

Oregon Musician

Sharing ideas about music and the teaching of music

Music and Nature

The Editor's Comments



About the Editor

Diane Baxter, pianist, educator and consultant, is the editor of *Oregon Musician*. She recently retired as Professor of Music at Western Oregon University where she received the Faculty Honors Award for Outstanding Creativity and the Pastega Award for Excellence in Teaching. Diane taught studio piano and courses in Ethnomusicology, Performance Anxiety, and Research Methods. Diane consults, performs and adjudicates far and wide, often giving workshops on performance excellence. "The Science of Artistry: The Fourth String" was published in *Clavier Companion* in Nov/Dec 2013. Diane's article, "Ethnomusicology and Alchemy" was published in the April/May 2020 edition of *American Music Teacher*. Diane began Piano at Tigh na Breac in 2018, an international annual workshop on the shores of Loch Etive in the Scottish Highlands. The focus is on performance success and doing our best when it matters most. The workshop is thriving. She lives, writes, plays and thinks in Brownsville, Oregon.

If you truly love nature, you will find beauty everywhere.

—VINCENT VAN GOGH

It is endlessly fascinating to ponder music that has been inspired by the natural world. Birds that populate our gardens often create a wild and brilliant ruckus. It's hard to imagine such "music" emanating from such small little beings. Even chickens have a complex and intriguing language, where alarm squawking is quite different from calm murmurings or happy cackling. Lots of music has been inspired by birds and chickens both. Of course, no acoustic instruments would have been

possible originally without natural materials (yes, yes, I understand the evolution into plastics, electronics, etc.). This edition of the *Oregon Musician* provides ample evidence of deep and long-lasting connections with the natural world. (I'm not sure the natural world gains as much from humans, however. I once saw a documentary called "Glenn Gould's Toronto" where Gould sings a snippet of Mahler's *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*—replete with orchestral bits—to the elephants in the Toronto Zoo. They didn't seem terribly impressed.) During lockdowns of the pandemic when streets were empty in cities, some Spanish researchers noticed that birds returned and began singing again. "Urban birds were used to the hustle and bustle of cities before the pandemic. Loud noises and packed streets were just a part of their daily lives. But when the pandemic forced people inside, it was suddenly quiet and empty outside . . ." (Dr. Oscar Gordo of the Catalan Ornithological Institute in Barcelona). Researchers started seeing urban bird behavior that was much more common to birds in the wild, such as renewed singing at dawn.

We are part of nature and nature is certainly part of us. That is the underlying message demonstrated by the articles of this edition.

Michael Johnson's insight into Olivier Messiaen's fascination with birds is a good way to begin. Michael writes: "A large proportion of scholarly study has gone into Messiaen's romance with bird-song. He has spoken extensively of his love of birds in general, their chirping and their flight, and his realization as a youngster that they were actually making some kind of music. In his later years he called himself a professional ornithologist. He also accepted, as he said in a seminal interview with French music critic Claude Samuel, that his 'passion for birdsong was open to ridicule.'

Don Latarski states: "All composers have to be inspired to write music and what better motivator than the perfection we so often witness in nature . . ." Don sees natural beauty through macro photography as reflective of "my notion of composition and melody. When I look at some of the images I've captured I'm immediately struck by how they distill the lines, curves, textures, and shapes of melody. I realized that what I try to achieve through my music is the same thing being reflected back through my camera's lens. The photos are a reflection of the feelings I experience through music."

Kate Harrison writes from her perspective as an environmental and human rights lawyer, and as a musician. "How music conveys the idea of nature and its elements is fascinating. I can recognise bird song and shaking lambs' tails in Haydn, undulating waves in Debussy, thunderstorms in Bartok, and a vast empty terrain in John Luther Adams. Whether this is because of a real resemblance to the natural world or a trained response crafted through the traditions of classical music, I do not know." Kate mentions that it was Beethoven who inspired the "Pastoral Project," announced in 2017 at the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, to link the composer's 250th anniversary with what should have been the year of the UN's COP 26 to discuss action on climate change. The Beethoven Anniversary Society in collaboration with the UN Climate Secretariat UN-FCCC launched its first project aimed at "preserving the nature so beloved of Beethoven."

Paul Roberts has generously provided us with more from his new book. We read about the first book of *Liszt's Années de pèlerinage-Suisse* (Years of Pilgrimage-Switzerland). This collection "contains several quotations from Lord Byron's narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, one of the best sellers of the generation immediately preceding Liszt's and hugely popular in France during his formative years in Paris in the 1830s. All the quotations are descriptions of landscape, specifically of the sublime pastoral scenes of the Swiss Alps." When writing about "Orage" ("Storm"), Roberts ties the description to Liszt's virtuosity as a pianist. "This is furious storm music par excellence and it reminds us that the evocation of storms was one of the staple components of Liszt's public improvisations . . . in 'Orage' piano technique becomes integral to the imaginative effect. This is music theatre, it requires performance. Storms are marvels of nature; Liszt's storms were marvels of a new kind of pianism. 'Orage' is an act, just as Byron's poetry is an act, a virtuosic display that leaves us, as witnesses, breathless at the audacity. But it is this very audacity that carries the meaning—we are overwhelmed not only by the act itself but by what it is required to do, by what only virtuosity can do."

Jenny Gilbert's articulate and entertaining essay on Romantic ballet reminds us that aside from the specific subject matter, dance has an invisible natural force that plays a crucial role: gravity! All dancers and choreographers certainly are aware of its relentless presence and invisible partnership. She writes: "Romantic ballet was a short-lived craze—it blazed for barely 30 years and very few complete examples have survived—but it left the world with two foundation-ballets, *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, and both offer fascinating glimpses of the prevailing view of the natural world. They also show the response of dance to the ideas that were sweeping through the other arts in the 1830s and 40s. Ballet was just perhaps a little less high-minded than music and painting, as we shall see."

Happy Reading to all. I am grateful to our authors for their work and thoughts.

As always, if you have comments, questions, or ideas for future editions, please contact me at baxterd@wou.edu.



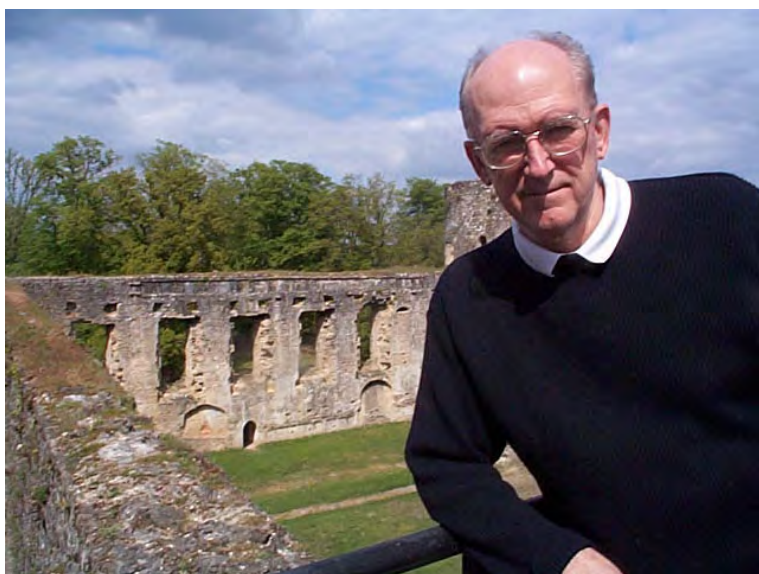
Music and Nature

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Olivier Messiaen: Tracking Birdsong in the Woods

by Michael Johnson



About Michael

Michael was born and raised in a small town in Indiana. From the age of 17 he never stopped traveling. After graduating from San Jose State College he went on to Columbia University, New York, on a fellowship in international reporting. In 1967 The Associated Press hired him and sent him to Moscow for four years as a general news reporter. He then worked as a business and economics writer in Paris, New York and London, finally settling in Bordeaux ten years ago where he became a music journalist, critic and portrait artist. His special interest is piano performance and composition.

