

# WILD TRACK

Sound, Text and the  
Idea of Birdsong



sound  
studies

Seán Street

B L O O M S B U R Y

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## *Sound, Text and the Idea of Birdsong*

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*For Jo*

*Touch lightly Nature's sweet Guitar  
Unless thou know'st the Tune  
Or every Bird will point at thee  
Because a Bard too soon*

– Emily Dickinson

# Contents

Prelude	viii
1 Dawn chorus: Describing sound	1
2 Recording an essence: Hearing, reading and the imagination	19
3 Ludwig Koch and the music of nature	35
4 Murmurings: Call and response between bird and human	53
5 Paths through the green wood	71
6 Science in Arcadia: The road to Selborne	91
7 The romantic poetry of listening	111
8 Honest John: The sound world of John Clare	129
9 North American sublime	147
10 Survival and the sound of spirit	167
11 Listening to ourselves listening: Voices for today and tomorrow	183
Postlude: 'Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades'	201
Bibliography	207
Index	215



# Prelude

The surface of the Earth is finite; everything that has ever been recorded – through technology or before that, through words or images – has been experienced somewhere, in a place where a human being once stood or sat. That place still exists, however changed, and many of the first sounds also remain the same: rain falling on stone, waves breaking on shores and the wind through woodland trees. Someone, perhaps millennia ago, was where I am now, and heard the world going on around them as I do now, measuring the moment in the place, listening. It is an act of the imagination to picture how a square mile of land has evolved, adapted, been manipulated and shaped, yet beneath it all, has remained fundamentally itself. A place is geographically circumscribed, but time is thorough and ongoing. Furthermore, to extend the concept of continuous sound evolution to our everyday footpaths, suburban roads and parks, the street corners and retail centres of today and hear them as they were, may be hard, but potentially salutary. A shopping mall's tarmac car park may have once been marshland where wildlife thrived, a housing estate may have wiped out meadowland, and so on.

Some things sounded differently here in the past, some did not. Like travelling through a once familiar city, finding it changed in some respects, but with flashes of familiarity as certain scenes evoke memories, there may still be constants. Imagination and concentration can seed the idea of past sound, and words have the capacity to express it, and sometimes that same imagination moves beyond documentation into a kind of transcendence.

This book is entirely about listening as an active occupation: conscious listening, awareness, attention to sounds under sounds, all the noises and murmurs of the shouting and whispering world. While it might have selected another sound source to make its case, it happens to have as its focus birdsong within the context of the natural world, because in various forms, it is all around us, and has long been a constant through the generations, so we have in its presence a reference. The songs of birds have preoccupied human beings since they first heard something they did not understand and sought to interpret it. The very folk names that have passed down to us through time are often, themselves,

attempts at simulating their music, and the fundamental and primary impetus of recording the aural experience of birds in words came from the sound itself; an onomatopoeic interpretation of the call as it impressed itself on human consciousness, so in many cases, identification led to naming according to an approximation of the sound heard. Some bird names are buried in Time, while some are more self-evident.

Time, indeed, is part of the equation: like us, birds live and die, leaves fall, but the seasons, the blossoms and the songs return year after year, or at least, they have up to now ... We listen and we philosophize, but the birds don't: they sing, unconcerned with our witness below. They do what they have always done, and we cannot help but try to find our own meanings in their song. The Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote of the very eggs of a thrush as 'little low heavens',<sup>1</sup> but those heavens are part of the real world, as we are. Birds live and die, they fight and kill, they defend territory, scavenge and try to protect and feed their young, just as we do; it's just that they don't discuss it with us. Neither can we emulate their avian abilities; to take to the air, we must build machines. We can at least sing, we can make our own kind of music, but we learnt that from them in the first place too.

Birdsong seems to take us somewhere far, far back, to somewhere we can almost remember. It is a hint of a lost sound world re-emerging, a metaphor for the planet as it was before we began obliterating it, before the air changed, when the light was clearer. At the moment, it feels as though nothing is different; the new leaves and blossoms come on our trees, and from within them, often unseen, the birds sing. Location-based sound recordists and producers frequently gather ambient sound from the air which they call 'Wild Track', the ambience of the world happening around us, collected as part of the production process, usually to blend with other sounds and the spoken word, to smooth editing and create a continuity of atmosphere. Latterly, however, partly because of pandemics and resulting lockdowns, the background has become more of the foreground in our philosophy of sound, and the wash of tonal colour onto which the main subject was placed now assumes its own importance, and so we listen to what it has to say with retuned ears, minds and hearts. The wild track is its own document.

