

# Whistling in the Dark

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**Extended comments to the Avian music heard at:**

**[http://www.jonroseweb.com/f\\_projects\\_whistling\\_in\\_the\\_dark.php](http://www.jonroseweb.com/f_projects_whistling_in_the_dark.php)**



Whistling in the Dark embraces a set of duets between various pied butcherbirds (from field recordings) and virtuosic human musicians (recorded in home lockdown) performing transcriptions of this extraordinary avian music. And music it is, a continuing and ever transforming treasure trove of melodic invention thirteen million years in the making.

Dr Hollis Taylor made the field recordings and initial transcriptions as part of her 16-year investigation into the vocalisations of these feathered choristers. Every year, she spends four months in outback Australia listening, analysing, and recording the music and environmental context of these birds. The main areas of her research privilege areas in and around Alice Springs and North Queensland. Each bird is named by road or place, and since pied butcherbirds are not migratory, Hollis has chronological recordings of individual birds that demonstrate new melodic developments annually and seasonally.

For my part, I selected from hundreds of recordings/transcriptions, which I then arranged (in deliberation with Hollis) for human musicians—an interspecies collaboration. Some birdsong phrases were recast at half and quarter speeds (exposing details otherwise too fast for our human perception); others were exposed to contrapuntal devices such as inversion or augmentation—while sections from my own imagination endeavoured to either ‘be bird’ or consider ‘what if bird could’. However, in general this work sets itself the task of meticulously taking seriously the sonic constructs of another species. We hope this project featuring diverse Australian musicians does so with authenticity and with the highest artistic integrity.

The question often posed is, ‘Why don’t you play live with the birds when they are singing?’ It can happen by chance (usually diurnally), but to intentionally subject birds in their critical spring season to human trespass on their sonic territory is a ‘no-no’ by any reckoning. The pied butcherbirds that Hollis records sing nocturnally. If you’ve ever seen a pied butcherbird vocalise, you know each phrase demands a total bodily propulsion to attain maximum projection. It’s exhausting music, an individual bird sometimes singing up to seven hours with scarcely a pause. Human sonic intrusion can add to this stress. In addition, recording these birds is a hit-and-miss affair. Perfect recording conditions are rare; nonetheless, the unadulterated recording is preferred to one where some musician blasts away trying to get a bird to respond.

Also, the birds may sing in less than safe environments, where snakes inhabit campground facilities, where drunken truck drivers wander around looking for something or someone to do, where cows walk into your tent, where police impersonators arrive to steal your car, and where other disrupting humans materialise out of nowhere to impede the recording of this remarkable wild animal.

So, what do human musicians think about working with these flying dinosaurs? Well, no one turned us down. On the contrary, our challenge to 'perform the music of that bird' was met with considerable enthusiasm. It might be the time we find ourselves in, the collapse of biodiversity, global warming, devastating fires, and a pandemic that has our measure. Human exceptionalism is struggling under examination. Drought also pushes the pied butcherbird into a closer symbiotic relationship with our species. -And to add to our investigating woes, some scientists reckon that Alice Springs will run out of water within 70 years.

Pied butcherbirds often sing with pitches delivered slowly enough that we (as humans) can comprehend the sonic characteristics of their musical process. But what we may perceive as a stable pitch is, on close examination in a sonogram, often revealed to be a rather impermanent sliding portamento. So, what happens when such music is transcribed for fixed-pitch instruments such as vibraphone, marimba, and piano? Will the result always be reductive? Other characteristics of the bird's classic repertoire such as rattles, zips, beak snaps, and vertical complexity can be approximated with tremolos, percussive sounds, grace notes, and keyboard polyphony. Often what we hear as a pitch event may consist of half a dozen discrete pitches; many duos in this set consist of various slowing down procedures where (hopefully) the original avian content and intent becomes audible. In *Binns*, even with the tempo slowed to half speed, it's still a breathless mouthful for Lamorna Nightingale's flute marking a songpost in the fecund 'sonoverse' of the forest.

The birds may not sing multiple lines of song simultaneously (nor do we usually), but they often inhabit the early morning chorus, finding their own place in the horizontal polyphony. With regard to the piano featured in *Midway*, I created a canon from butcherbird material, as I've always kept a vision of a colonial piano left discarded and stranded in a subtropical Australian forest (my BBC radiophonic production - *Ivories in the Outback*). How might a piano sound with the keys being hammered by the beaks of a few dozen birds? Zubin Kanga (as asked) reveals how spiky an upright piano can sound. In the duos like *Cameron* and *Amadeus*, complexity is a given as the dawn chorus has kicked into gear and the butcherbird boosts his/her volume to compete for sonic space.