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Scholars who have delved into the creative forces of French composer Olivier Messiaen since his death in 1992 are seeking to understand where this unique voice came from. It is clear that his religious beliefs and bible readings served as part of his inspiration. The title of the *Quartet for the End of Time* refers to the biblical passages in Revelation 10.1-7 in which an angel descends from heaven and declares that “there shall be no more time”—meaning eternity will arrive, with no past and no future to distract us from God.

A large proportion of scholarly study has gone into Messiaen’s romance with bird-song. He has spoken extensively of his love of birds in general, their chirping and their flight, and his realization as a youngster that they were actually making some kind of music. In his later years he called himself a professional ornithologist. He also accepted, as he said in a seminal interview with French music critic Claude Samuel, that his “passion for birdsong was open to ridicule.”

Messiaen persevered, however. He once said he believed birds are “the best musicians on the planet,” and credits them with inventing the chromatic and diatonic scales, and engaging in the first group improvisation in their “dawn chorus.”

His widow Yvonne Loriod recalled in one interview how she supported Messiaen’s avian interests. “I used to drive him into the countryside in my little car,” she said, “and he would spend nights in haystacks or barns to hear the dawn chorus. He could hear a nightingale and noted that at sunrise that voice would soon be joined by “a mate singing counterpoint.”

A video of his bird obsessions shows him slogging through wooded areas, notebook in hand, taking rapid dictation from the birds. “I simply write what I hear, then adapt it for our modern instruments,” he said. Birds tend to chirp two or three octaves above piano range and some sing in quarter-tones. These qualities cannot be reproduced on a standard piano but Messiaen does a fair imitation with high-register piano writing.

He carried binoculars to match the song with the species, and claimed to have identified some 500 European birds by their song. He recalled in an interview that a peasant who caught sight of him in the early morning dew wondered, “Is he a foreigner or is he mad?”

One violinist friend sometimes accompanied him in walks in the woods. What was it like to observe the composer at work? Messiaen would order his friend to “pay attention” as the sun rose. “The moment was still, then all of a sudden we heard “peep” . . . Five seconds later all the birds started singing together, like an orchestra!”

It was these birds, in a forest near Verdun, that inspired what would become the third movement of the *Quartet for the End of Time*.

Another signature element of Messiaen’s music is the tone color he could produce in piano, organ, choral or orchestral compositions. From an early age he was gifted with synesthesia, a cerebral condition that relates music to specific colors. Seattle musicologist Jonathan Bernard wrote in an essay on Messiaen’s coloration that composer Alexander Scriabin also relied on synesthesia to help enrich his compositions. “For those individuals,” Bernard wrote, “either privileged, cursed, or just different, depending on one’s point of view, the phenomenon is completely involuntary.”

Olivier Messiaen: Tracking Birdsong in the Woods

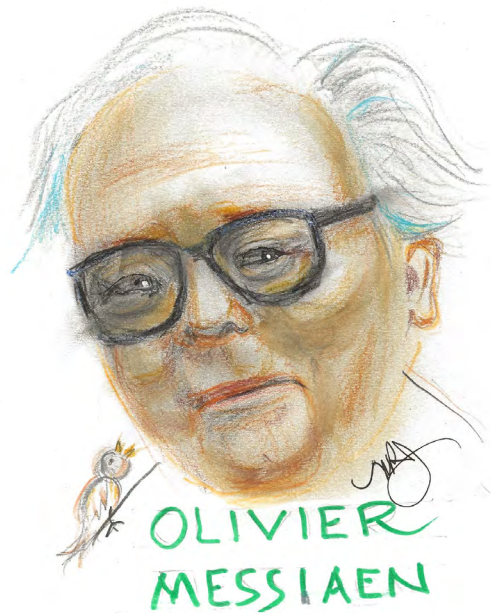
I keep running into Messiaen-lovers. One French woman who as a child heard Messiaen play the Sainte Trinité (Holy Trinity) organ in Paris tells me his playing could be “grandiose, almost scary.” Messiaen took a liking to her and invited her one day to sit on the bench. She remembers touching a few keys. “He smiled when I put a shy finger on the keyboard, then he struck the first majestic chords of the Bach Toccata and Fugue. The church was immediately filled with waves of that gigantic sound. I still carry it with me these many years later.”

Messiaen served as organist at Sainte Trinité for 60 years. The faithful swarmed in to hear him play the sacred repertoire at Sunday Mass, then to listen to his improvisations afterward. And the adulation continues. Hundreds of devoted fans turn out annually for the Messiaen Festival in the Pays de la Maije of France, a mountainous backwater near Grenoble, that inspired many of his large-scale works. Even Boulez, reformed and mellowed, has participated in the festival as a conductor.

Messiaen’s place in music history is assured today, with some music scholars ranking him alongside Igor Stravinsky as one of the most innovative voices of his time. Major works were commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, and he was in demand worldwide for teaching harmony and composition. He became a virtual rock star in Japan, where he discovered Japanese traditional music and borrowed from the harmonics he was hearing there for the first time. His YouTube visits on the internet today number in the hundreds of thousands for his organ, piano, orchestral, choral and chamber works.

His personal accessibility also left good memories among those who studied with him. He laughed easily and had a taste for loud shirts—Hawaiian prints toward the end of his life. His relaxed attitude toward students was to let them grow naturally, not to force them into a traditional box. British pianist Peter Hill, editor of *The Messiaen Companion*, recalls his “natural courtesy, with a sweetness and charm . . . nonetheless the intensity with which he listened made playing to him a formidable experience.” Even Loriod fondly recalls her long marriage to him as passing “with never a cross word.”

Messiaen’s circle as a popular Paris Conservatory professor included students Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, Harrison Birtwhistle, Alexander Goehr, George Benjamin, Tristan Murail, Gérard Grisey among others who went on the push the avant-garde boundaries. Other



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musicians also came to study with him, such as Quincy Jones, the Hollywood jazz and cinema composer. Boulez, writing in *The Messiaen Companion*, credited him with “the great merit of having freed French music from that narrow and nervous ‘good taste’ inherited from illustrious forebears . . .”

A handful of his works remain in the standard repertoire but close listening reveals a broader talent and unique sound world, much of it inspired by birdsong. He left a legacy of 73 works for piano, orchestra, chamber groups, solo instruments, many enhanced by a gathering of exotic bells, gongs and cymbals and Balinese gamelans he collected from around the world.

I spent the summer listening to 16 CDs in one of his boxed sets and can now fully appreciate his extraordinary richness. In this research I discovered his “Colors of the Celestial City” that combines all of his principal musical motifs—Christian symbolism, plain-song, birdsong, rhythm and his color associations with musical chords.

Messiaen was distressed when skeptics refused to accept his mental colorations as basic to his compositions despite his precise descriptions of the vivid orange, greens and purples he saw in his mind as he struck certain chords. “I see colors whenever I hear music, and they see nothing, nothing at all. That’s terrible. And they don’t even believe me,” he said to one interviewer. “For Messiaen, we know that it was harmony . . . that produced the response.” And he is convinced there was nothing whimsical or improvised about Messiaen’s color responses: “They were absolutely fixed and consistent from hearing to hearing of a given passage.”

Full color schemes came into play as he composed for the organ, an instrument he exploited as a full orchestra. His “free recitals” on Sundays built large audiences at the Holy Trinity church in Paris. Natural acoustics bounced sound off the stone walls and high ceilings to the chilling delight of parishoners.

The concept of orchestral use of keyboard instruments extended to his piano writing as well in which he exploited its timbre to the full. His piano literature is voluminous, with “Catalogue of Birds” generally noted as this most important piece.

Of all the musical jewels Messiaen left us, it is his *Turangalila-Symphonie* that is most commonly associated with his name. Its 1949 premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the young Leonard Bernstein, brought Messiaen to wide international attention for the first time. It is not a symphony in any traditional sense but rather a mosaic of ten movements that unfold over about one hour and fifteen minutes. One critic characterized it as replete with “dancing rhythms, tantric sex and laughing gas.” The title comes from Sanskrit words that mean “love song and hymn of joy, time, movement, rhythm, life and death.”