This started me thinking about the very act of recording: how we take for granted the fact that technology can provide the sounds we want to hear at the

<sup>1</sup> G. M. Hopkins, 'Spring' in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by N. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 42.

touch of a button. On my phone there is an app that records the song of a bird as an aid to identification, websites offer me illustrated articles that inform, using recordings, and I can evoke whole landscapes through surround sound, simply by setting up a few speakers linked to playback. All this I accept. But it prompts a question: what is the consolation for the nature lover, faced suddenly, or gradually and inexorably, with the absence of all this, say through the loss of the faculty of hearing? From this leads another question: how did we share the experience of the sound environment around us before the technology we now employ so easily and readily? For someone without access to the sound of the world, how did – and do – you name, describe and *explain* these sounds? It is when we try to describe what we hear from them, that we must resort to words. That quest is of course not only a response to birdsong, but to the whole natural world of which we are a part. This book aims to join the listener in that wider world, but in doing so, it confronts the sheer scale of such a task. So, we come back to minutiae, the details from which our sound environments are made and build themselves. Birdsong lends itself to this focus, because as with human expression, it is communication, it is its own speech and language. Very little epitomizes the poignancy of the disappearing moment more eloquently than the song of a bird.

We continue with what we have always done: we seek to translate it and find metaphors of sound that we can interpret in our own terms. Even the 2014 *Handbook of British Birds* published by the RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) finds recourse in similes to convey the sound of, for example, the long-eared owl: ‘jingling calls, but later they make a drawn-out squeak that has been likened to a squeaky gate,’<sup>2</sup> or the voice of the Jack Snipe, one of the wader species, occasionally making an in-flight call ‘sounding like a cantering horse – “kollarap, kollarap, kollarap”’.<sup>3</sup> It is not hard, considering just these few examples, to gain an understanding of how the sound of birds, their identification and recognition, has, through history, been so often linked to an attempt to describe or explain to another, the sound of the bird itself. Because we are not birds, we mostly (with notable exceptions) lack the ability to convincingly mimic them. We fall back on our own language to interpret theirs, and from this comes a challenge that has fed into some of the greatest human forms of cultural expression. To ‘hear’ the soundscapes of our ancestors, how sound was recorded

<sup>2</sup> P. Holden and T. Cleaves, *The RSPB Handbook of British Birds* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

as an experience, prior to the advent of recording technology, we must rely on words. This is an attempt to explore that premise, using the idea of birdsong and the natural world as its case study. It is not a naturalist's book; neither is it a literary guide, although it strongly and gratefully acknowledges both worlds. It seeks not to be comprehensive, but indicative. As far as the literary examples I have chosen are concerned, it inevitably comes down to a personal choice. It is also not a chronological survey of its subject; mostly it is an exploration of themes as they feel relevant to the subject under discussion, rather than how one thing led to another, although sometimes it's that too. After all, whether we are discussing the sonic world of nature with Pliny the Elder, who died seventy-nine years before Christ was born, or Dara McAnulty, the young Irish naturalist born in 2004, we find ourselves considering writers who marvel at the same phenomena, wondering how best to convey the experience of listening to it.

My subtitle is 'sound, text and the idea of birdsong.' In its own way of course, *everything* is text. Sound is a text written on air; a thought is a text written in the mind. For convenience, however, and with this caveat firmly in view, this book engages with the word 'text' mostly in its written sense, as the transference of ideas and sounds onto the written or printed page. So why should this matter? Why should I invite you to read poetry and creative prose in a book about sound and listening? It is my hope that some of the examples I cite here – and there are many others that could have been selected – may prompt the reader to delve further into these subjects, read, consider and, beyond all that, listen with a heightened awareness to the sounds of the world. If we hear a thing well enough to accurately describe it, to articulate its qualities and its effect upon us, then we are probably listening more deeply than we were before we focused our inner microphone on that sound. To *describe* a sound opens the door to truly *knowing* it. So, here's a thought for sound recordists: don't just let your machine do the listening but see how well you can do what the machine cannot: that is to say, capture not only the sound of a place or a thing, but what it felt like to be there at the time. I would suggest that an attempt – even a failed attempt – at putting down on paper our experiences of a sound in words – or voicing them into that same machine – will bring us closer to the idea of not only hearing but *knowing* sound. It may help us to hear and know one another better too.