*Palm Ragonesi 2016* and *Owen Springs Reserve 2016* were composed with a click track in mind to keep bird and instrumentalist together when they were directly playing in unison or precise rhythmic counterpoint. This was quite a task for Cathy Milliken (oboe) and Ben Ward (double bass), as the bird phrases are quite demanding at tempo. For the rest, I created a score with rest bars to replicate the birds, who generally use an 'interphrase interval', and then (by editing) allowed a natural dialogue to evolve - a conversation. Quite often in the field, a bird may sing solo for long periods and then be joined in the far distance by another bird (this can be heard in some of the recordings). Sometimes, they share similar material and other times the motives are contrasted (the personal repertoire of each bird is transformed annually in any case). In *Petrick*, bird and trombone almost 'trade fours'. Simone de Haan put it like this: 'After listening multiple times now, the aspect I am happiest with is the degree to which the spirit/sound of the pied butcherbird

has influenced my playing/musical approach, along with the tentative beginnings of a dialogue starting to emerge between the bird and the trombone (towards creating a new world together perhaps?)’.

With its recent African origins, an instrument like the marimba (in *Dalrymple*) sets up a truly exotic vista, but as with all these duos, the juxtaposition maintains a recorded fiction created in a time of crisis. Claire Edwards waxes almost therapeutically: ‘I have performed Jon and Hollis’s bird transcriptions many times now but this bird is my favourite! This gorgeous creature which hails from Charters Towers is tuneful, happy and upbeat - a true mascot to get us through COVID-19!’

The ancient lineage of the butcherbird reminds us that humans are new on the block with regard to the invention and perception of melody. And when rock stars ‘own the stage’ and singer-songwriters churn out yet another groan of unrequited love, we know where the precedent can be found. Most of us, however, perceive music as having more strings to its bow than just two functions. The birds know when they have a good tune, as they repeat it; they also know how to show off their technique with counter-melodies and combinatorial variations. This goes way beyond the requirements of biologists who insist that birdsong be kept in the confines of competition for territory and mates (both male and female butcherbirds sing). As with all diligent musicians, pied butcherbirds practice - the aesthetics of improvement. Out bush, Hollis has witnessed what can only be described as a ‘music lesson’ in which a juvenile is taught old style, in your face, carrot and stick, the grounding and learning of song elements. However unlike a simple call and response routine, the evidence so far suggests that memorization and production by a naïve bird are not simultaneous: the long-term storage of song phrases precedes their first vocal rehearsal by months.

This particular lesson came with punishment for not keeping up with the program (a confrontational zip noise and beak snap) or reward (a tasty piece of flesh from the larder hanging higher up in the tree).

With traditional acoustic musical instruments, there aren’t too many classes; it’s basically hit, scratch, or blow (idiophones, chordophones, or aerophones, if you prefer). But the kinaesthetic relationships and haptic feedback for each instrument locates precise motor actions. As yet we don’t really have technology smart enough to determine the variant detail of what goes on in the brain while performing with these families of instruments, but the inherent characteristics of each instrument clearly suggest a wide range of differing cognitive processes. The conversion of avian music into human music transforms the activity in more ways than just playing ‘the notes’ in a different register. A new physiological drama’s afoot.

On brass instruments, the songs may take on the (cliched) militancy of a marching band or New Orleans jazz band - my anthropomorphic observations, of course, since we have no idea what the music conjures up for the birds in the dark of the night. Please compare the two tracks *Palm Ragonesi 2014* and *Palm Ragonesi 2016* - the first a happy go lucky tuba tune rendered by Chloe Higgins and the second a ‘classic piece of European avant-garde’ (according to British composer Richard Barrett) delivered by Cathy Milliken. The bird is likely the same bird in both duos and he/she has transformed the material quite radically in the course of just two years. There is a certain ‘tonality’ based on the repetition

of some key pitches ...but it is not a tonality derived from the keyboard (and it is impossible to run the history of Western music without a keyboard).

Many musicians have posed questions concerning tunings, equal temperament, just intonation, and the like. Surely there would have to be a 'butcherbird scale' of some kind? Probably not the kind of mystery that takes up much time with your average bird. But they do use pitch: there are many examples of octave equivalence, leaps of a major 6th appear common. And they have perfect pitch in the sense that a repeated phrase will show up in the sonogram as an accurate repetition - as exact as anything in classical music. Eventually, scientific colleagues of Hollis around the world will do the number crunching *en masse*, and we may become wiser (cognitively speaking) as to what butcherbirds preference, but I suspect we will end up with a Rumsfeldian known unknown.

With *Cameron*, once slowed down, I hear the jauntiness of a wayward Pierrot and then the lilt of a Viennese waltz (at one stage the clarinet line is played eight times slower). Most of the material is very tricky. Jason Noble comments: 'It was a challenge keeping up with this character; rapid altissimo lines and brisk staccato passages certainly gave my articulation a workout.'

The clear, still voice of *Erija* brings me into a Feldman-esque glacial state. Alexander Garsden performs with precision the chords and inversions that I have derived/translated from the bird's pitches. I've cut the recording short; the original bird song lasted over two hours.

