

**MIKE COLLIER**  
With music by *Bennett Hogg*  
**Singing the World: The Dawn Chorus**  
**1<sup>st</sup> June - 15 June 2019**  
**Allenheads Contemporary Arts**

**A brief description of work**

*Imitating with the mouth the fluid voices of birds  
came long before  
men were able to sing together in melody and please the ear.*

Lucretius (94–55BC): De Rerum Natura

This exhibition of pictures by Mike Collier and music by Bennett Hogg was initially inspired by listening to a dawn chorus in a Northumberland woodland garden—a choir of sixteen birds heard early one morning in mid May. Together their songs, represented variously as digitally manipulated sonograms and musical transcriptions, form the basis of this show of prints, music and paintings.

The work in the show isn't copied directly from birdsong but *is* drawn from a close study of it. Mike has approached the experience of the dawn chorus in a number of different ways, collaborating with printmaker Alex Charrington (Charrington Editions), composer and musician Bennett Hogg and natural history sound recordist Geoff Sample.

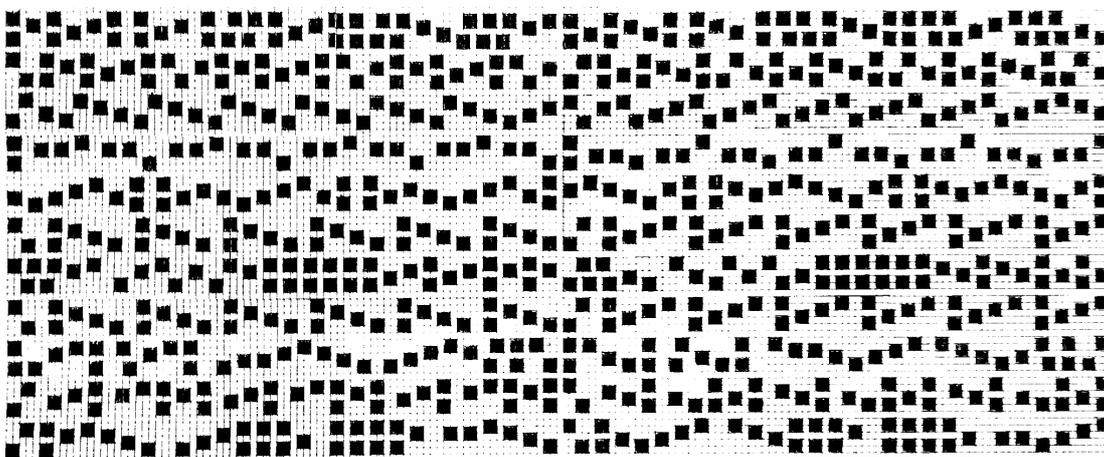
Together, they have looked at the relationship between the natural world, its specific cultures and cultural ecologies, and our own sense of culture/s. The work loosely describes how individual bird species interact through song in the dawn chorus—exploring ways of visually and musically re-invoking these patterns of cultural interaction in a more-than-human world.

The prints and music examine ways of showing how we might better understand our complex relationship to a more-than-human world, enabling us to value the whole world as a living ecology of cultural differences.

For much of the work in this exhibition, Mike, working closely with Alex and Bennett looked at visualisations of birdsong in a book by W. H. Thorpe and realised that the rough, printed symbols taken from a 1950s oscilloscope illustrated there bore a superficial resemblance to handwritten “neumes”, a medieval form of musical notation.



*An example of early Medieval neumes from 'Investigating Italian Gradual Leaves'; a project by Tessa Cernik*



*Early drawing of birdsongs translated from sonograms using a basic neumatic variation of musical Medieval transcription (detail) - Mike Collier 2017*

Working from Geoff's sonograms of individual bird recordings, Mike drew the notations shown here in a key (see catalogue number 7. *The Dawn Chorus Key*; 2018) – notations that that he subsequently used for catalogue numbers: 1 – 6 and 8 -11

Edward Grey, in the *Charm of Birds*, describes the dawn chorus as 'a tapestry translated into sound'. The full set of thirteen prints in *The Dawn Chorus – A Transitional Narrative*; 2018 represent the transition from pre-dawn darkness at around 3:30 am (when the dawn chorus actually starts) to its height between 4:30 and 5:00 am. After this, the peak of noise is past and the sonic excitement subsides. For the show at ACA, Mike has selected six out of the thirteen prints. Although he has described this complete set of prints as a narrative sequence over a two-hour period, he says 'this work should not be read as a completely literal translation ... it is a re-imagined sequence with its own internal aesthetic'. The prints have been developed with Alex Charrington of Charrington Editions using Adobe Illustrator to progressively layer the series of birdsong notations. The timing of a dawn chorus varies with the season; our snapshot here is mid-May in a Northumberland woodland garden.