It seems to me that the choice of tuning in to birdsong as a metaphor for all listening, presents itself as an ideal subject for this exploration; birds are there around us, and their sounds accompany us through our days, whether we notice them or not. Birds and other animals may have shown us the way towards

speech, as they certainly continue to inspire us to sing; and most importantly, the planet is withering, and as it grows noisier in its self-destruction, the life that it first nurtured becomes quieter with each day that passes. It matters that we notice things now.

My sincere thanks to the first inspirers of this journey, and for their encouragement as I embarked upon it. I owe a lot to Cheryl Tipp, Curator of Wildlife and Environmental Sounds at the British Library, who was the first to encourage me to think that perhaps there was a case to answer here. That said, without the supportive words and positive advice of Hilary Davies, Tim Dee, Kevin J. Gardner, Jeremy Hooker, Richard Mabey and Chris Watson, I might not have had the temerity to set out on such a hazardous interdisciplinary voyage. In the end however, because this is a book about listening, if it helps in the understanding of how tuning more actively to the auditory sense leads to increased care and thought in the act of recording in sound and words, in making, creating and enhancing life, then it will have fulfilled its ambition. My thanks to kindred spirits Mike Collier and Michael Guida, and other colleagues and friends at Liverpool University, Goldsmiths, the University of London, the University of Sunderland and the John Clare and Richard Jefferies Societies. Jeremy Hooker's poem, 'Somewhere, a blackbird', from his 2019 collection, *Word and Stone*, is reprinted by permission of the author and the publisher, Shearsman Books. To my wife Jo, my love, and thanks for her reading of the text, and her valuable suggestions throughout the whole process.

## Dawn chorus: Describing sound

Birdsong is a doorway into a parallel place. It is at once familiar and profoundly other-worldly, part of a way of being that we have sought to understand, and coveted, since we first listened, and looked up. I once spent a chilly early April morning in 1982, in the woods above Thomas Hardy's cottage in Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, listening to and trying to record the dawn chorus, hoping to capture something of the sound that he might have heard as a boy. In the end, I only partially succeeded in my efforts of course, because although it *was* a dawn chorus, it was not *Hardy's* dawn chorus: I was about 130 years too late for that. In spite of this, it was not just any wood; notwithstanding the time lapse, it remained Hardy's wood, and as it happened, for me it was not just any time, but a day near the start of April 1982, in the first week of the Falklands War. When I think of that morning, I remember the sounds I heard, the broader context of world events in which I listened, and in my imagination, Thomas Hardy's experience of it in his time, as evoked in the natural music that plays and weaves through the text of his novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*:

To dwellers in a wood almost every species of tree has its voice as well as its feature. At the passing of the breeze, the fir-trees sob and moan no less distinctly than they rock; the holly whistles as it battles with itself; the ash hisses amid its quiverings; the beech rustles while its flat boughs rise and fall. And winter, which modifies the note of such trees as shed their leaves, does not destroy its individuality.<sup>1</sup>

That is Hardy's 'voice', articulating his interpretation of what he heard on a particular day, filtered through reflection. We are listening to him listening, just as when we hear a recording, we are listening through a microphone, wielded by another. Often for the sound recordist, woodland – or indeed any open-air ambience – can be a mixed blessing. Wind noise through trees may be ambiguous; is that the sound of leaves and branches responding to the breeze,

<sup>1</sup> T. Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (London: Penguin Classics, 2004), p. 7.

or is it the sound of rushing water, or rain? The eye comes to the aid of the ear in the actual location, explaining the origin of the sound, but to the 'blind' listener, the mind asks questions the ear cannot answer. Likewise, in modern times, there are the everyday 'sound-bombs' of a distant car, an aircraft or a siren. No such problem for the written word, filtering and focusing like a spotlight on the centre of attention; Hardy's precision conveys the sound – give or take a century or so – of the wood in which I found myself that morning just as the birds woke up. His ears had already done the work, and it was his mind that interpreted what they heard, recorded it and then played it back through words to be inwardly 'heard' by the reader: in this case, me.