In early morning at *Burleigh Heads*, James Nightingale's tenor saxophone adds a third voice to two pied butcherbirds who are singing more in the style of a diurnal group session than the classic night songs. These ensemble songs, as analysed by Hollis, are more in the character of a hocket, where singers alternatively share the set phrase; butcherbird hockets may involve six or even more singers. James' contribution also includes elements from the song transcription of a bird in the same park recorded by Hollis a few years earlier.

The bird who sings on *Amadeus Street* has, as Joanne Cannon mentions 'nothing to do with Mozart' (although apparently Wolferl was very fond of his pet starling). As with a number of these recordings, Joanne expertly uses multiphonics in her rendition. Having a syrinx (instead of our single larynx), PBBs are masters of a whole range of what might be considered as multiphonics. These complex vertical sounds are used sparingly and contrast vividly with the paradigmatic silver tones of the bird.

Of course, it's a given that most PBB songs function (as in all species) as love songs too. Do they have musical jokes as well, I wonder? As you will hear, they often include in their songs a few bursts of what Hollis refers to as their 'species call' (nominally a F#, G, F# phrase). It's audio signposting: Here I am, a butcherbird, watch out!

The quintessential sawtooth waveform of string instruments don't come near to whistling, so the songlines of the birds take on another guise entirely. The bird's articulation can be perceived as an analogous problem to solve, and there are certainly techniques that correspond (e.g. a flute sound can be conjured up with harmonics played *sul tasto*; the warning 'zip' bird call can be achieved with a fast portamento). On the other hand, counterintuitive non-bird and instrument-specific limitations or technical extensions can create another musical frame altogether. Having been brought up listening to butcherbirds, Brett Dean showed interest in the *Mount Surprise* bird. He orientates his viola playing

around the baroque notions of 'Messa di Voce' - emphasising the middle in the bow stroke and using vibrato as an occasional expression not a continuum. Such spot variant is typical of PBB practice.

There remains a quality in the Ur-songs that speaks directly to us, no matter the changing contexts of environment. They are of this world but 'other'. For Benn Ward's encounter with the pied at *Owen's Springs Reserve*, I was thinking primarily of the huge gap in range between bass and bird - the gestalt of a six-octave differential. Then later, as I listened back, I had the impression of a concerto for bass and orchestra: suddenly, the orchestra has been disappeared and replaced by a single bird. Try playing *Owen 2016* with the embedded audio of *Owen Springs Reserve 2014* (button at top of page) - this thorough musical makeover comes from the same bird!

Butcherbirds often build inter-phrase intervals into their formal night songs. They don't have to take a break for breath (they breathe while they sing); the tacit space between each phrase is a built-in aesthetic. I have engaged with this space. Sometimes I keep this thought bubble exactly as the bird marks it, sometimes I enlarge it (to make room for the human), and sometimes I remove it completely to bring the music more into human models of song form. The duality of this project takes advantage of this opportunity, and as with modes of improvisation, the partners can copy, ignore, play a counterpoint, send the idea back to where it came from, create some kind of sonic collision, or simply stop. Listening, whether subconscious or directly, is common in both species of musician.

At the end of *Salt Evaporator*, the water in a nearby drain subsides, and the bird launches into two short episodes of mimicry. It sounds like a burst of radical modernism - high speed cut and paste. Before Hollis started her detailed studies of pied butcherbirds, scant documentation of this species reports on this as a yet unexplained phenomena. Mimicry has been an area of fascination in Hollis's research, particularly since it remains an activity whose function(s) are unresolved by biologists. About a dozen different avian species calls are lined up together in rapid fire delivery; the habitual space between phrases has gone. Again, the bird can utilise both sides of their syrinx to create vertical complexity at source. The volume is quite low compared to their (extremely loud) songs, so there is little in the way of territorial broadcasting to be ascertained from this activity. These short bursts of mimicry seem to happen at the end of a song sequence and often in a noisy environment.

Hollis has recordings of pied butcherbird mimicry that include mobile ring tones, a reversing truck alarm, cats meowing, and horses (in the sky?) neighing! My hunch is that it is a kind of ancient daydreaming or even avian therapy. Whatever it is, mimicry is a private affair for each bird, not normally heard ...and we are lucky to have this recording of it.

For those interested in examining further the issues that a project such as this throws up, I would suggest Dr Hollis Taylor's book *Is Birdsong Music? - Outback Encounters with an Australian Songbird* (Indiana Press, 2017, ISBN 9780253026668), one of the definitive books on the subject.

And lastly, despite being resident musicians on this planet for millennia, the individual singers of the pied butcherbird species do not have access to a performing rights society, so Hollis Taylor ([piedbutcherbird.net](http://piedbutcherbird.net)) and I support their musical work through contributions to Birdlife Australia ([birdlife.org.au](http://birdlife.org.au)). You could do this as well if you're inclined.