This is probably the most diverse period in terms of species involved although timing also varies with weather conditions and light levels - later on an overcast dull day, earlier under a clear sky. Shown here are #2 (**Redstart Progression**; 3.30am: the Redstart is often one of the first birds to be heard in this liminal period between night and day), #4 (**Robins and Blackbirds 'Riffing'**; 3.45am: we now move from night to the early pre-dawn, with Blackbirds and Robins riffing off each other.), #7 (**Turdine Build Up 2**; 4.05 - 4.10am: the sky lightens and the whole turdine chorus is rolling: Robin, Blackbird and Song Thrush (residents) - and Redstart, with the soft, repetitive 'coo, coo, cu cu' of the Woodpigeon beginning to underscore the soundscape). #8 (**Dawn Chorus Progression 1 with Turdines and Sibilants**; 4.15am: the morning air acts a filter allowing the warmer colours (pink and yellow) to glow – and individuals of other species start to sing: Wren, Great Tit, Blue Tit, Chiffchaff, Chaffinch, Nuthatch, and Warblers). #10 (**Dawn Chorus Progression 2 with Turdines and Sibilants**; 4.20am: now the Chaffinch adds to the growing chorus) and #11 (**Dawn Chorus Progression 3 with Turdines and Sibilants**; 4.25am: in our chorus, the Greenfinch, Spotted Flycatcher and Great Tit can now be heard).

**Catalogue numbers 8 -11** are a set of four new paintings made especially for the show at ACA. Within each different Dawn Chorus there are various smaller communities of song – what Mike has called Vignettes. **Vignette #1** re-imagines Blackbird and Robin singing before dawn; **Vignette #2**, Spotted Flycatcher, Great Tit, Nuthatch and Chaffinch; **Vignette #3**, Wren, Goldcrest, Spotted Flycatcher, Blue Tit and Dunnock and **Vignette #4** Greenfinch, Goldfinch and Chiffchaff.

**Catalogue number 12; The Full Dawn Chorus** — also made especially for this show — is an eight-foot square wall piece constructed from over one hundred sheets of A4 paper re-presenting the full dawn chorus. For this piece, and working closely with Alex, Mike has devised a more nuanced and complex set of neumatic notations (again derived loosely from Geoff's original sonograms). Now there are three layers of notations on each of the twenty-one lines — a layer of black notations, a layer of medium-grey notations and a layer of light-grey notations. The full image is shown below with a table indicating which birds appear where on the piece.

<b>Black notations</b>	<b>Medium-grey notations</b>	<b>Light grey notations</b>
Dunnock	Chiffchaff 2	Redstart
Blackbird	Spotted Flycatcher	Great Tit
Chiffchaff	Blue Tit	Spotted Flycatcher
Goldcrest	Blackbird	Nuthatch

Great Tit	Blackbird 2	Blue Tit
Song Thrush	Chiffchaff 2	Spotted Flycatcher
Nuthatch	Blackbird	Robin 2
Blue Tit	Chiffchaff 2	Woodpigeon
Redstart	Nuthatch	Spotted Flycatcher
Chaffinch	Chiffchaff 2	Mistle Thrush
Robin	Woodpigeon	Chiffchaff 2
Spotted Flycatcher	Great Tit	Redstart 2
Mistle Thrush	Nuthatch 2	Goldcrest
Wren	Redstart	Spotted Flycatcher
Woodpigeon	Redstart 2	Chiffchaff 2
Greenfinch	Wren	Redstart 2
Blackbird 2	Blackbird	Dunnock
Chiffchaff 2	Chiffchaff	Redstart 2
Robin 2	Redstart 2	Woodpigeon
Nuthatch 2	Spotted Flycatcher	Wren
Redstart 2	Song Thrush	Great Tit



