

Edward Cowie (b. 1943): Where Song was Born

| \vdash | 1 | Australian Raven | 3:13 |
|--------------|------------------|---|-------|
| | 2 | Australian Wood Duck | 3:02 |
| ~ | 3 | Australian Masked Plover | 2:23 |
| 0 | 4 | Eastern Whipbird | 2:46 |
| 0 | 5 | Willy Wagtail | 2:20 |
| В | 6 | Golden Whistler | 3:18 |
| _ | 7 | Superb Fairy Wren | 3:23 |
| 2 | 8 | Brolga Crane | 2:40 |
| \checkmark | 9 | Pied Butcher Bird | 3:29 |
| 0 | 10 | Bush Stone Curlew | 2:54 |
| 0 | 11 | Wedge-tailed Eagle | 3:00 |
| В | 12 | Australian Magpie | 2:43 |
| _ | 13 | Bell Birds | 3:41 |
| 3 | 14 | Wampoo Pigeon | 2:33 |
| _ | 15 | Golden-headed Cisticola | 1:03 |
| 0 | 16 | Tawny Frogmouth (with distant honey-eaters) | 2:15 |
| 0 | 17 | Pied Currawong | 1:09 |
| В | 18 | Kookaburra | 2:52 |
| _ | 19 | Mangrove Kingfisher | 3:11 |
| 4 | 20 | Helmeted Friarbird | 2:37 |
| ~ | 21 | White-breasted Sea Eagle | 4:50 |
| 0 | 22 | Green Cat Bird | 3:30 |
| 0 | 23 | Sooty Owl | 1:30 |
| В | 24 | Lyrebird | 2:40 |
| | Total playir | ng time | 67:12 |
| | 1 can paying amo | | |

Where Song was Born: 24 Australian Bird Portraits

An introduction by the composer

During an often-solitary childhood spent in the wilds of Suffolk and the Cotswolds, I came to form a deep interactive consciousness of Nature as both friend and teacher. However, of all the senses with which I came to some kind of understanding of how nature works, **sound** was primal and primary. In addition, nothing could enhance, deepen, surprise, and beguile more than the songs of birds. By the time I was six years old and only just beginning to read music, I had already learned how to **draw** the shapes, contours, textures and rhythmic forms of birdsongs. It was also natural to me (shades of Wordsworth and the hooting at owls), to imitate the songs of birds around me. I could summon tawny owls with hand-cupped 'hoots', and cause wood warblers to acoustically dispute territory with me during my 'whistling song-contests' with their hidden smallness in the deep shades of the woods near my house.

British and European birds consist in some of the most beautiful songsters on the planet. And these are not just the euphonious songs of the nightingale, but also the songs of blackbirds, thrushes, wrens, robins, skylarks and dunnock and more than a hundred more of different species. The science of Ornithology (the systematic study of birds), is a fairly recent one, or at least the study and understanding of their songs is. Advances in recording devices together with digital realisations of the sounds in visual forms, has (during the last 65 years), led us to begin to comprehend the fabulous complexity of birdsong. Though humans may have 'sung' for over a million years, birds have been doing it for far longer than that and in much more complex forms too.

However, given that the birthplace of modern ornithology was Europe in general and Britain especially, it was understood that birdsong had its origins in the Northern Hemisphere. Comparisons were made (erroneously as it has turned out), between the great European songsters and the birds from the Southern Hemisphere and it was assumed that the more gritty and less 'pretty' songs of birds like parrots, hornbills, herons and even emu and ostrich proved that any 'good' southern songsters must have acquired their vocal skills from a migration of great Northern birdsongs to the South.

Comparative science, together with new data from DNA and the fossil record have now reversed the known origins of birdsong. It was not fluted and whistled through the ancient forests of Europe and North America first, but instead across the vast plains and woodlands of what is now known as Australia! The reasons for this are, of course, quite complicated though (unbelievably perhaps), it was the prevalence of nectar in ancient Australian habitats that led to fierce competition for the feeding grounds and thus the development of more and more elaborate birdsongs to secure a niche in those feeding-grounds.