His final composition, appropriately named *Revelations on the Beyond*, was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic and was finished just two months before his death. It premiered six months later at Lincoln Center with Zubin Mehta conducting.

Messiaen's theology, birdsong and color-association facility combined throughout this life to leave behind extensive works for organ, piano, expanded orchestra and choral and chamber groups. He fulfilled his weekly obligation as organist at Holy Trinity in Paris until his death at 83 in 1992.

Following his funeral, Yvonne Loriod ordered a special gravestone topped with the sculpture of a bird.



Nature and Music

by Don Latarski



About Don

Don Latarski began studying guitar in 1963 and never quit. He has released 15 albums/CDs of mostly his own compositions and was head of guitar studies at the University of Oregon for 33 years. His explorations on guitar led to authoring 21 different instruction books. In retirement he spends his time composing, recording (in the home studio), exploring intimate nature with his camera, walking, and riding motorcycles.

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I was lying in bed recently in the wee small hours of a dark fall predawn morning listening to the rain fall on the aluminum vents and shingles of my studio. Through my open window I also heard the plaintive cry of gulls and distinctive honk of Canada geese. All the while I'm wondering: "Is this music?" If so, then we live in nature's evolving opera. It begs the question: "Where do we draw the line between sound and music?"

I think most people experience bird "songs" as a form of music. There are exceptions, like the squawks of scrub jays and cawing of crows, but I suspect to some people this is also music. Mozart had a pet starling for about three years and was said to be inspired by the variety of sounds that the bird made. He reputedly incorporated a number of these "melodies" into compositions. We tend to prefer the more melodious sounds of mourning doves, song sparrows, wood thrush, common loon, marsh wren, and with the composer/violinist Hollis Taylor, the pied butcherbird to name a few. Her recording "Absolute Bird" is "a tour de force of composition and wildlife recording with each work based around the songs of the pied butcherbird as captured by (Hollis Taylor) in multiple locations over a fifteen year period." (<https://tinyurl.com/4zwbkfrs>) This astounding project really blurs the line between nature and music.

The other question that I keep coming back to is: "Why are musicians obsessed with imitating the sounds heard in nature?" What is it that stirs our souls so deeply that we look to the sound of crickets, frogs, ocean waves, rippling brooks, wind in the willows, and rustling leaves to inspire and raise our musical expression to a higher level? I have been deeply inspired by these natural sounds and created a CD—a pastiche of "music" by adding my own wind and water guitars to the mix. The CD is called "Wind Water Wing." <https://www.amazon.com/Water-Nature-Voices-Oregon-Latarski/dp/B08CT19NYK>

There are countless examples in the classical repertoire of composers imitating sounds or being inspired by sights and sounds in nature, from Chopin's "Raindrop" Prelude in Db; Op.28, No.15, Beethoven's "Pastorale" Symphony Number 6 in F major; Op.68, Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee," Claude Debussy's "La Mer," and Olivier Messiaen's "Oiseaux Exotiques." Other composers (Antonín Dvorák, Bedrich Smetana, Ludwig van Beethoven, Franz Schubert, Richard Strauss, Edvard Hagerup Grieg, Camille Saint-Saëns, Felix Mendelssohn, Johann Strauss, Jean Sibelius, and Ottorino Respighi) have also felt the call of inspiration from Mother Nature.

It's impossible for me to know why these famous composers labored long and hard to try to translate their nature-inspired feelings into sound, but I believe it's natural to assume they felt the power, majesty, and awe of Mother Nature. They were so moved by their experiences that they had to compose using the only means at their disposal: melody, harmony, and rhythm.

All composers have to be inspired to write music and what better motivator than the perfection we so often witness in nature, from the simplest flower, the overwhelming grandeur of the Grand Canyon or gazing out to sea from the vantage point of a

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lighthouse. Some would argue that we are witnessing the hand of God at work while for others it is simply the physical manifestation of Mother Nature, Gaia, Terra Mater, Pachamama, or the Hopi Kokyangwuti. Whatever your perspective there is no disputing the deep sense of awe and wonder that we feel in the presence of the miraculous. I've become acutely aware of this since taking up macro photography—viewing life on a smaller scale. My view of the world has shifted to the miniature, not microscopic, but certainly more singular than say landscape photography.

What has surprised me the most of this relatively new pursuit is how it reflects my notion of composition and melody. When I look at some of the images I've captured I'm immediately struck by how they distill the lines, curves, textures, and shapes of melody. I realized that what I try to achieve through my music is the same thing being reflected back through my camera's lens. The photos are a reflection of the feelings I experience through music.

But nature isn't just sound. Patterns, textures, smells, and colors abound. Take for example the Fibonacci Sequence which is simply a series of numbers. 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233, 377, 610. The next number in the sequence is found by adding the two numbers before it. This pattern is often referred to as "The Golden Ratio" or "The Divine Proportion." The Fibonacci Sequence is found throughout Western harmony and scales. It has been called "nature's code" as well. The golden ratio held such a fascination for Greek culture that architects and sculptors made it their canon of perfection, beauty and



harmony. Later, in the Renaissance, the Italian mathematician Leonardo Pisano (called Fibonacci) created the famous sequence of numbers related to it that bears his name. For

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more detail on this natural phenomenon and how it has been used in composition and in instrument building, see <https://tinyurl.com/4emuw7ed>.

Nature has been proven to have beneficial effects on people in a number of different ways. One way is simply by breathing in the air in the forest—*forest bathing*. The term was coined in Japan in the 1980s as a physiological and psychological exercise called *shinrin-yoku*. In 1982, Japan made *shinrin-yoku*, or “forest bathing,” a part of its national health program. It has been documented to lower blood pressure, blood glucose levels, reduce nervous system arousal, enhance immune system function, increase



self-esteem, reduce anxiety, and improve mood. Psychiatric research has determined that being in nature reduced feelings of isolation, promoted calm, and lifted mood among *patients*. But forest bathing isn’t hiking; it is more like a slow meander through the woods with the focus being on staying in the moment and paying attention to the detail of the surroundings. Ever wonder why you feel so great after a ramble through the woods?

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Forest bathing produces a heightened sense of well-being—a natural high. People who spend at least 120 minutes per week can achieve these results. I've noticed how much more energy I have at the end of a nature perambulation than I do at the beginning.



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I've experimented with a couple of different ways to use nature forces to produce music on guitar. Two such experiments involve wind and water. I've built two versions of what I call "water guitar." Water flows over the strings causing them to vibrate. With the wind guitars, wind flows over the strings. The water guitar sounds are somewhat mellow, while the wind powered instruments tend to be higher in overtone content and therefore much brighter.



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Here are some links to hear these two instruments.

The water guitar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pY-jMZhxbmc>

The wind guitar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKJQ0iz7drM&t=54s>

So how does a composer turn “nature” into music? Is it even possible? The short answer I believe is NO. Music isn’t nature, but through music we can filter, share, and process our feelings and emotions that we experience by being in nature. You can be deeply moved by nature and try to capture those feelings by using instruments that mimic different sounds in nature, such as with a flute or piccolo (the most birdlike of all instruments), or by creating textures, melodies, patterns, and timbres that make us feel a deep sense of well-being, similar to those we might associate after a day in the woods or on the lake. (One of my favorite examples is Aaron Copland’s “Simple Gifts” from *Appalachian Spring*.) The drumming of a woodpecker on a tree, the chorus produced by tree frogs, the percussive slap of a beaver’s tail to warn others of impending danger, and the buzz of bumble bee wings are all music if you accept it as so. It is reasonable to assume that our ancestors imitated the sounds they heard in nature through vocalizations in imitation of birds and other animals and also by striking things. It’s also likely that they perceived nature in a much deeper musical way than we ever can since the natural world, with all of its dangers and uncertainty, was their only environment. We, on the other hand, are accidental observers at best. I think it’s a fair assumption that we don’t hear the world like our ancestors did. Along the way we’ve lost our appreciation for the sounds of the natural world, which for our ancestors was music and so much more.

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Here's a simple test. At what point in this soundscape do you actually realize that "music" is happening. There are no right or wrong answers, but this little exercise will help clarify what you perceive as music versus sound. Does music require the manipulation of sound by a human or can it come from nature itself?

