Gardez la Distance -composer’s note to players and listeners

The idea for this piece sprang from reading an in-depth study of the song development of a mature blackbird, that was carried out in 1957 by Joan Hall-Craggs (hereafter referred to as HC). Perhaps because the writer was a remarkable musician as well as a respected ornithologist, this extraordinary contribution to the study of bird vocalisation made me want to learn about composing from how blackbirds develop their songs, touching, however lightly, on how (black)birds listen, what they are listening for, and how this affects what they sing. HC writes of "developed forms" arising from "simple basic phrases", the way an extended call can be developed from these elements, and ornamented; a process similar to "practising"; and also deals in detail with the interactions between different birds of the same species, for example, imitation and antiphonal singing.

Using these observations enabled me to make (compose) a piece of music where both myself and the performers might learn as blackbirds do - or at least gain and greater appreciation of their songs.

The names of the three movements: Subsong, Plastic Song and Song Crystallisation, are those given by ornithologists to the distinct phases of the bird's learning. The piece is driven by the interaction of spontaneity, notation, and silence on the basis of avian performance.

Movement 1 Subsong  
“I*n the first week of song 26 basic phrases-the basic song-together with 24 variants of these phrases were recorded”*

Based on HC’s research, Movement 1 (Mt1) contains 26 songs. 22 (piano & clarinet) or 23 (flute) selected for their musical interest from among numerous blackbird songs which I then composed into three sequences, one for each instrument. Interspersed are the themes of an extended song sequence sung by a blackbird I call Strathmore\*. These eleven “Strathmore” themes are shared between each instrument (1-4/11 clarinet, 5-7/11 flute, and 8-11/11 for piano).

Like blackbird, each musician is a soloist, performing at the same time and independently of the other musicians but keeping an ear out for exactly what each other is doing (as is the nature of a music ensemble and song-birds).

The flow of the songs and silences in Mt1 needs to be rehearsed by the trio to embody moments when the ensemble come together as two or three players share the same song at the same point in their sequence. These special ensemble songs are indicated with one, two or three colour-coded frames: flute clarinet piano, indicating which instrument plays them. There are up to five “ensemble” songs for each player, and these ensemble moments can also be extended with blackbird ensemble tactics\*\* if the player has time to memorise them.

Movement 2 Plastic song

*“In all, 19 such phrases of a permanent character were noted; most of these occurred during the first three weeks of song,*

*but six occurred in April, one in May and one in June” (p.282).*

The songs from Mt1 represent what HC’s views as songs of permanent character occurring in the first three weeks of singing and which endured throughout the spring season. These are repeated in Movement 2 (Mt2) as a series of solos (2A\_flute 40 songs , 2B\_piano 40 songs, 2C\_clarinet 41 songs) and all 11 Strathmore themes are now played by each instrument as if they had been picked up by listening to each other in Mt1.

Notating Strathmore’s long song also revealed sub-themes - songbursts which are structurally less important as they have few if any variants or repetitions. These subthemes were newly added into Mt2 as developed forms of singing . The unravelling of the Strathmore themes and subthemes evolves around HC’s extraordinarily detailed studying of her blackbird.

In the hope of being something like a blackbird-composer, this is played out in my treatment of Strathnore’s rhapsody with its main themes (1-11/11 α ) interspersed as part of Mt1’s 26 songbursts (analogous to HC’s observations during the first 3 weeks of her blackbird’s song back in March 1957). These 11 themes endure in different and more repetitive presentations throughout the three solo sequences that make up Mt2 which is heard three times.

The flute’s presentation of Mt 2 comes first (Mt2A) when we hear six new song-bursts not previously played in Mt1. These are called subthemes and labelled flute\_i-vi/6B and represent HC’s observations of the blackbird’s April development phase. Then comes the piano’s presentation of Mt 2 (Mt2B) which repeats Mt2A but now with an additional subtheme labelled piano\_i γ and represents HC’s observations of the blackbird’s May development. Mt 2 is then repeated for the third and last time by the clarinet (Mt2C) who again adds yet another subtheme (clarinet\_i δ ), representing HC’s observations of the blackbird’s June development.

For the special “framed” ensemble songs in Mt 2 the non-soloist can jump in as soon as the soloist starts playing one of these special (memorised) songs as blackbirds do in the field.

Movement 3 Song Crystallisation

By the end of Mt2 we have heard, learnt and practised all the songbursts that make up the main blackbird song which I call Strathmore Rhapsody. Mt3 simply notates this birdsong in full; it is a blackbird song of exceptional quality.

The musicians’ role is to play along with, and accompany this very special blackbird song.

The piano starts (or cues in) the sound-track of the blackbird’s song, and begins playing the notated version more or less in time with the blackbird. The flute then enters imperceptibly with tiny fragments of the song, and gradually takes over form the piano, while the piano moves into improvising a simple chord pattern indicated by chord symbols in the score. Finally the clarinet enters and takes over the tune from the flute, leaving the flute to improvise around the melody; then gradually all the players fade out leaving the blackbird to finish.

The pianist can also choose to continue the chords under the blackbird’s final notes.

———————

General comments for all Mts1-2-3:

The songs are best learnt using the notation in combination with the recordings.

Each recording has slowed-down and midi-instrument versions, that are listed as the “audio guide” sheet as part of the score.

The tempo of the original blackbird song is indicated by the number following the @ in the song title and refers to the crotchet beats-per-minute unless otherwise stated. The faster speeds of most of the miscellaneous songs in Mt 1 and Mt2 should not undermine musicality of the phrases, and can be slower as long as the general feeling is one of flighty spontaneity.

By contrast Strathmore’s rhapsody is in human time, lilting along at an even 120 BPM.

\*I call this blackbird “Strathmore” and the recording I use as the soundtrack is by Geoff Sample, a field recordist, natural history author and sound artist of high renown. He was kind enough to talk to me at some length about my ideas for this piece, and allowing me to use his recording as the basis of it, and I was encouraged when he pointed out that this was also one of his favourite songs (even though in terms of recording quality the sound is rather buried within that of the forest, as it had been recorded at some distance from where ‘Strathmore’ was singing).

\*\*BLACKBIRD ENSEMBLE TACTICS

counter-singing - counter (parry) with more-or-less the same song, this response can make the “soloist” pause to “listen” or the soloist can just carry on with their own sequence

antiphonal - the song can repeat antiphonally; but keep this for rare moments, as blackbirds are noted for their anti-monotony tendency.

communal - play more-or-less in unison

In rehearsal, the musicians improvise with these ensemble tactics and take time to play with the (memorised) songs when the ensemble comes together.