

Field recordings as ‘cut-outs of the real’ in *Tree of Codes*

The opera begins with the sounds of birds – the high-pitched chiming sounds of bellbirds and the seemingly electronic warble of magpies recorded in Australia (these are field recordings gifted to the project by the Australian composer David Lumsdaine). These, and other recorded sounds in the opera, are for me, rather like Marcel Proust’s madeleine: they trigger an emotional geography of time past. This is the mythic time of endless summer days; of childhood out in the Australian bush with its intense acoustic fabric of birds and insects intercut with the revving of trail bikes.

These sounds of birds, insects and machines form an emotional pulse to the work and migrate into the music in varied expressive ways to enrich the meaning of the text. Birds of course are found in the imaginal landscape of many cultures as messengers from the spirit world or as carriers of the souls of the dead and they are a constant presence in the opera. The birdcalls shape the musical vocabulary of the singers and the instrumentalists, transforming at times into cascades of baroque ornamentation as well as pulsing repetition. At one point the bird sounds are actual language: the character of the Mutant Bird in the opera performs some phrases in the whistled language of Kuşköy, spoken and understood by people in the village located near the Black Sea coast in the northern part of Turkey. When instructed in Act 1 of the opera to ‘Speak’, the Mutant Bird responds in this special whistled language with phrases such as ‘Listen’ and ‘Yes, sometimes the birds answer’.

If bird-like whistles can be a form of heightened speech, so too can the buzz of insects as well as the intergalactic bubbling of gases coming off a comet. Act 3: ‘Ventriloquism’ begins with sounds based on a recording made by Manuel Senfft, where he transposed data from the European Space Agency Rosetta Mission’s exploration of the Comet 67P/ Churyumov-Gerasimenko, to bring the sound of the comet into the range of human hearing. This iterative comet song is taken up by multiple percussion instruments performed on stage making a further transposition from a cosmic scale to earthly rhythms of frogs and insects. Wood blocks are struck and bowed with rasp sticks by the musicians and at one point the animal chorus becomes intelligible – the animals are reciting lines from Goethe’s *Der Erlkönig!*

There are other ‘sounds of the real’ that are perceived momentarily – fragments of time rushing by in reverse - from the sounds of children playing, to a baby crying, to the sound of orgasm. The music speaks of the radiance of living in the face of death and life pokes its way into the musical fabric with all its force.