

Secret Dialogues

2014

for solo marimba

Like my earlier work, *Crying bird, echoing star, Secret Dialogues* is based both on birdsong and on the star patterns of certain Constellations. Whereas the earlier work was mainly concerned with a kind of mystical communication between our feathered friends and the stars above them, here the dialogues are more literal and earthly, revealing a continuously evolving theatre, or choreography, as birds call to each other and answer from constantly changing positions. You sit in one fixed position – a Wood Thrush calls from the tree above you – another answers from a roof-top a hundred yards distant – the first thrush calls again, but now he has moved to another tree, just a few yards away – the second bird replies again from the same position – a thrush now calls from another roof-top, answered by yet another from the lilac bush; so continues the debate with ever increasing activity until, at the height of the dawn (or dusk) chorus, you are surrounded by singing, as birds compete for the most acoustically advantageous position from which to project their voices.

The work falls into two sections, loosely representing the gradual awakening and quietening of the dawn and dusk choruses. These take place against a backdrop of slowly-shifting stars, which dispassionately preside over the passing of the day, unmoved by the daily cycle of musical activity which their presence provokes.

The birdsong used in *Secret Dialogues* is based on the songs of ten birds - Robin, Nightingale, Pied Butcherbird, White-rumped Shama, White-browed Robin Chat, Wood Thrush, Water Rail, Dunnock, Whitethroat and Pied Flycatcher. Many of these birds have an extensive repertoire of songs – in the case of the Wood Thrush, for example, some eighteen different songs appear in this work alone. Altogether some fifty different songs are used, each one undergoing subtle harmonic and rhythmic transformations with each new appearance.

The intricate dialogues of these birds is overseen by nine Constellations, which gradually appear in the following order – *Sextans, Bootes, Coma Berenices, Corvus, Crater, Leo, Lynx, Cancer* and *Draco*. As in certain previous works of mine, the star-patterns of these Constellations are realised and developed using my own particular graphic techniques of rotation, augmentation and diminution on both x- and y-axes, and applied to constantly shifting harmonic fields. It has always struck me how uncannily alive and lyrical they become when realised in this way, and in some cases they even begin to resemble the birdsong.

Secret Dialogues was commissioned by a consortium of marimbists headed by my good friend, Eduardo Leandro (also a bird enthusiast), to whom the work is dedicated.

James Wood