In May 1924, less than two years after the birth of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC), listeners heard the well-known cellist Beatrice Harrison playing popular solo pieces in the garden of her house, Foyle Riding in Surrey, among them *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, by Dvorak, *Chant Hindou* (Rimsky-Korsakov) and *The Londonderry Air*. Harrison was a familiar figure on concert platforms, the soloist preferred by Edward Elgar in performances of his *Cello Concerto*, and the first to record that particular work under his baton. Already a celebrity by the time of her garden recitals, it was not however Harrison to whom listeners responded in their thousands, but her duettist. There in the woods around her home, a nightingale sang, seemingly prompted by the sound of the cello. It occurred on a number of successive evenings, and was predictable enough for the BBC to set up one of its first live outside broadcasts to capture the happening. Harrison later described the event in her autobiography:

Suddenly, at about a quarter to eleven on the night of the 19th May, 1924, the nightingale burst into song as I continued to play. His voice seemed to come from the Heavens. I think he liked the *Chant Hindou* best for he blended with it so perfectly. I shall never forget his voice that night, his trills, nor the way he followed the 'cello so blissfully. It was a miracle to have caught his song and to know that it was going, with the 'cello, to the ends of the earth.<sup>2</sup>

The whole thing had started some nights before, when Harrison was rehearsing at home. The bird started singing, as if responding to her playing. Beatrice contacted John Reith, general manager of the fledgling BBC, and it was agreed that this was a moment that could put this new medium firmly on the map. Here was an opportunity for a radio revolution: a 'live' outside broadcast. The

<sup>2</sup> B. Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales* (London: John Murray, 1985), p. 132.

date of the 19 May was agreed, and the event was trailed with plenty of advance publicity. Richard Mabey has explained what happened next:

Two van-loads of equipment and a large battalion of engineers arrived ... and set up the operation in the garden. The microphone was placed as close as possible to the bird's singing post, and the amplifiers were stacked in the summerhouse ... The plan was to wait until the bird was in full song and then break into the Savoy Orpheans' Saturday night dance programme.<sup>3</sup>

The weather was perfect, the moon was full and the air was still and warm. Yet despite many attempts, and various musical offerings from Beatrice, the bird would not sing. The clock ticked on, Beatrice played, but her cello sang alone.

Then, just after 10.45, twenty minutes before the station was due to go off the air, the bird began. An excited continuity announcer broke into the Orpheans, and for the next fifteen minutes the BBC's audience listened entranced to the historic duet.<sup>4</sup>

The duet between human and bird gained almost instant fame, becoming a universal phenomenon, to the extent that some years later, when King George V met Harrison, his first words were: 'Nightingales, nightingales! You have done what I have not yet been able to do. You have encircled the globe.'<sup>5</sup> The woodland around the house was a haven for birds, and prompted by the success of the initial broadcast, subsequently other birdsong transmissions and a commercial recording were made in Beatrice Harrison's garden, all achieving great success and sales. For nearly one hundred years, the Harrison/nightingale broadcasts were acclaimed as one of the iconic moments in radio history. Yet all was not quite as it seemed. In 2009, the author Jeremy Mynott raised some doubts as to the authenticity of the song in the 1924 recording; there was something about the sound of the bird that struck him and other experts as curious. Opinion was divided, but Mynott presented a persuasive piece of evidence in the form of a letter from Ted Pittman from Kent, the grandson of one Dame Maude Gould, a bird impersonator – a siffleur – who worked under the name, 'Madame Saberon.' His account stated that the BBC had booked Maude to be present on the night of the broadcast, as a backup in case the nightingale did not sing, and it was in fact

<sup>3</sup> R. Mabey, *Whistling in the Dark: In Pursuit of the Nightingale* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> B. Harrison, *The Cello and the Nightingales*. p. 132.



her voice, and not the bird's, that enthralled the audience. 'The trampling around of all the technical staff and all the heavy equipment scared any birds off and the recording is actually that of Maude Gould whistling to Ms Harrison's playing'.<sup>6</sup> A further complication lies in the fact that at the time of the broadcast, the BBC did not have the facilities to record outside broadcasts. Disc recording was still a complex and time-consuming process, and the question arises as to whether the recording that has been passed down to us represents that very first event, or actually a subsequent 'performance' made by a commercial record company? Whatever the reality, the effect at the time was colossal, and a tradition of cello/nightingale broadcasts followed annually for a number of years, all of which were, by all accounts genuine.