***Full Dawn Chorus,***

Digital Print; 228.5cms x 223.2cms

May 2019

Produced in collaboration with Alex Charrington and installed by Alex and Tom Jordan

**THE MUSIC**

***“ ... singing every minute high up in the golden-green blossom ... ” and  
“ ... out of the wood of thoughts that grows by night ... ”***

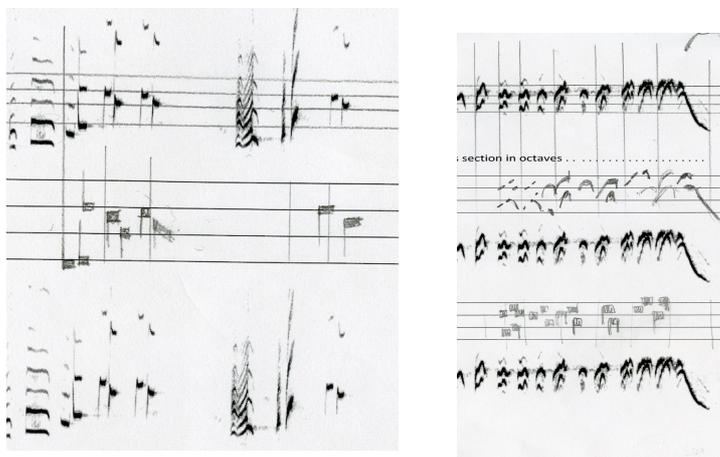
**2017/8/9**

*In collaboration with Mike Collier and Geoff Sample*

*Digital piano music loop; 18 mins long*

The music for the exhibition (**catalogue number 13**) consists of two separate but interconnected pieces, which are derived from transcriptions of the individual birds in our Northumberland garden dawn chorus. These are not “straight” transcriptions after the manner of the French composer Olivier Messiaen—they don't transcribe the *sound* of the birds. Just as Mike's visual

images take a step away from the actual sound of the birds, so Bennett – starting from the same ‘medieval’ notations as Mike – has “translated” these into modern notation. The musical notes are, therefore, “twice-translated”, from sonograms into medieval neumes, from neumes into modern notation. Bennett has composed with these materials quite freely.



In the first piece “ **... singing every minute high up in the golden-green blossom ...** ”, Robin and Blackbird are joined by Dunnock, Blue Tit, Great Tit and Wren. The title comes from a short prose piece by Edward Thomas, whose poetry, like that of John Clare almost a century earlier, is infused throughout by birdsong. A subtle change of atmosphere halfway through signals a shift from the brightness of the dawn chorus to the softer, more mellow evening chorus, dominated by Woodpigeons. The seven different bird species complement the seven different layers of Mike's image (this screen print – **The Dawn Chorus: Full Chorus; 2017** – is on display in the Schoolhouse), for which the music was composed, though this correspondence was more serendipitous than designed.

The second piece “ **... out of the wood of thoughts that grows by night ...** ” (also Edward Thomas) is in three sections, beginning with Redstarts in the before-the-dawn darkness, moving through two sections in which Chaffinch and Wren, then Blackbird and Robin duet with one another, the final section being again based entirely upon Woodpigeons. This piece was composed to accompany the sequence of prints in **The Dawn Chorus—A Transitional Narrative; 2018 (catalogue numbers 1 – 6** in this show at ACA).

Though the music is based on birdsong, it doesn't *mimic* birdsong, and in this it closely parallels Mike's approach. To a visitor it is probably not even apparent *which* piece is being heard, let alone which birds are “present”. But this is not the point. Just as we can listen to the dawn chorus, or indeed birdsong at any time of the day, and not necessarily recognise each and every species, the combination of the music and the images is intended to stage, for want of a better word, an “experience”, inside of which we can, of course, make our own connections.

In response to Mike's most recent work, *The Full Dawn Chorus: 2019* (catalogue number 12), Bennett has composed a set of very short "scribbles" for piano which appear on speakers either side of the picture, more or less at random, and over the top of the already existing music.