I feel the power of nature in melody and in macro photography. They aren't so different. Each is a distillation of possibilities. There is a sublime quality about a simple image that seems poetic and melodic to my eye. This type of photography is very revealing of nature's perfection and infinite variety, from a leaf, seed, or flower. A friend recently



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likened this type of photography to haiku—a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, in three lines of five, seven, and five, traditionally evoking images of the natural world.

By broadening your definition of “music” perhaps you can find more inspiration and joy in a walk in the woods, or maybe even in your own backyard. The “high” we experience from nature has inspired countless poems, essays, paintings, architecture, sculpture, and musical compositions. As technology encroaches more and more into our personal worlds, the nature experience becomes even more important.

All photos by Don Latarski



Into the Woods: Jenny Gilbert on the Romantic Movement in Ballet

by Jenny Gilbert



About Jenny

Jenny Gilbert is chief dance critic on the UK's digital reviews platform The Arts Desk and was dance critic of the leading broadsheet newspaper *The Independent on Sunday* for 19 years. She also co-directs the international piano summer school in southwest France, Music at Chateau d'Aix. She lives, writes, and thinks about dance in East Sussex, England.

Outside the canon of Western art-dance it's not hard to find examples of the human form imitating elements of the natural world. Think of the cactus-spike hands and twining tendril arms of flamenco, the lotus-blossom shapes of south-east Asian temple dances or any number of lion or dragon dances. Within the canon there is of course the towering example of *Swan Lake* with its battalions of tutu'd swan-maidens; there's *The Firebird*; and there's that faun, half man, half goat, who lazed his way through Debussy's afternoon. But this article will focus on an earlier period of ballet, the Romantic. (Confusingly, in ballet, "romantic" comes before "classical." The change happened at the mid-point of the 19th century when the locus of creative activity shifted from Europe to Russia.) Romantic ballet was a short-lived craze—it blazed for barely 30 years and very few complete examples have survived—but it left the world with two foundation-ballets, *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, and both offer fascinating glimpses of the prevailing view of the natural world. They also show the response of dance to the ideas that were sweeping through the other arts in the 1830s and 40s. Ballet was just perhaps a little less high-minded than music and painting, as we shall see.

Into the Woods: Jenny Gilbert on the Romantic Movement in Ballet

Throughout the previous century dance in the theatre had been viewed as pure entertainment, a decorative interlude in productions of opera. But in the 1820s the fever for all things gothic ushered in a completely new look and sensibility, and the freedom for ballet to tell its own stories. There were practical reasons for this. With Louis Philippe (aka “the citizen king”) newly installed on the French throne, the Paris Opéra became a private enterprise whose new productions had to appeal to the general public. And what the public apparently wanted was sensation and fantasy—in short, to be spooked.

The ballets mounted at the Paris Opera in the 1830s addressed this and other pre-occupations of the new ticket-buying public—mainly businessmen and bankers (who were quick to discover, in an age when women’s clothing covered the body down to the ankle, that going to the ballet offered the chance to look freely at shapely legs). Their more serious concerns included, in the wake of the 1830 revolution, an ongoing fear of political instability, fear of the advances in science that were disturbing old certainties, fear of encroaching urbanisation and a fierce nostalgia for a disappearing natural world. Escapist gothic melodrama, set deep in the forests of pre-industrial Europe, fitted the bill. The new fairy heroines—sylphs, ghosts and Wilis—were heartless, willful creatures of the spirit world who lived outside the mores of human society. They skimmed the stage on the tips of their toes, giving the appearance of both floating and flying. The new ballet heroes, maddened by their fragile beauty and suggestion of sexual independence, pursued them in a kind of hopeless frenzy.

The technological change that pushed Romantic ballet into being was in footwear. By stuffing the toes of her dancing slippers with cotton wadding and darning the outer surface for grip, the new-style ballerina could balance directly on the ends of her toes giving the impression of hovering several inches above the ground. The phenomenon prompted wildly colourful prose from critics and fans. “To describe Marie Taglioni (the original star of *La Sylphide*) one would have to tip a hummingbird quill into the colours of the rainbow and inscribe it on the gauze wings of a butterfly,” gushed one French writer. Birds, feathers and moonbeams featured in other accounts. Painters and illustrators were just as prone to the fanciful, showing ballerinas perched weightlessly on flower stalks or twigs, tipped forward in impossible off-balance positions supported by absurdly tiny feet.



Into the Woods: Jenny Gilbert on the Romantic Movement in Ballet

Another catalyst for Romantic ballet was the arrival of the gas lamp. At the Paris Opéra in 1822 new gas-powered stage lighting was installed with reflectors that diffused its greenish light, creating mysterious shadows and suggesting moonlight filtered through trees. These lamps also glamorized the effects of existing stage devices such as trap doors and flying wires, smoke machines and waterfalls. It's still possible today to find historically-based productions of both these old ballets that use flying wires to startling effect. Even audiences inured to CGI in the cinema have been known to emit a communal gasp at the fleeting appearance of one of the Wilis—the undead vengeful brides who roam the forest in Act II of *Giselle*—high against the back wall of the stage, swooping from branch to branch.

Denying the solidity of the flesh was not achieved by the toe-shoe alone. The Romantic dancer also worked hard at developing a softly curving line, flowing from one pose to another like drifting thistledown. And thistledown is more than a casual simile in this context. The point about dance and its shape-throwing is that it's *all* simile and suggestion. There are no words to dictate what the spectator should be thinking at any particular moment and, contrary to popular belief, there is no set meaning to any particular step or gesture, aside from one or two obvious signals in mime. To a large extent whatever the movement suggests to the viewer is legitimate. Which isn't to say that Romantic ballet with its white-clad sylphs didn't give audiences some outsize clues. The standard tutu—longer and gauzier than the short, stiff version that came later with the classical style—was typically fitted on the back with a pair of wire-framed wings, compounding the night-moth analogy.



Mayara Magri as Myrtha in *Giselle*, The Royal Ballet ©2021 ROH. Photograph by Alice Pennefather.

Into the Woods: Jenny Gilbert on the Romantic Movement in Ballet

In the tragic dénouement of *La Sylphide*, the foolish would-be-bridegroom James, desperate to possess the flighty creature who has lured him into the woods on the eve of his wedding to sensible Effie, is tricked into throwing a magic shawl over the sylph's shoulders, believing it will bind her to him. Instead, her wings drop off and she dies. It has to be said, in the productions I've seen, the clunk as each wing hits the floor doesn't help the entomological allusion.



Peasant girl Giselle makes the reverse journey from human to winged wraith. Dead by the end of the first act, she reappears in Act II rising from her woodland grave, arms demurely crossed over her heart. From then on she is assumed to have joined the ranks of the Wilis, the vengeful souls of betrothed girls deceived by their lovers. These pallid winged creatures, still wearing their bridal veils, make it their business to hunt down any man careless enough to be walking in the forest at night, forcing him to dance till he drops dead of exhaustion. But the shade of Giselle does not share her sisters' lust for revenge. She protects her former lover Albrecht from their wrath with her increasingly tender and exquisite dancing. As this sequence progresses there is a sense of

stretched time, created both by the choreography and by Adolph Adam's music, which slows and narrows to a sliver of flute and pianissimo strings. In a good production, with the best dancers, you hold your breath for fear of disturbing an extraordinary moment, the aural and visual equivalent of a vanishing wisp of mist.

Albrecht, ultimately, is saved by the dawning of a new day. Like other creatures of the night, the Wilis cannot tolerate sunlight and are forced to withdraw, letting him live. When he comes to his senses, it is only the evidence of the white lilies strewn by Giselle at his feet during their dances together that persuade him that it was no dream. Flowers feature throughout this ballet, with a specificity that would not have been lost on contemporary audiences. Lilies were for purity, rosemary for remembrance, myrtle for fidelity and the asphodel for its association with death. The original libretto of *Giselle*, written by the critic, novelist and all-round Parisian mover and shaker Theophile Gautier (an acquaintance of Franz Liszt as it happens), was also very specific about the trees that were to dress the set. Silver birch, presumably for its ghostly aspect in low light, aspen for its quaking leaves, and weeping willow for, well, obviously, weeping.