It also needs to be put into the context of the nature of 'recorded truth'. In early recordings, there are a number of precedents for reproducing spoken texts in other than the original voice; it was the *content* that mattered, the spirit of the thing, almost as much as authenticity. Gladstone's voice was first recorded by Edison, but due to technical reproduction difficulties, his speech was recreated by actors on subsequent recordings. Likewise, years later, some of Winston Churchill's most famous wartime speeches were recreated for overseas audiences by an actor. Within these parameters, therefore, Madame Saberon was being morally true to the spirit of the heart of the matter in her recorded text, quoting the nightingale's song. Thomas Hardy's description of woodland sound exists, and remains a record of a place and time, while Madame Saberon's nightingale facsimile created another kind of text that formed a concept in the minds of those who heard it, establishing a seminal broadcasting moment. Thus in the telling, and in their own ways, they both remain as stories in which memory and imagination perpetuate an event that continues to exist in a different reality. What persists above all is the story itself, which has gone into broadcasting history and lore. If the later version of events is itself to be trusted, deception of the audience did not, apparently, come into the equation at the time, and the tale has been told and retold in numerous books (including my own), on media and the early years of radio, and continues to capture the imagination of new generations coming to it for the first time. The fact is that by now many more people have read *about* the Surrey nightingale duet than have actually *heard* the recording itself. It is almost as though we don't need to witness it to be captivated

<sup>6</sup> T. Pittman. Quoted in J. Mynott, *Birdscapes: Birds in Our Imagination and Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 313.

by the idea. It is recorded in words, and knowing that it happened, and can be told, is enough, and conveys its own reality to the mind, just as Hardy's wood exists in the imagination through his written text.

Early in broadcasting history as the nightingale outside broadcasts were, they were not the first attempts at holding on to the sounds of avian life. In 1889, the eight-year-old Ludwig Koch made what has been claimed to be the first surviving sound recording of a bird: an Indian Shama bird. Koch is a key player in this story, and we shall devote time and space to him later. Between his pioneering wax cylinder recording and Beatrice Harrison's broadcast encounter with the Surrey nightingales, the preservation of sound as an artefact developed at a remarkable rate. In the same year as Koch recorded his Shama Bird, the German-American inventor Emil Berliner was working on what became known as the gramophone. More importantly, he was also developing a method of recording that involved a stylus on a disc rather than a cylinder. From 1896, this disc-cutting device was powered by an electric motor and could therefore run at a constant speed. A 7-inch diameter disc could supply two minutes of recording time, and in 1901, larger discs increased the available duration first to three minutes and then in 1903 to four minutes, from a 12-inch disc. Koch, predictably, was among the first to avail himself of this technology, mostly within domestic and garden environments.

Meantime, in England, the photographer and writer Cherry Kearton managed to record a few notes of a nightingale and a song thrush, using the old cylinder technology. Cherry and his brother Richard were naturalists who were early specialists in wildlife photography, and in 1895 they had published the first natural history book to be entirely illustrated with photographs. In 1910, Karl Reich from Bremen in Germany released the first commercial record of a bird – a captive nightingale – a disc which contained on the 'b' side the sound of a thrush, thus replicating the Kearton cylinder recording on new technology, via the Victor Talking Machine Company in Camden, New Jersey, and making it available to a wider listening public.