I first visited Australia in 1981, when I was funded by Covent Garden to go and do field-research into the Australian bushranger and 'hero', Ned Kelly, for a new Opera for that house. The Opera was never completed. I found too much discomfort in the restrictions and social 'politics' of the medium. However, almost the moment I left Sydney Airport, I began to hear birdsong of a very different kind and quality from those of Britain! Because I was always accustomed to both listen to and see the habitats in which birds sing, I also recognised the differences between bird and place in Australia as opposed to that in Europe and even the United States. Most Australian habitats – especially those inland from its extraordinary coastal habitats – are vast. Many have either seemingly infinite horizons or in the case of the great jungle rainforests, no horizon at all. In both cases, there is an often overwhelming sense of the primal and elemental. Many places feel like they have never been seen by a human eye at all.

When Covid-19 struck the globe in early 2020, I was forcibly thrown into a state of enclosure. My wife and I live in fairly remote wooded and wetland south Cumbrian landscapes, so in spite of government measures to restrict movement, we were able – legally – to walk in wild places close to our home and enjoy (as it turned out, thank goodness) a warm, sunny and birdsong-riven Spring.

I decided that I would like to write a major cycle of birdsong-connected pieces for violin and piano. The result was *Bird Portraits*; a cycle of 24 short movements, each featuring a 'rendering' (not normally a direct imitation), of both an individual bird species and also the habitat(s) in which its song is sung. That seventy-minute cycle is now beautifully recorded and released on this great record label.

Very quickly after completing the British bird cycle, I began to hear the songs of Australian birds! This time, however, with the recent discoveries of the Australasian origins of birdsong, I changed the duo from violin and piano to flute(s) and piano. There are several reasons for this. The violin (as we know it) is basically a European or at least northern Hemisphere instrument and with a history of only a few centuries. The flute on the other hand, is known to be one of the, if not **the** most ancient of instruments. More or less everywhere you travel in Australia, the presence and spirit of its ancient aboriginal peoples is present. Wind instruments form an integral part of the instrumental music of the Aboriginals of Australia. Virtuoso didgeridoo players often incorporate the songs and movements of birds into their ceremonial music. Thus in choosing the flute this time, I felt more at ease with the conjuring of a natural sound for the Australian birds being portrayed.

Secondly, the timbre and dynamic of Australian birdsong is closer to breath than it is to the vibration of hair on a string. Thirdly, and this is highly subjective of course, the relationship between habitat and song in Australia has always sounded to me to be closer – more homogeneous somehow. And though the piano is far from being an instrument suggestive of breath, I sense that a flute is less removed from piano sounds than a violin, and I definitely wanted to create a kind of closer fusion between song and habitat in the Australian Cycle than I did in *Bird Portraits*.

Both cycles are related of course, not only in the approach to 'sonic portraiture' (tried in my 5th String Quartet for example and several of my major works for voices including *lyrebird motet* and *Gesangbuch* (recorded on Signum Classics), but also to their twenty-four part structure and the deliberate split of both cycles into two halves, with 12 movements in each half. In both cycles, Part Two breaths a rarer air than the First Part. There is more a sense that the birds are not only being placed in a musical setting but that the setting has become more mysterious, with an element of ritual and meditative mediation between subject and music and between landscape and our emotions. These two cycles represent a major breakthrough in the clarity and emotional 'planes' of my music. I guess that's the advantage of being almost eighty years old; the subjects are outside time somehow: as it should be with great music- the years have given me insights, which look back; into the moment; and to a future music yet unborn – but waiting, (if you will pardon the lovely pun)....in the wings!!

Postscript

Now that I have the two Bird Portrait albums to listen-to, I can confirm that I am committed to making two more cycles. The **third cycle**, then, takes me back to the United States of America, to which I have made many visits since 1977. In some ways, the vastness of the great spaces of the USA can sometimes make me think of the wildernesses of Australia. There is that often-felt sense of the infinite. However, the voices of American birds are yet-again, unique for the main part though the 'singers' are still divided between virtuoso and grating; harsh shrill minimalists! This cycle is to be called *Where the Wood thrush forever Sings*, a quotation from Henry David Thoreau, whose *Walden* has been a life-long inspiration to me. It will be scored for clarinet(s) and piano, and again, probably in 24 short movements.

