

# 8.3 FAMILY PROGRAM NOTE

## ***The Conference of the Birds*** **(2014)**

**Jonathan Sheffer** (b. 1953)

[World Premiere | Festival Commission]

I thought of birdsong as a source for a piece of music months before talk of this commission began. I was attending a meditation meeting on eastern Long Island last year, and during the quiet time, I was aware of an unusually busy amount of bird chatter outside the small chapel where we had gathered. All of a sudden, the birds stopped speaking, all at once. I opened my eyes to see if this sudden silence had registered with anyone else, then returned to my breathing, as the chorus of birds slowly picked up steam again.

When I was offered to write this piece, I thought immediately about how this event might be translated into music for orchestra. Of course, composers have been mining birdsong in their music for centuries, from madrigals to classical symphonies, and to the florid symphonic essay of Ravel, Stravinsky, Respighi, Messiaen and so many others. As well, as I began to transcribe bird calls into musical notation, I noticed how birdsong has crept into the melodic fiber of Western music as far back as Mozart, Beethoven, Bizet, and on and on. I compiled (mentally) what seemed to me two types of birdsong in composed music: mimetic types of gestures that sought to translate bird calls precisely into melodic forms; and unconscious musical gestures that derived their shape and character from the saturation of bird sounds in our aural world.

The next period of this work's genesis was taken up with research and development. I read widely from books about birdsong, and contacted noted birders in order to find a way to organize natural events into a piece of orchestral music. After speaking with Santa Cruz resident Jon Young about his book on birdsong, I opted to try and describe in a 20-minute piece of music an entire day of listening to birds from one location, to show the rise and fall of their activity during a 12-hour period. Unfortunately, having this plan did not begin to answer the central question: what is the *music* to be?

Fortunately, on a weekend in the Hudson Valley, I chanced upon a children's book in a home decorating store with an attractive cover with the word "birds" in the title. As I idly paged through it, I realized that I had found a narrative upon which to hang all the notions of birdsong that I had been storing up.

The source material for the book, and for my piece, is a 12-century epic poem by Farid ud-Din Attar, a 12-century Persian Sufi. The poet dreams he has been transformed into a hoopoe. The birds of the world gather to decide who is to be their king, because they need someone to lead them in a troubled world. The hoopoe, the wisest of them all, suggests

that they should find the legendary Simorgh, a mythical Persian bird, like a western phoenix. The hoopoe leads the birds, each of whom represent a human fault that prevents man from attaining enlightenment. When the group of thirty birds finally reaches the dwelling place of the Simorgh, all they find is a lake in which they see their own reflection. It is the Sufi doctrine that God is not external or separate from the universe, rather is within us all, and which unites us.

The narrative offered many opportunities for musical description: the gathering of the birds, with their uncontrolled chatter; their characters described in their refusal to embark on the spiritual journey; the difficulties of the journey itself; and the final arrival at the mountain, and the attaining of answers to their quest. The story is rich in situations and meaning, which made the task of finding the music a whole lot easier!

For me, the motivation to compose has always come from the possibility and the particulars of the performance. I need to be able to visualize the space, know the singer or soloist, and generally be able to imagine the experience of the audience of hearing the music. In that sense, gratitude for the opportunity to create new music has always preceded the act of composing, and I am grateful to Cabrillo for the chance to write a piece for large orchestra, and for children. I had children's ears and thoughts in my mind at all times. I've tried to put humor and vivid character in the mouths of the birds, and to employ the rich palette of a large orchestra to convey the sense of wonder and excitement that I felt as a child whenever I was taken to a concert. It's my hope that I have been able to transmit some of that joy to young listeners as well. —Jonathan Sheffer

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*Not recorded*