The naturalist and wildlife broadcaster Eric Simms identified the first known recordings of wild birds in America and Africa as being much later, in 1929, and it was in Australia in 1931, on 27 June, that the song of a lyrebird was committed to disc. There is also a reference in the account of the 16th Congress of the American Ornithologists' Union as early as 1898 which refers to the playing of 'a graphophone demonstration of a Brown Thrasher's song'.<sup>7</sup> In the early

<sup>7</sup> E. Simms, *Wildlife Sounds and Their Recording* (London: Paul Elek, 1979), p. 3.

recordings, the use of caged birds was often considered expedient due to the limitations of the technology; pre-electric mechanical and acoustical horn-based machines were limited in their top and bottom frequencies, and had to be placed close to the subject in order to capture any meaningful sound at all. At the Paris Exhibition of 1900, a wire recorder – the Telegraphone – was demonstrated, ‘two years after Poulson magnetized a steel wire of 0.5 to 1mm diameter from a piano with alternating fields of audio frequencies and, by running the wire alongside a coil, reproduced the alternation with the help of the magnetism left, as a sound in a telephone.’<sup>8</sup>

This then, briefly, is a hint of the prehistory of the coming of recording and its application in the preservation of natural sounds. Up until this period of technical activity, the word ‘text’ had been applied to words on paper; things would now never be the same again.

It was not, however, until the arrival in 1925 of the electrical broadcasting microphone that real progress was made in terms of quality, enabling both music and wildlife to be caught in a new clarity that did at least some justice to the original. This was of course after the first Harrison broadcasts; nonetheless, a duet between a cello and a bird caught the imagination, and this and subsequent broadcasts and recordings opened a door, through the dramatization of the event. Until that point, most of the people who listened to the duets would not have heard the actual sound of a nightingale in the wild. However, they might well have read poems or accounts of its song, since the nightingale is probably the most documented and celebrated voice in the avian world. These people would have gained an *idea* of the sound, conveyed through words, with varying degrees of success, dependent on the skill of the writer and the acuteness of their perception. Today technology allows us to listen to birdsong wherever we are; we can be familiar with sounds from far-flung countries we may never visit in person, and not only become experts on the nuances of avian signals, but share them in the comfort of our own home also. Yet before the advent of recorded sound, the written word was the only real tool for bringing the experience of birdsong to the masses, beyond being present as a witness to the

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 4. Valdemar Poulson was a Danish engineer whose contributions to the development of early radio technology were considerable. The Telegraphone was his invention, and in 1903 he went on to develop the Poulson Arc transmitter, the first continuous wave transmitter, which was later used in some of the first radio stations up until the early 1920s.

actual event. So how was it described during that time, and how very different was it from today's first-hand data-capture?

The thirteenth-century rota, or round, 'Sumer is icumen in', sometimes known as 'The Cuckoo Song', is one of the best-remembered and most frequently quoted renditions of the sound of a bird as a representative of a season beginning, and may have been the first poem I actually read, coming as it did on the opening page of my father's 1931 edition of *The Oxford Book of English Verse*:

Sumer is icumen in,  
     Lhude sing cuccu!  
 Groweth sed, and bloweth med,  
     And springth the wude nu –  
         Sing cuccu!<sup>9</sup>

To my childhood ear, this was pure sound, and the onomatopoeia in the repetition of the word 'cuccu,' itself a name based on the voice of the bird, evoked then as now, an unequivocal representation of the noise of spring:

Awe bleteth after lomb,  
     Lhouth after calve cu;  
 Bulluc sterteth, bucke verteth,  
     Murie sing cuccu.<sup>10</sup>

It is as though one living thing sends a cue to the rest of the natural world to awaken; the sound of the bird rings familiar even through the Wessex dialect of Middle English, itself almost a set of abstract silent musical notes, to the modern ear. We do not know the author, but some sources suggest it was William de Wycombe. Whatever, it is acknowledged in its musical form to be the earliest musical composition featuring six-part polyphony, but even as a spoken poem, it is pure sound, and makes its own music even before it is sung. In the final verse, it gives itself over to a tumult of ecstasy, poet and bird encouraging one another's song.