Into the Woods: Jenny Gilbert on the Romantic Movement in Ballet



Reece Clark as Albrecht, Natalia Osipova as Giselle, and Mayara Magri as Myrthe in *Giselle*. The Royal Ballet ©2021 ROH Photo by Alice Pennefather.

Some readers may be wondering at this point why this article has made so little mention of the orchestral scores. The short answer is that the music composed for these ballets was not expected to be great. It is lovely in parts, but those parts are not through-composed. The scores written for *La Sylphide* by the Norwegian-born Herman Løvenskiold (if you've not heard of him you're not alone), and for *Giselle* by the Frenchman Adolphe Adam (prolific, but not much better known) were typical in providing a pleasant backdrop, programmatic in so much as it pushed the story along and supplied special effects where needed (horns for a hunting scene, tremolando strings for moments of jeopardy) but basically a necklace of pretty tunes, loosely strung. The general opinion, unchallenged for most of the 19th century, was that it was not the place of ballet music to draw attention to itself, nor to aim high. The first ballet score to do this was Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. He was pilloried for it, and the first production (in Moscow in 1877) was a flop. Most of the critics declared the music to be far too complicated for ballet, plus "too noisy, too Wagnerian and too symphonic." It was not until a newly choreographed version of Act II was mounted for a memorial concert in 1894 for the recently deceased Tchaikovsky that the result was unanimously hailed as "marvellous."

Streaming of the ballets:

Note to those who would like to explore these ballets further. Full productions and extracts of both *La Sylphide* and *Giselle* can be found on YouTube. The author particularly recommends the *Sylphide* extract danced by Tamara Rojo and Steven McRae, the *Giselle* extract Myrtha and the Wilis with Monica Mason, and Alessandra Ferri with Mikhail Baryshnikov in American Ballet Theater's production of *Giselle*.

Royal Ballet Giselle

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8h5cuc>

English National Ballet La Sylphide

<https://ondemand.ballet.org.uk/production/la-sylphide/>



Listen to Nature

by Kate Harrison



About Kate

Kate Harrison is a lawyer in private practice who lives in central London, a partner in the firm of Harrison and Grant. She lectures at two universities and advocates for the environment and human rights, providing services for campaign groups and charities. Kate has been described as a person with “incredible energy, a very powerful intellect and legal mind.” As a singer in the London Symphony Chorus, she travels and performs in the UK and Europe. As a pianist, Kate performs in England and in France with other like-minded artists.

What has classical music to do with nature, with preserving nature? How have composers related to nature in the past? What are contemporary composers exploring in terms of changes to the natural world? I am a lawyer, singer, and pianist, living and working in central London, about as far away from nature as is possible. However, my legal work is mainly for campaign groups working to preserve and protect the natural environment. Whilst the city may be far away from nature, it is never far from excellent music, including choral music of all sorts. Britain has a tradition of amateur singing, on which its religious and secular music depends, and has long had choral societies up and down the country. From the foundation of Yorkshire’s Halifax Choral society in 1817, choruses were often formed as symphonic choruses to collaborate with major orchestras. The Halle choir in Manchester was founded in 1858, the same time as the Halle orchestra. Other major orchestras have their own amateur singers: the BBC Symphony Chorus (1928), the London Philharmonic Chorus (1947) and the City of Birmingham Chorus (1921), to name

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a few. I am lucky enough to be in the London Symphony Chorus, which regularly takes part in concerts here and abroad, performing with the incomparable London Symphony Orchestra. (Nature, through the rampant coronavirus, has interrupted those activities but, vaccinated and tested, we are now back on course.) In this way amateurs can be part of concerts directed by the world's leading conductors, an extraordinary privilege which gives one significant insights into the world of classical music. In the last few years, after decades of neglect, I have taken up the piano again. Encouraged by the inspirational Paul Roberts, I have discovered a thriving community of pianists who meet, play and broaden their knowledge of repertoire.

Classical music is a high art, the apogee of "culture," generally performed indoors in concert halls, opera houses, theatres and places of religion. Its practice requires hours, months and years of study and application. Elaborate human constructs which organise sounds into systems of pitch, rhythm, timbres and form are dependent on sophisticated instruments, themselves crafted over centuries of design and labour. Such high art stands in stark contrast to the idea of the "natural world." Singing, rhythm and dancing may come naturally, and are common to all human cultures, but the systematic refinement which turns any natural propensity for rhythm and song into a piano concerto, an oratorio or the Ode to Joy (in which the singing is unnaturally challenging) is an extremely complex, learnt life's work.

However, the prominence of nature as an inspiration for music compositions is evidenced by a brief glance at the London Symphony Chorus programmes of the last five years. The list includes Haydn's *The Seasons* (conducted by Sir Simon Rattle for the Chorus's 50th anniversary year), John Luther Adams in the *Name of the Earth* (premiered in New York, with the European premiere at the 2018 Proms with a mass chorus of 600!), Britten's *Spring Symphony*, Holst's *The Planets*, and Debussy's *Three Nocturnes*, which include "Nuages" and "Sirenes." The latter includes a final female chorus which evokes the sea and its countless rhythms.

Even though the titles may be less revealing, other compositions focus on nature and our relationship with it. Bartok's *Cantata Profana* relates a folk tale about a father and his nine sons who, having devoted their time only to hunting, are magically turned into stags. The music depicts the cruelty of nature through a fierce argument between the chorus and the brass section, with an eventual acceptance of nature and fate. The sons are never to shed their cloven hooves, antlers and lives of pure nature in the forest. Different modal scales mark a path from the darkness of strife with the environment to light and acceptance/harmony.

Folk tales inspired Peter Maxwell Davies last work, *The Hogboon*, an opera for children. The premiere required the additional adult forces of LSO and LSC in its 2016 premiere.¹ *The Hogboon* is based on Norse myths and tells of a village terrorised by the fearsome Nuckl'avee, a sea monster (depicted by a bedraggled group of very small children)

¹ Sadly, the composer died a few weeks before the performance.

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who threatens to eat people. The much maligned seventh son of a seventh son discovers the power to summon the Hogboon, a natural spirit of the earth, who contrives to banish the Nuckl'avee if the villagers will "protect me and all of Nature."

How music conveys the idea of nature and its elements is fascinating. I can recognise bird song and shaking lambs' tails in Haydn, undulating waves in Debussy, thunderstorms in Bartok, and a vast empty terrain in John Luther Adams. Whether this is because of a real resemblance to the natural world or a trained response crafted through the traditions of classical music, I do not know. I am not even sure the call of a cuckoo bears faithful resemblance to the chorus in Thomas Arne's "When Daisies Pied," although I believe I can identify the similarities of pitch and rhythm. Recently a marine biologist complained that films showing scenes from nature, in this case some coral reefs, typically feature serene minimalist music of the sort used to induce meditation in a health spa. The truth is that the oceans are very noisy! According to the Natural History Museum coral reefs are "one of the noisiest places in the ocean. Recorded using underwater microphones, this cacophony can sound to our ears remarkably like frying bacon." One wonders whether this revelation about the noises made by sea creatures as they target their prey could have made any difference to "La Mer." If so, how would a noise like frying bacon have been transcribed and would we ever have associated the result with the sea?

Music as an expression of our relationship with and attitude toward nature changes over time. *The Seasons*, referenced earlier, is a monumental work scored for soprano, tenor and bass soloists, chorus and a large orchestra with four horns and three trombones. The singers deliver texts which express either views of country-folk leading an idealised version of country life, or comments on it. The libretto highlights aspects of each season. It opens with a scene of melting snow and departing storms; Spring presents rebirth and farming after winter. Summer depicts sunrise (soloists and orchestra), baking heat (wilt-ing downward scales in the woodwind), a crashing storm which clears and leads to calm, with bells tolling in the evening, then rest. There are even frogs who croak happily once the storm has passed, a step too far for Haydn who reportedly thought this requirement of the text was "French trash." Autumn is hunting, thanksgiving, betrothal, and drinking, bucolic bliss rounded off with a fugal drinking song. Winter is bleak, with a lost wanderer in the snow finding shelter in the village, where women spin and sing. As the oratorio grows to a close, we are warned that our spring and summer will inevitably become autumn and winter. The piece is a metaphor for earthly existence, the end of which can be overcome with God's help.

