in research, performances and recordings of cycles by Bach, de Bériot, Tartini, Telemann, and, most recently, his project, 'Preludes and Vollenteries', which brings together 200 unknown works from the seventeenth century, from composers including Colombi, Lonati, Marini and Matteis, with the Wren and Hawksmoor churches in London's Square Mile.

His work with museums has resulted in long-term projects at institutions including the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, the Metropolitan Museum, New York City, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, Galeria Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, and the exhibition 'Only Connect', which he curated at the National Portrait Gallery, London. Most recently his 'Tegner' commissioned by the Bergen International Festival, is a close collaboration with the major Norwegian abstract artist, Jan Groth, resulting in a set of solo Caprices, premiering at Kunsthallen, Bergen, and travelling to galleries in Denmark, the UK and even Svalbard/Spitzbergen. Peter is the only living violinist to have performed on the violins of Ole Bull, Joachim, Paganini and Viotti. As a writer, Peter has published a monograph on the Victorian artist/musician John Orlando Parry, many articles in journals worldwide, and most recently, *Practice: Walk*, for Routledge.

Peter is the founder and leader of the Kreutzer Quartet and the artistic director of the ensemble Longbow. Viotti Lecturer at the Royal Academy of Music, he was elected Fellow there in 2013. He is married to the Danish writer Malene Skærved and they live in Wapping.

www.peter-sheppard-skaerved.com

Roderick Chadwick is a pianist, teacher and writer on music. He has performed some of the most challenging works for the instrument, including Lachenmann's *Serynade* at the inaugural London Contemporary Music Festival, Messiaen's *Catalogue d'oiseaux*, Stockhausen's *Mantra* with Mark Knoop and Newton Armstrong (including a highly-regarded recording on the Hathut label), and John McGuire's *48 Variations*, also with Knoop. Other recordings include works by Gloria Coates, Maurice Duruflé, Sadie Harrison, Hans Werner Henze and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – several of these with violinist Peter Sheppard Skaerved.

Roderick is a member of ensembles Chroma and Plus-Minus, performing with them at festivals such as Huddersfield, Ultima (Oslo) and the 2019 Warsaw Autumn Festival. His first performance on BBC Radio 3 was at the age of 14 (the Britten *Gemini Variations* live from the Aldeburgh Festival), and broadcasts since have included solo works by Laurence Crane, Richard Barrett and Will Gregory.

In 2018 Roderick published *Messiaen's 'Catalogue d'oiseaux', From Conception to Performance* (CUP), co-authored with Peter Hill. In 2008 he was artistic advisor to the Royal Academy of Music for their Messiaen centenary celebrations. He is currently recording the *Catalogue* book by book for the Divine Art label, alongside thematically-linked repertoire.

He attended Chetham's School in Manchester in the 1980s, studying with Heather Slade-Lipkin, and later with Hamish Milne. He lives in South London and is Associate Professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

"The redoubtable Roderick Chadwick" (*The Strad*) "Possessor of devastating musicality and technique" (*Sunday Times*)



Roderick Chadwick

Peter Sheppard Skærved

The Composer

'Considered by many to be the greatest living composer directly inspired by the Natural World'

Edward Cowie's first Prom commission was *Leviathan* – a large scale orchestral work premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1975. It marked the first major event in a career that was to gain him national and international recognition for a new kind of 'voice' in the music world. Its title, arising from a conjunction between the mighty whale and a book by Hobbs with the same name can be seen as a signal of a composer whose imagination is deeply embedded in and inspired by the forces of nature. Throughout the 1970s and beyond, a stream of works inspired by wild places on this planet flowed into being, works like his sumptuous *Gesangbuch* (1975/6), (just released on Signum Classics), the *American Symphony* (1984), Mount Keira Duets (1985), and his powerful *Choral Symphony*, 'Symphonies of Rain, Steam and Speed'. This immersion in the study of nature was born of a childhood spent in rural Suffolk and the Cotswolds and continues to form the core of his fertile imagination today.

But two further strands underpin and inspire Cowie's musical practice and ideas. His undergraduate studies in Physics and practical studies in Painting have been integrated into a kind of 'fusion-world' of ideas where science, the visual arts and music coalesce in a kind of creative continuum. In recent years, he has increasingly worked towards his music by means of 'field studies', theoretical research and painting-drawing. Studies and collaborations with leading physicists, for example, have not only seen exhibitions of his pre-compositional drawings, but have added a body of new music that directly translates scientific theory and experiment into music. His monumental solo piano series Rutherford's Lights was inspired by a study of the relationships between theories of light and colour, and his more recent Particle Partita for solo violin – with a sonic time-line of the history of particle physics.

These 'fusions' of disciplines, the bridges between study and practice are an essential part of the composer's quest for new ways of forming. Parallels can be found between the linear and pointillist textures, forms, and motifs in his music with the writings and paintings of Klee and Kandinsky. During his period as first Composer in Association

with the BBC Singers (2002-5), Cowie produced a string of large and small-scale pieces that moved through landscapes and natural habitats all over the world. *Gaia, INhabitAT, Lyre Bird Motet*, and *Bell Bird Motet* are classic examples of a music that engages all of the senses with a profound respect for the power that nature has to move us.

Cowie was the first Granada Composer/Conductor with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra between 1982/4. This led to many conducting dates with other orchestras including the BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra; the BBC Singers, ABC symphony orchestras of Sydney, Adelaide, Queensland and Tasmania and the Seymour Group and the Australia Ensemble. He was the first Composer in Association with the BBC Singers between 2003/5 and first Artist in Residence with The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) for the same period. His work for television has included a major film on Edward Lear for Granada TV and his acclaimed BBC2 TV film *Leonardo* of 1986. He has also written and presented major radio series commissioned by ABC FM Australia as well as for BBC Radio 3 and 4.

Major public lectures include the Gertrude Langer Memorial Lectures in Australia, and the Kate Springett Memorial Lecture in London as well as a Ruskin Lecture at Oxford. He has been invited to give keynote lectures and recitals all over the world. As a visual artist he has had over 40 one-man shows in important galleries in the UK, Germany, USA, Australia and New Zealand and his paintings and drawings are in public and private collections in 19 countries.

Other musical honours have included a Gulbenkian Award to study at The Royal Ballet; The Radcliffe International Composer's Prize and a Chopin Fellowship to study with Lutoslawski in Poland. Cowie acknowledges Alexander Goehr as a major influence (as Cowie's professor and teacher) on his life and work- an acknowledgement that continues in a warm and ongoing friendship.

As an academic, Cowie has held major professorships in two Australian and one British University as well as Visiting Professorships in Germany and the USA. He has two doctorates- a PhD which includes studies in physics, mathematics, music and fine arts and was awarded the first Doctorate in Music (DMus) from the University of Southampton for his work as a composer. He was awarded a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship for inspirational visits to Africa and California, both leading to major

compositional outcomes concerned with bringing music to the world that 'warns of the dangers to the wild and living world through the continuing destruction of it at the hands of humanity'.

Cowie's reputation continues to grow world-wide, and new CDs emerge with high praise and appreciation. His collaborations with major soloists and chamber groups are also enlarging and deepening. He still regards the human voice and the chamber-music mediums as the 'the most fabulously rich and varied palette of possibility in the expression of emotion and sensation'.

He lives and works – harder than ever – in south Cumbria with his visual artist wife, Heather Cowie.

www.edwardcowie.com







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Edward Cowie sketching guillemots on the Farne Islands, England