Cuccu, cuccu, well singes thu, cuccu:  
     Ne swike thu naver nu;  
 Sing cuccu, nu, sing cuccu,  
     Sing cuccu, sing cuccu, nu!<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> A. Quiller-Couch (ed.), *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

The sound recordist, Chris Watson, recording on Holy Island, Northumberland, in the twenty-first century, sought to evoke a seventh-century soundscape such as the monks who created the Lindisfarne Gospels might have heard as they worked in the fields, or laboured over the great manuscript. It was a ninth century Irish scribe who memorialized the cuckoo there in verse some three hundred years before that same song caught the attention of the spring song's author:

A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance),  
 In a gray cloak from bush-fortress.  
 The lord is indeed good to me:  
 Well do I write beneath a forest of woodland.<sup>12</sup>

This raises a key argument of this book. A sound recording is what it is: a record, and the definition of a record is both as a noun and as a verb. It is a thing constituting a piece of evidence about the past, initially, historically and primarily an account kept in some permanent form. It may be written as text, or latterly, in the form of signals on wax, shellac, tape or in digital form; it remains an evidential artefact that does no more than register proof that an event happened. Thus, the verb, *to record* articulates the intention to enable the existence of such evidence. When we seek to describe, not only the sound, but the *effect* of the sound, we find descriptive creative literature to be our refuge. 'A clear-voiced cuckoo sings' is a record, but 'A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me' is an acknowledgement that I was there to hear it and that I am a beneficiary of the sound (something of which the cuckoo is unaware, and about which the bird does not care.) Further, 'A clear-voice cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance)' is a value judgement that evokes feeling. The scribe's poem thus tells us not only of the sound, but of the way it changes his environment, and himself.

It is so often the cuckoo that gains representation, either in words or in music. This simple two note song is both instantly replicable, and easily simulated. Because of this, it is the first bird to be recognized, its song carries, usurping the air as the bird itself usurps the nest. It is thus a shorthand for many composers seeking to evoke a landscape. Beethoven (1770–1827) in his *'Pastoral' Symphony* 'records' it, Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) places it near the start of his *First*

<sup>12</sup> C. Watson, *In St Cuthbert's Time: The Sounds of Lindisfarne and the Gospels* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Touch Music). CD insert booklet, note by Dr Fiona Gameson, St Cuthbert's Society, Durham. CD Number Touch to: 89, 2019.

*Symphony*, while the English composer Frederick Delius (1862–1935) gives us a whole tone poem, *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, motivated by the same emotion that fired the Irish scribe to write in praise of the bird. The music not only mimics the song, it also describes the mood of the moment, a microcosm of the burgeoning season surrounding it. For many composers, birdsong is a decoration rather than the main subject, although the Italian Ottorino Respighi (1879–1936) placed avian life centre stage in his 1928 five-movement work based on the seventeenth and eighteenth century music, *The Birds*, in which he attempted to transcribe birdsong into notation, and even include bird actions, such as scratching feet or fluttering wings. At various points in the piece, we hear the dove, the hen, the nightingale and the ubiquitous cuckoo. Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) went further in 1952 when he was invited to provide a test piece for flautists at the Paris Conservatoire; his response was to compose *Le merle noir* for flute and piano, based entirely on the song of the blackbird. He had long been fascinated by birdsong and had incorporated it into a number of his earlier works, but the idea of transcription took hold for him with the Paris work, and the following year, 1953, other pieces began to appear, such as his work for orchestra, *Réveil des oiseaux*, evoking birdsong heard in the Jura Mountains region of France, culminating in the famous *Catalogue d'oiseaux* of 1958, which gives a sense, not only of the bird, but also the mood context of its location. His massive *Turangalila-Symphonie* of 1949 takes birdsong into a richly imaginative and complex tapestry, and shows Messiaen to be, of all composers up to his time, one of the most enthusiastic and knowledgeable ornithologists of all composers. Subsequently, a late work by the English composer Jonathan Harvey (1939–2012), *Bird Concerto with Piano Song*, combined recordings of real birdsong with electronics, orchestral music and a pianistic commentary, of which Harvey wrote: 'Real birdsong was to be stretched seamlessly all the way to human proportions – resulting in giant birds – so that a contact between worlds is made'.<sup>13</sup> The work is haunting and moving, although its blend of real birdsong with simulation drew criticism from some ornithological quarters. The clustering sound evokes flashes of light, perhaps echoing the morning air in California, where the *Concerto* had its genesis. At the work's root is the idea of the song, as Arnold Whittall wrote: 'The overriding aesthetic quality of the piece throughout it, that of "playing with the idea of song", the basic contrast