Birds, brooks, and thunderstorms appear in Beethoven's Symphony No. 6, the "Pastoral" symphony. Beethoven's subtitle for the piece is "Pastoral Symphony or Recollection of Country Life, an expression of feeling rather than a description". His own subtitle might imply no "descriptions" as such, nevertheless Beethoven's notes leave no doubt that he intended to invoke imitations of actual birds. He names three specific birds on the

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score, including the nightingale (solo flute), the quail (solo oboe), and the cuckoo (two clarinets). Beethoven represents a man who is at one with nature, finding it a source of comfort, bounty and awesome power. Beethoven's words expressed his desire to have the listener *feel* nature—rather than to see a series of images. The symphony reveals the “echo which man desires to hear.” This yearning for and appreciation of countryside became greater as contemporary Europe moved from country to town in the early days of the industrial and political revolutions.

It was Beethoven who inspired the “Pastoral Project,” announced in 2017 at the UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties, to link the composer's 250th anniversary with what should have been the year of the UN's COP 26 to discuss action on climate change.² The Beethoven Anniversary Society in collaboration with the UN Climate Secretariat UN-FCCC launched its first project aimed at “preserving the nature so beloved of Beethoven” and recalling his words:

*How happy I am to be able to walk among the shrubs, the trees, the woods,
the grass, and the rocks—no one can love the countryside more than I do—
for the woods, the trees, and the rocks give a man the inspiration he needs.*

On Environment Day in 2020 the Secretary General's message to the world recalled this quotation and said:

*In his Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven used music
to emphasize humanity's close relationship with nature.
Today, nature is sending us a clear message.
We are harming the natural world—to our own detriment.
Habitat degradation and biodiversity loss are accelerating.
Climate disruption is getting worse.
Fires, floods, droughts and superstorms are more frequent and damaging.
Oceans are heating and acidifying, destroying coral ecosystems.
And now, a new coronavirus is raging, undermining health and livelihoods.
To care for humanity, we MUST care for nature.
We need our entire global community to commit to a green,
resilient and climate-friendly future.
Let's listen again to Beethoven and heed the message of his music.*

Some contemporary composers are doing more than listening. There is a growing list of composers in all music genres grappling with ecological and existential themes. John Luther Adams work *In the Name of the Earth*, is described by the composer this way:

² See e.g., <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/classical-orchestras-responding-climate-crisis-music/>

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In the Name of the Earth is a celebration of this beautiful planet earth—the only home we will ever know—where the only real borders are watersheds and coastlines.

The work is scored for massed voices, performing out of doors.³ The texts of *In the Name of the Earth* are litanies of names—the names of mountain peaks and ranges, rivers and glaciers, forests and plains and deserts—sung in languages from all over the earth.

This is a perilous moment in the history of our species. Lost and wandering on the edge of our own extinction, we need new maps to help us find our way. In this spirit, *In the Name of the Earth* proposes a kind of musical mapmaking and path finding.

As the geographer Denis Wood observes, maps are not objective representations. They are propositions. Historically, maps evolved in conjunction with the rise of the nation state. Maps are tools that we humans use to diminish and control the land and its inhabitants. Throughout history, people have used maps to prosecute wars against one another and against the earth. But maps can also help us understand more deeply the places we inhabit. And if we better understand where we are, we may better understand who we are, and how best to live.

By singing some of the beautifully resonant names that we give to mountains, deserts, rivers and oceans, I hope to draw music not only from my own imagination, but also more directly from the world.

The title is a conscious reference to Christian liturgy. But in place of the father, the son and the holy ghost, I want to invoke the roots of my own faith, in the earth, the waters, and the holy wind.”

This is music inspired by a new view of nature, one which some argue dates from the first days of space travel and the ability to see the Earth from the outside. This perspective reveals the earth and its biodiversity NOT as powerful and immutable, but as vulnerable and endangered by human activity. The resources we have plundered and used since Beethoven’s time, in particularly fossil fuels, forests and factory farming of animals, have affected our atmosphere to such a degree that the climate and humanity are in peril. If we do not do something very soon the earth as we know it will cease to exist.

³ But in London we were indoors in the Albert Hall.

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Music informed by this knowledge has a new mission: Not just to describe nature and our feelings towards it but to inspire action and change from the people who listen to it. We must preserve it for future generations. The ultimate salvation for our earth and this life is up to us. In this way the music of John Luther-Adams carries the message of Peter Maxwell Davies' *Hogboon*—look after nature and the spirit of nature and it will look after you.



The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

by Paul Roberts



About Paul

Pianist, writer, lecturer, inspiring teacher—and a leading authority on the music of Debussy and Ravel—Paul Roberts has earned the admiration of audiences, critics and fellow professionals worldwide. In Europe Roberts is the artistic director of the international summer school for pianists Music at Chateau d'Aix in southern France. In London he teaches at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama, where he has been awarded an Honorary Fellowship (FGS), and where he is currently researching his next book, *Reading Liszt: Words Becoming Music*. His acclaimed *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Amadeus, 2012) followed his first two books: a biography *Debussy* (Phaidon, 2008) and *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Amadeus, 1996). *Images* has become a seminal text on the subject. 'It is a complete picture of Debussy's poetic world,' Richard Goode has written, 'and is one of the few indispensable books on music that I know.' In addition, Goode writes: "Paul Roberts' excellence as a writer on music is matched by his superb talents as a pianist. I know of no other figure in the musical world who combines so impressively the roles of scholar and performer." "Paul Roberts is an exceptional musician, a fine and deeply sensitive pianist, teacher and an author of the greatest distinction. His books on Debussy and Ravel are quite simply the most outstanding and perceptive I have read." (Bryce Morrison)

The Aura of Byron: *Années de pèlerinage—Suisse*

An excerpt from
Franz Liszt: Revealing the Poetry Behind the Music
by Paul Roberts,
To be published by Rowman & Littlefield in May 2022

The first book of Liszt's great collection of piano pieces *Années de pèlerinage-Suisse* (Years of Pilgrimage-Switzerland) contains several quotations from Lord Byron's narrative poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, one of the best sellers of the generation immediately preceding Liszt's and hugely popular in France during his formative years in Paris in the 1830s. All the quotations are descriptions of landscape, specifically of the sublime pastoral scenes of the Swiss Alps. Liszt conceived his *Années Suisse*—during his travels through Switzerland with his lover Marie d'Agoult in the mid 1830s. (They were traveling to Geneva for her to give birth, discretely, to their first child, Blandine.) Published as *Album d'un voyageur* (Album of a Traveller), in 1842, the pieces were revised and published in 1855 as the *Années de pèlerinage—Suisse* that we now know.

The first book of the *Années Suisse* opens with 'Chapelle de Guillaume Tell', a tribute to the Swiss folk hero William Tell. In the three pieces that follow, the cinematic sweep of history gives way to intimate lithographs and pastoral simplicity.

'Au lac de Wallenstadt' (On Lake Wallenstadt)

This lovely composition, as small as it is, provides a perfect illustration of the kind of associations that can be made in the preparation and reception of a musical work. By itself it is a delightful exercise in Schubertian tone painting, but in the context of the whole collection it can be seen to face in many directions, connecting to the meaning of the whole *Années Suisse* and expanding into a wider understanding of Byron's poetry. 'Au lac de Wallenstadt' provides a window onto Liszt's reactions to Byron; we begin to get a sense of how he read the whole of the third book of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

*Clear, placid Leman! thy contrasted lake,
With the wild world I dwelt in, is a thing
Which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake
Earth's troubled waters for a purer spring.* (Byron)

Liszt misses out the the first three words for the sole reason that he has transferred Byron's scene from Lake Lemman (Lake Geneva) to Lake Wallenstadt (also known as the Walensee), where he and Marie d'Agoult stayed for several days in June 1835 on their way to Geneva. Marie recalled:

*The shores of Lake Wallenstadt detained us for some time. Franz wrote for me there a melancholy harmony, imitative of the sigh of the waves and the cadence of oars, which I have never been able to hear without weeping.*¹

¹ Marie d'Agoult, quoted in Adrian Williams, *Portrait of Liszt By Himself and His Contemporaries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 68.

