

Life Thrums with Music (excerpt)

Nature's sounds are healing. The sound of a rainforest; the flowing of a stream; a cascade of a waterfall; frogsong, insect rhythms and birdsong: these heal and salve. We humans as a species were born into our existence hearing the mother-voice of nature and the primal song of the animal musicians who were there before us, drumming, carolling, whistling and hooting.

Hearing the sounds of animals, whose bodies thrum with their calls, we experience viscerally the truths of our existence: that we are manifested creatures, wholly embodied, and that ours is but one voice among many in a gorgeously plural world-choir, where giraffes hum in low voices caressing each other on a savannah evening, where bitterns boom at dawn by a quiet lake, where hedgehogs snore, in a rising half-voiced wheep and exhaled whiffle. Even when the sounds are in the deep infrasound range of elephants, lower than our hearing, we can still feel, right inside us, the deep pulses that throb the air.

Through the sounds of nature, we may move into the fullness of what it is to be a person. That word 'person' is from the Latin, *persona*, the mask worn over the face in ancient classical theatre. *Persona* is understood to mean the sound (son) coming through (per) the mask. But arguably there is something deeper going on. We are resounders, and perhaps to be a true and fully well person includes being permeated by the sounds that pass through us, being a sounding-board for millipede, muntjac and muskrat. A person is an instrument of listening, played by everything that surrounds them, resonating with goat-song and puffin-joke and camel-carol. Our bodies rung by the wild voices, the bells, blowings and buglings of life, conducting us to that place both electric and tender where we can feel most fully alive.

Birdsong is both fleet and fleeting, fast and evanescent. Quick and quickening, it touches the quick of the spirit. It quickens the woodlands with liveliness, as to be quick also means to be alive, as in 'the quick and the dead'. Birds embody the very quick of things, vitality or the life force intensifying the living air that is their element. A world without birds is not only silent, it is dead and deadening.

Having a diversity of species around us is evidence that the world is well, that it is sound, and it is richly medicinal, as humans feel well and whole when we see and hear sounds from a wide variety of animals, birds and insects, the full harmonies of the living world that Henry David

Thoreau called 'a vibration of the universal lyre'.

The world of animal sound is always moving, drifting, ebbing and flowing, but forming an intense and aesthetic concert in various ecologies. At the top, higher than human hearing and far above the top notes of a piano keyboard, are the ultrasonic calls of bats. Down a little are the cicadas and insects. Further down, the bright screech of the swift. Then, down through the piano's top octaves, many other birds, down to cats, some monkeys and human voices. The sloth is said to sing at night, in the musical intervals of a human scale. Bear cubs in the den hum as they suckle. Gibbons sing for sunrise in glissando phrases (and in Indonesia their songs are considered so beautiful that Dayak myth says the sun rises in answer). Chimpanzees hoot, in rising and falling cadences for storms and for dawn. Further down the keyboard is the sea lion's roaring call, and then below the lowest notes of the keyboard is the infrasonic humming of giraffes, and the basso profundo of elephants and whales in their infrasonic lowings.

And at the centre is the bee, right at the core of it all. When bees are flower-buzzing, they hum a half-note above Middle C, at the core of the keyboard, right where they belong, in the sweet heart of everything. The music of the animals vouchsafes us, leaving us calmed and invigorated at the same time, sung into the eternal present as life is ceaselessly sung into being, sounds swelling, filling, resounding, flourishing and made whole.

We know in our most atavistic selves that we are made whole in the healing wellness of all, when livingkind is sound and whole in itself, a net of wild melodies that we can rest in.

The sound of bees buzzing makes something in my spirit feel calm, reassured and also gently tingly. I felt that it was a healing sound before I learned its factual truth. Bees buzz from about 10 to 1,000 Hertz, and these sound frequencies resonate with organic tissues that promote healing: the sound stimulates the cerebrospinal fluid in the brain and spine, causing it to resonate and aiding the immune system, circulating nutrients and filtering the blood. These sound frequencies also affect the pineal and pituitary glands, the hypothalamus and the amygdala.

My garden is incomplete if it is silent. It needs bees in order to flower aurally with that sweet susurrus sounding the blossom in its blessing-song, humming that all is well and all shall be well. The bee is a sweet alchemist, turning pollen into honey and Hertz into healing.

The ancient Egyptians were the first to describe cerebrospinal fluid around 3,000 BCE, and

some say they had a tradition of ‘bee teachings’ in which the humming of bees was understood to stimulate the release of the ‘elixirs of metamorphosis’, an exquisite phrase for conjuring the soft thrill that the buzzing of bees gives us.

Some months ago, the American composer David Rothenberg, in his pursuit of animal music, made a recording of pond insects and sent it over to me. Listening to this insect chorus, with a variety of species crackling, ticking and chirping, flooded me with a sense of wellness. It sounds full to the brim, both complete and diverse like a perfect gathering. In a pond, the insect orchestra is an accord of sounds in neat-tucked tidiness, intimate and close. It has the same effect on me as ASMR, the autonomous sensory meridian response, where certain sounds make you feel at once thrilled and soothed, ecstatic and serene. I now have one of Rothenberg’s special hydrophones so I can listen to pond music wherever I go, and the first time I tried it out was at a loch on the Aigas estate in Scotland, with the author and naturalist John Lister-Kaye, whose reaction was to feel it as something that would gentle the mind into sweet sleep.

I can’t help resonating with insects: they give me good vibrations and I’m not alone. Amazonian people say the song of the insects, humming and buzzing, makes a strong impact on people and is associated with powerful transformation and the fertility of nature. When the Lakota medicine man Lame Deer described the perfect soundscape for a holy man, he noted the preference for a place with ‘no sound but the humming of insects’.

Rattlesnakes rattle us. Hyenas laughing remind us we may be the butt of their jokes. Foxes at night sound like babies being tortured. The huffing snort of an upset horse is agitating. Even animals that can’t harm us can disturb: I admit I get terribly startled by pheasants leaping up churring from the ground. A fly, too early on a summer morning, irritates me insanely with the sheer stupidity of its drone. A single mosquito can drive me half demented.

This sense of our own carnality, which we learn both from within ourselves and implacably from the animals, is profoundly healthy. It teaches us that we are but one animal among many, showing us that human sound alone is insufficient and unhealthy because it is unnatural, unbalanced, and out of harmony with the All. The animals are collectively the ground bass of normal.

When human voices quake us, screaming a dissonance of lies, dishonesty like nails on a blackboard scraping out a malevolent seventh to spoil the sweetness of accord, and rasping the

nastiest lie that only humans matter, the animal voices save us, their sounds are the tonic of the chord and also the medicinal tonic, the rightness of the physical world played in the home key. The animals call us into the belonging world where we matter and they matter, where matter matters, where the unashamed physicality of our being is embedded in the true world, shared and live.

The orchestra of animals is an inveterate conscience reminding us of the glittering infinity, multivocal, a speckled plethora of polka-dotted sounds, tawny roars, turquoise peeps, tangerine chirrup, cavalier in the reckless plurality of life.