<sup>13</sup> J. Harvey, Programme note for CD insert booklet. In *Bird Concerto with Piano Song* (London: NMC, 2011). Records NMC D177.

between organisms which sing and instruments which can (only) play [fuelling] a transformational drama'.<sup>14</sup>

Composers may incorporate the song of nature either through specifics or in more general ways. Between 1895 and 1897, Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), wrote a two-movement work for twin pianos called *Sites Auriculaires* (broadly translated as 'places which might be sensed by the ear'). The first of these was *Habanera*, inspired by his Basque mother's stories of her young life in Madrid, conjured for her thereafter by this song form. The second, *Entre Cloches* ('Between Bells'), evoked through the counterpoint of bell sounds in the piece, the sounds of various Parisian church bells tolling together at noon. If there is any birdsong here, we may imagine it to be drowned out by the clamour of the bells or replaced by the flutter of startled and complaining wings. For many other composers, however, birdsong may be the central subject evoking Place, or the audible part of a visual landscape, more than décor, the subject itself and sound that gives meaning to the place in which it is heard. Tori Takemitsu (1930–96), in his work, *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Gardens*, invites us to approach a garden as from a distance, with the oboe as the principal voice, and the circling of birds, pointing to the fact that when we think of the sound of birds, we should never forget the fluttering and beating of wings. As children, we became familiar with orchestral birds: Serge Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* evokes woodland and its creatures, Leopold Mozart's (1719–87) *Toy Symphony* gives us particular birds in the sound of the cuckoo, the quail and the nightingale, while Haydn's (1732–1809) *Symphony no. 83 (The Hen)* is self-explanatory, perhaps gaining inspiration from other works such as the early seventeenth century Carlo Farina (1600–39) from the Court of Dresden, who peopled his 1627 work, *Capriccio stravagante* with cackling hens and barking dogs. Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) too, in his *Four Seasons* gives us birds, dogs and insects as part of the musical world. Famous among musical representations of the animal kingdom is Camille Saint-Saëns's (1835–1921) *Carnival of the Animals*, with its aviary, woodland birds and swan, this last being an expression of mood and movement rather than song, as with Sibelius's (1865–1957) dark *Swan of Tuonela*. The Finnish composer, Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928–2016), in his *Cantus Arcticus, Concerto for Birds and Orchestra*, explored similar artistic if not geographic territory in 1972, employing recordings of bird sounds

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

made in the Arctic Circle and marshlands of Leminka. Orchestra and waterfowl seemingly interact, and we hear the calls of waders, shore larks and migrating swans both individually and collectively, and benefitting from the technology that enables as it were, 'wide-angle' and 'close-up' auditory images to be gathered. All these compositions are texts, written forms translated back into sounds through orchestras or other combinations of musicians, and while they *are* textual interpretations of a sonic event experienced in the natural world, they are not the main subject of this book. Much has – and will – be written about music as a representation of, or emotional response to natural sound, but here I want to focus on the *word* as sound and thought-transmitter. Avian life is at the root of music, but so often we find composers stepping back from the challenge of matching it, using the sounds as stylised jumping-off points for expression, because, when all is said and done, the sounds of the natural world are sonically inimitable.

Even when the first recordings of birdsong were made, miraculous as they seemed, they were technically rough and indistinct, reminders, souvenirs, suggestions of the real things. Little wonder that the idealized sound of the natural world was prized in words and in music. George Meredith wrote his poem, 'The Lark Ascending' in 1881. It was after the First World War that Ralph Vaughan Williams took it as the inspiration for his soaring single movement work for violin and orchestra, when, in the wake of four years of carnage, the metaphor of its ecstatic innocent flight into invisibility must have been deeply poignant and meaningful. The piece is now a popular favourite amongst concert audiences, but how many of those rapt listeners have been drawn to seek out the real thing? Meredith's poem expresses the sound perfectly:

He rises and begins to round,  
 He drops the silver chain of sound,  
 Of many links without a break,  
 In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,  
 All interwoven and spreading wide,  
 Like water-dimples down a tide  
 Where ripple ripple overcurls  
 And eddy into eddy whirls<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> G. Meredith, *Selected Poems* (Boston, MA: Elibron Classics, 2005), pp. 5–6.