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

There is little doubt that the piece was 'Au lac de Wallenstadt', though Marie's memory, long after the event, has replaced its masterful innocence with tears and melancholy.



Lord Byron

A central motif in Byron's poetry is the opposition of light and dark, symbolizing the poet's struggle with positive and negative impulses, with creative forces and their opposite. The lines Liszt quotes present the contrast as one between the worldly—the "wild world"—and the spiritual, "the purer spring" that feeds mountain lakes (and the poet's well-being). At this point in the narrative the forces of optimism, represented by the simple splendors of the natural world, win through; the human soul is purified. So it is fitting that for Liszt the heroic life of political action represented by 'Chapel de Guillaume Tell' gives way to pastoral simplicity: Liszt's own musical narrative "forsakes earth's troubled waters for a purer spring."

Repeatedly in *Childe Harold* there are images and lines apposite to Liszt's music, stanzas that he must have read but which he did not quote, which resonate with what we know of him. It is inescapable that Liszt recognized a deep kinship with Byron that had a direct bearing on the music he conceived. It cannot have escaped him, reading *Childe Harold*, that he was experiencing on the Walensee what Byron experienced on Lake Lemán. The music is born from the actual experience of the young Franz Liszt, subsumed into his imaginative experience via the literature he was reading.

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse



Illustration to Liszt's "Pastorale" in an early edition of *Années de pèlerinage—Suisse*.

'Pastorale'

In the original *Album d'un Voyageur* 'Wallenstadt' was followed by 'Au bord d'une source'—Liszt even considered arranging the two pieces as a single unit, two titles but with the same number. In the revised collection the delightful 'Pastorale' now inserted in between hardly disturbs this structure. The three pieces form a perfectly integrated experience in performance, three different views of the same Alpine scene. The lack of epigraph for 'Pastorale' befits a piece that imitates the music of folk dancing and folk instruments—its 'meaning,' we might say, is already contained in the specific allusions of its style and its title.

'Au bord d'une source'

Liszt changes his literary allusion—the quotation here is from a poem by Schiller, *Der Fluchtling* (The Fugitive):

*In säuselnder Kühle
Beginnen die Spiele
Der jungen Natur*

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

‘The games of young nature begin in murmuring coolness’—three short lines that imagine the birth of the natural world as the source of a mountain stream. The word *säuselnder* captures a meaning, and a sound, that is a combination of rustling, whispering, and murmuring—in translation we take our pick. The epigraph gives an extra dimension to the “purer spring” of ‘Au lac de Wallenstadt.’ Liszt, like his revered Schubert, was a master at finding keyboard figurations to evoke external sounds and moods. But as all pianists will know who have played this intricately challenging piece (in style a concert etude), it is not only the web of figurations, and the resulting dissonances, that produce the illusion, but the cross rhythms—the reiterative dancing and hopping, the ‘games.’

‘Orage’

Liszt’s ‘Storm’ is the perfect foil for the pieces that have preceded it. It was a late addition, not in the original *Album*, and here creates an uncompromising change of direction in the narrative dynamic:

*But where of ye, oh tempests! is the goal?
Are ye like those within the human breast?
Or do ye find, at length, like eagles, some high nest?* (Byron)

The opening bars shatter the peace of the pastorale terrain, indeed like lightning. This is furious storm music *par excellence* and it reminds us that the evocation of storms was one of the staple components of Liszt’s public improvisations. The virtuosity of the performer is foregrounded. Where in ‘Au bord d’une source’ the intricacy of the pianism is mostly concealed behind the delights of the figurations—as in a Chopin etude—in ‘Orage’ piano technique becomes integral to the imaginative effect. This is music theatre, it requires performance. Storms are marvels of nature; Liszt’s storms were marvels of a new kind of pianism. ‘Orage’ is an act, just as Byron’s poetry is an act, a virtuosic display that leaves us, as witnesses, breathless at the audacity. But it is this very audacity that carries the meaning—we are overwhelmed not only by the act itself but by what it is required to do, by what only virtuosity can do.

Byron spends several stanzas in Canto III describing the storms he witnessed in the Alps. He employs the familiar literary device that finds symbols for human emotion in natural phenomena. Byron exploits it with great skill, drawing attention to himself—his inner torments and ecstasies—at the same time as painting a word picture of considerable imaginative power.

*Now, where the swift Rhone cleaves his way between
Heights which appear as lovers who have parted
In hate, whose mining depths so intervene,
That they can meet no more, though broken hearted.* (Byron)

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

The reader is not only among the peaks with him, but witness to his confessions. It was by such immediacy, and audacity, that Byron became the best seller of his age. In his notes to Canto III he gives the precise date and time (midnight) of the storms, of which he has “seen several more terrible, but none more beautiful.” In stanza 93 he asks that he should be “a sharer in thy fierce and far delight/a portion of the tempest”, so picking up a central motif of the whole canto. The stanza develops a similar image of birth to the Schiller quotation at the head of ‘Au bord d’une source.’ In ‘Orage’ however it is the birth of an earthquake, rather than mankind. Both images suggest the gods of Greek mythology:

*How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,
And the big rain comes dancing to the earth!
And now again 'tis black,—and now, the glee
Of the loud hills shakes with its mountain-mirth,
As if they did rejoice o'er a young earthquakes birth.* (Byron)

Byron’s ‘Big rain’ and ‘loud hills’ might be seen as the same order of audacity as Liszt’s bagpipes in ‘Pastorale’ and alpine horns in ‘Guillaume Tell’—both composer and poet effortlessly introduce into their highly sophisticated art down-to-earth elements that avoid any sense of bathos.

Liszt’s change of direction at this point in his musical narrative, his inclusion of a new composition, and a new quotation, prepares the way for ‘Vallée d’Obermann.’ We can see in operation here a sign of the careful planning by which the whole volume emerged from the fragments of *Album d’un voyageur*, revised, pruned, reassembled. The narrative darkens even further in what follows.



Franz Liszt in 1858, age 57.

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

'Vallée d'Obermann'

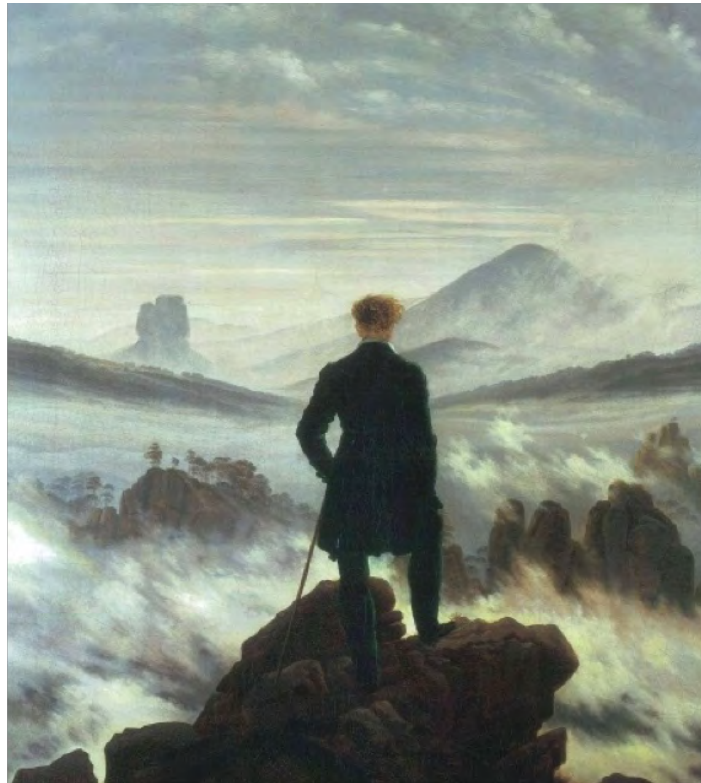
Originally the piece was dedicated to Etienne de Sénancour, author of the novel *Obermann* that was the first source of Liszt's literary inspiration. (*Obermann* was examined in detail in the previous chapter.) For the 1855 publication 'Vallée d'Obermann' was considerably revised—the dedication was dropped and a whole stanza from Byron added. The quotation follows on directly from the lines Liszt placed at the head of 'Orage,' and it is where we reach the climax and purpose of Byron's storm image. This new quotation also exemplifies the poet's style at its finest. In the quotation before 'Orage' he had asked a rhetorical question of the cosmos: What is the purpose of storms, what do they teach us apart from awe and magnificence? He watches, restless, troubled, hearing the 'departing voices' of the thunder. "But where of ye, oh tempests! is the goal?" Then comes the stanza in which he dramatizes in one long passionate sentence, replete with the breath of spontaneous utterance, the culmination of his thought, the realization that in the face of a storm his expressive powers, by comparison, are impotent:

*Could I embody and unbosom now
That which is most within me,—could I wreak
My thoughts upon expression, and thus throw
Soul, heart, mind, passions, feelings, strong or weak,
All that I would have sought, and all I seek,
Bear, know, feel, and yet breathe—into one word,
And that word were Lightning, I would speak;
But as it is, I live and die unheard,
With a most voiceless thought, sheathing it as a sword.* (Byron)

It is of course a magnificent pose, for all its sincerity. He does indeed "wreak [his] thoughts upon expression," we do indeed feel the force of "that one word . . . Lightning." The poet laments that within himself there is the same potential as the forked lightning that illuminates and shatters the cliffs of the Rhone valley, even though he cannot match the same cosmic splendor. But notwithstanding his speechless humility (all the same, uttered in speech), he gains by comparison.

It is but a small step sideways to Liszt, who had the same passionate belief in the expressive power of art, and which in *Années Suisse* reached its apotheosis, its most dramatic expression, in 'Orage' and 'Vallée d'Obermann.' In these two pieces we can sense the presence of the Byronic hero, of man pitting himself against the elements, analogous as much to the paintings of Delacroix and Caspar David Friedrich as to Byron.

The Aura of Byron: *Années de pèlerinage*—Suisse



Caspar David Friedrich *Wanderer Above a Sea of Mist*.

'Eglogue'

*The morn is up again, the dewy morn,
With breath all incense, and with cheek all bloom,
Laughing the clouds away with playful scorn,
And living as if earth contained no tomb!* (Byron)

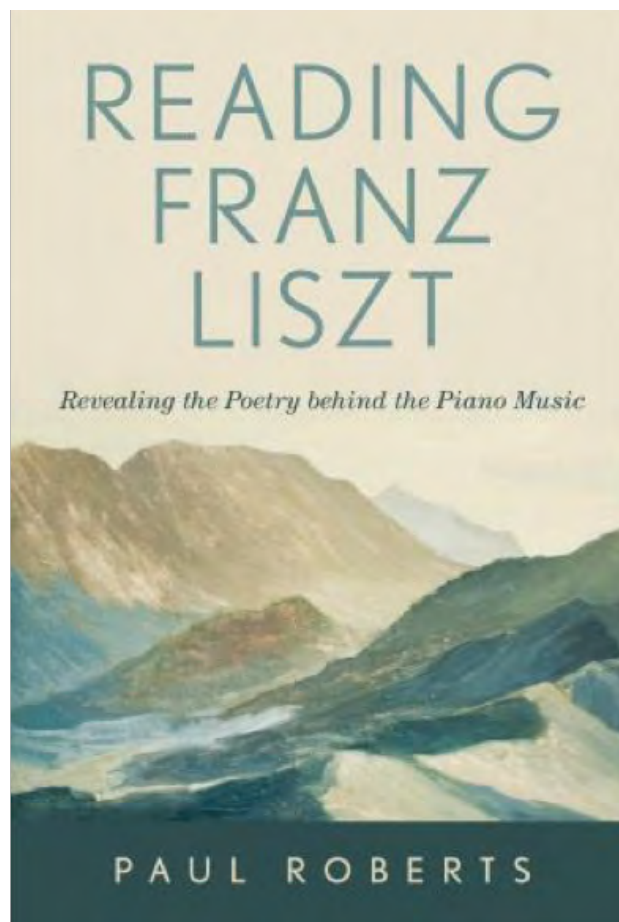
The match between the mood of the music and the words is perfect—innocence expressed by pentatonicism and skipping rhythms. This music never cloys, never falters in its mastery of the pastoral genre and its effortless expression of delight. One realizes that Liszt is not providing a simple illustration of poetic images so much as a musical critique of poetry. We come to understand Byron in his stylized pastoral pose through Liszt's music in pastoral mode; our experience of the poetry is deepened.

'Eglogue' was not in Liszt's original plan, although the piece was written in the mid 1830s. He now adds it to the *Années* to strengthen the narrative, to clear the air after 'Vallée d'Obermann,' just as Byron evokes the clear air of the morning after a storm, 'laughing the clouds away.' The piece provides a buffer between the extended drama of 'Vallée d'Obermann' and the heart-ache of the smaller 'Le mal du pays' which now follows. The ecstatic love song of 'Les cloches de Genève,' the denouement of *Années Suisse*, is in sight; but first there comes a meditation on the nature of Romantic expression, and a long prose poem by Etienne de Sénancour.

The Aura of Byron: Années de pèlerinage—Suisse

'Le mal du pays'

The quotation Liszt adds here from Sénancour's *Obermann* is a discourse on the nature of Romanticism in the context of humankind's relationship to Nature. Sénancour's essay 'De l'expression romantique et du ranz-des-vaches'—which follows Letter 38 in Volume 1 of *Obermann*—touches on the meaning of the melodies played on the alpine horn by Swiss herdsmen as an expression of their love and longing for home, for their corner of the world (of the same significance as the blues or flamenco). The quotation is often lost (or ignored) among the pages of the *Années Suisse* because it seems over-weighted, coming as it does before one of the shortest pieces. Yet Sénancour's essay, which Liszt quotes in full (some 1,000 words), is in fact a central element of the composer's ambition to create a union of words and piano music. The quoted text culminates in Sénancour's central artistic conviction about the hierarchy of the senses, with the ear as paramount. He even argues that Romanticism itself is an aural consciousness, that Nature demonstrates that the strongest impulses of the soul come through the sense of hearing: "The voice of a loved woman will be even more beautiful than her features; the sounds of sublime places will make a deeper and more lasting impression than their shapes."² This is the essence of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage-Suisse*. It seems to connect with what is to follow in 'Les cloches de Genève,' where we hear in the central aria "the voice of a loved woman," and at the opening and close "the sounds of sublime places"—the bells of Geneva.



² *Obermann*, volume 2.



Donna Henderson is a poet, graphic artist and psychotherapist living in Maupin, Oregon. In 2007, she co-founded Airlie Press, a shared-work collective press dedicated to publishing north-west poets. Her work has widely appeared in magazines, anthologies and recordings, and two of her collections ("Transparent Woman" and "The Eddy Fence") were named finalists for the Oregon Book Award in Poetry. Her new collection of poems ("Send Word") is forthcoming in 2022.

More information about Donna can be found at:
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The Poet Speaks

Much Raining

Rain like an audience listlessly clapping
Rain like handfuls of pea-gravel pitched against glass

Rain like the sizzle of ham in a skillet
Rain like a tub someone, filling, forgot about

Rain like mice rustling amid with recycling
Rain like the thrumming of grouse in tall grass

Rain like a radio tuned between stations
Rain like a slash-pile on fire—that crackling

Sometimes a respite while clouds catch their breath—
Meanwhile, drips between rain like a room of clocks ticking

Rain like a woman wrapping presents in tissue
Rain like a child tearing into them later

Rain like the snap of rice spilled on Formica
Rain like the rumble of tires up a driveway

Rain like rooms full of angry fists, pounding on tables
And just when you think the rain won't end,
it doesn't.