And beyond this, a **fourth cycle** beckons. I have only visited Africa once, but its effect on me was profound and sometimes almost overwhelming. As with **all** my trips into new and wild places, I filled sketchbooks with drawings of animals, insects, birds and land and water-scapes, mainly of Botswana and parts of Zambia. I also notated more than 40 species of birdsongs. I'm going to score this set for percussion and piano and almost certainly with special emphasis upon one of Africa's most powerful and evocative instruments- the marimba. This cycle will be called **But because they have Songs**, which is the second part of a glorious ancient African saying- 'Birds sing not because they have answers, but because they have songs'. No 'saying' strikes me as more beautiful than this: it summates the entire message and intent of what will be over four hours of music inspired by birds and the places in which they fly, dance, fight, nest and sing......

This recording was refused financial assistance by The Arts Council of England.

Funding support **was** given to me, and gratefully acknowledged, by Dr John Hogg OAM and Linde Hogg OAM. This recording is dedicated to their daughter Sophie.



The composer working on a 'third stage study'

On playing 'Where Song was Born' - thoughts with my flutes and I

I am not a big fan of the Internet, but Edward Cowie and I first 'met' on social media in October 2020. We were, after all, in the midst of a pandemic when most of us stayed at home and spent much more time on line than usual!

We had noticed, listened, shared and admired each other's work and it didn't take long to think of collaborating and working together on something new from Edward. After a few phone-chats, I knew we could work very effectively together and I was consumed with curiosity as to how this journey of sonic exploration would turn out.

Edward's music has (literally) its roots and routes in nature. I was born and grew up in Italy – in green areas of Tuscany and Umbria (close to the birthplace of one of Edward's idols, Leonardo da Vinci!), and count myself a naturalist too. Nature has also always been close to my heart. Living in big cities can be a dehumanising form of living. To me, continuous contact with nature keeps me healthy and happy. Nature and music is the matrix of my own creative and experiential world.

So when Edward suggested a huge Australian Bird Portrait cycle of pieces for flute(s) and piano – and that this would bring me together with the great pianist, Roderick Chadwick, I was thrilled of course!

Things took shape at an incredible speed. Edward was clearly firing with great intensity and focus so it wasn't long before I began to receive the first few movements of *Where Song was Born*. We had agreed, from the outset, that I would assist Edward with advanced flute performance techniques. He would send me sketches of ideas and point toward gestures and 'effects' that (at that time) he didn't know how to notate – or even if they were technically possible. In a series of Zoom sessions with the composer, I made and illustrated 'solutions' to his sonic and technical challenges in real time – face to face and ear to ear!

It was extremely rewarding and exciting for me to be so directly involved in the process of composition and interpretation. It is, in fact, an ideal way in which to collaborate with a composer-especially an advanced and highly experienced one like Edward. Collaboration of this kind offers the performer an opportunity to experience a direct connection with the process of musical composition. Both he and I know that work like this is transforming and life-changing.

In music, birds have often been associated with the flute. Edward's music is very respectful of my instruments, allowing them to sing whilst at the same time seeking to go into new regions of sonic, textural and coloristic domains. Somehow, performing this music has always seemed natural to me in spite of the high level of technical and mental challenges. Edward has found a perfect balance between originality and good-fit with my flutes. Always, there is a sense that the voices and behaviour of birds have 'taught' the composer how to write beautiful music like this!

© Sara Minelli, November 2021.



A view from the piano

Although I don't have first-hand experience of the Australian landscape, the feeling of being close to nature seems especially vivid in *Where Song was Born*, even within the context of Edward's other bird cycles. This is partly due to the striking balance between human and avian expression achieved in the flute part – conveying not just the birds, but also the identification of the people of that land with their environment.

Then there is the relative strangeness of the music's fabric – though never relinquishing the composer's impeccable musicality – the presence in the cycle of ritualistic sounds (No.2, Australian Wood Duck), vocalisations, more abstract textures (No. 3, Australian Masked Plover), hints of slinky jazz (No. 22, Green Cat Bird) and accompanied cadenzas (No. 5, Willy Wagtail), all linking our modern sensibilities with the earliest songsters.

Book 2 in particular is almost psychedelic in its visions (as Peter Sellars described Tableau 2 of Messiaen's *St François*); a similarly powerful evocation of this land that comes to mind is Alan Garner's *Strandloper*. Even the Australian Magpie's chipper, slightly stroppy, *tour de force* opening (No. 12) submits to the prevailing atmosphere eventually.

Song, nevertheless, is the key musical feature, and the endlessly inventive play of tones, rhythms and timbres is as much a feature of the piano part as the flute. In my role as a teacher I'm regularly struck by the abundance of antipodean musical talent and creativity that visits us (sometimes settling down) in the north; *Where Song Was Born* provides many clues as to its deepest origins.

THE MUSICIANS

Described as "clearly a formidable exponent of the contemporary flute repertoire" (Music Web International) **Sara Minelli** is an Italian flautist based in London with an extensive repertoire of New Music and a growing reputation for exquisite live performances. Her debut solo album *New Resonances* was released with critical acclaim, appearing in important magazines such as Pan, the Journal of the British Flute Society and the Guardian.

She is highly regarded as a solo performer and has played extensively in the UK including at London Contemporary Music Festival, Fairfield Halls, Kings Place, Little Missenden Festival, the National Gallery, Handel House, Kettle's Yard, Cambridge University. Her solo International performances include Vox Feminae Festival (Israel), Klangspuren Festival (Austria), Les Moments Musicaux de la Touraine (France), GAMO International Festival (Italy), Pontino Festival (Italy), Five Days for New Music (Italy)

In 2016 Sara received the Artists International Development Fund Award from Arts Council of England, which led to several performances in Israel.

She has collaborated with the Composition Faculty at Royal College of Music in London and is a member of GAMO Ensemble for Contemporary Music (Florence). With the ensemble she performs at major Italian festivals, including Maggio Musicale Fiorentino.

Sara has received special recognition as a soloist with awards including the International Valentino Bucchi Prize (Italy). She was selected to perform in the Klangspuren International Ensemble Modern Academy 2014 and has worked with members of Ensemble Modern, composer Hans Abrahamsen and conductor Brad Luhman

Sara is the dedicatee of works for solo flute by Edward Cowie, Jonathan Cole, Alessandro Solbiati, Alessandro Magini, Alona Epshtein, Marina Leonardi, Matteo Giuliani and Rouzbeh Rafie. She has collaborated as a solo interpreter with UK composers including Richard Causton, Cheryl Frances Hoad, Jeremy Thurlow and played in the world premiere of a piece by Salvatore Sciarrino.

Sara has recorded for the Champs Hill label, EMA Vinci, and Métier/Divine Art.

http://www.saraminelliflute.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.

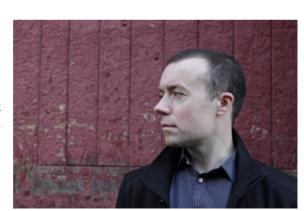
In 2018 Roderick published *Messiaen's 'Catalogue d'oiseaux', From Conception to Performance* (CUP), co-authored with Peter Hill. In 2008 he was artistic advisor to the Royal Academy of Music for their Messiaen centenary celebrations. He is currently recording the *Catalogue* book by book for the Divine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



Sara MINELLI



Roderick CHADWICK

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 Ph.D which includes studies in physics, mathematics, music and fine arts and was awarded the first Doctorate in Music (D.Mus) 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 recordings 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



Edward COWIE



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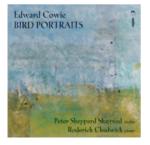
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Bird Portraits 1: Birds of the United Kingdom Peter Sheppard Skærved Roderick Chadwick

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