### **Coda:**

In *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson talked presciently about how early mornings were becoming 'strangely silent were they were once filled with the beauty of birdsong. This sudden silencing of the song of birds, this obliteration of the colour and beauty and interest they lend to our world have come about swiftly, insidiously, and unnoticed by those whose communities are as yet unaffected." Worryingly, the decline in songbird populations continues—for example, of the birds in our Dawn Chorus, the population of Song Thrush has declined by 50%; Spotted Flycatcher by 87%; Dunnock 33% Greenfinch 48% and Blackbird 16%.

### **Biographies:**

**Prof Mike Collier** is a lecturer, writer, curator and artist based at the University of Sunderland. His work pays close attention to the environment and is usually place-specific. He integrates image and text, often drawing on the poetic qualities of colloquial names for places, plants and birds.

More recently Mike has examined the nature of local soundscapes, exploring ways of showing how we might better understand our complex relationship to a more-than-human world, enabling us to value our environment (birds, plants, animals, peoples etc) as a living ecology of cultural differences.

In 2010 he co-founded WALK (Walking, Art, Landskip and Knowledge), a research centre at the University of Sunderland, which looks at the way we creatively engage with the world as we walk through it. Mike has shown in the UK and abroad and his work is in a number of public and private collections.

For more information see: [www.mike.collier.eu](http://www.mike.collier.eu);

And [www.walk.uk.net](http://www.walk.uk.net)

**Alex Charrington** runs Charrington Editions, a professional, collaborative printmaking studio. The studio encourages and facilitates artists to explore the print as a medium in its own right; to experiment with, and develop, their own artistic ideas by working in tandem with a skilled fine art printmaker. Alex is also skilled at working with digital print media, again working collaboratively with artists.

[alexandercharrington@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:alexandercharrington@yahoo.co.uk)

**Dr Bennett Hogg** (Newcastle University) is a composer, improviser, and cultural theorist. He works in electroacoustic music, environmental sound art, free improvisation and contemporary composition with a particular interest in sound/music and the the natural environment.

He is Director of the Landscape Quartet - formerly an AHRC-funded environmental sound art project, and has recently co-edited (with Matthew Sansom) an issue of *The Contemporary Music Review* on 'Music, Sound and Landscape.'

[www.landscapequartet.org](http://www.landscapequartet.org)

**Geoff Sample** specialises in recording birds and natural soundscapes as fine art and documentary. He combines a musician's ear with an extensive knowledge of bioacoustic science and the cultural context of hearing music in nature.

For twenty-five years he has released field recording albums through the label Wildsong. His natural history work includes the best-selling 'Collins Bird Songs & Calls' and his recordings and insight are regularly called upon by musicians, sound designers, radio, TV and feature films.

Art projects and collaborations have ranged from the multi-screen installation 'Dawn Chorus' with Marcus Coates (2007) to, more recently, Hanna Tuulikki's 'Away with the Birds'.

[www.geoffsample.com](http://www.geoffsample.com)

[www.wildsong.co.uk](http://www.wildsong.co.uk)

**Tom Jordan**, who has assisted in the making of the paintings and the installation of the show at ACA, is a recent graduate from the University of Sunderland. Tom's first degree and masters qualification was in structural engineering; he gained his second degree in Glass and Ceramics in 2017. He now works as a freelance artist developing his own work in socially engaged arts practice and helping artists create and install their own work.

<https://www.facebook.com/TomJordanCeramics>

[tjordan42@gmail.com](mailto:tjordan42@gmail.com)

#### **FURTHER REFERENCE:**

- *Collins Bird Songs & Calls* by Geoff Sample (essential reading/listening)
- *A Sweet Wild Note: What we hear when the birds sing* by Richard Smyth
- *Why Birds Sing* by David Rothenberg
- *The Great Animal Orchestra* by Bernie Krause
- *The Spell of the Sensuous* by David Abram (essential reading!)
- *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* by David Abram (essential reading!)
- *Bird Sounds and their Meaning* by Rosemary Jellis
- *Birdwatching With Your Eyes Closed* by Simon Barnes
- *A Study of Bird Song* by Edward A Armstrong
- *Birdsong in the Music of Oliver Messiaen* by David Kraft
- *Tweet of the Day: A Year of British Birds* by Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss
- *Birdsong* by Catchpole and Slater

- *The Evolution of Birdsong* by Charles A. Witchell
- *The Song of the Birds* by Walter Gartstang
- *Bird-Song: A Manual for Field Naturalists on the Songs and Notes of Some British Birds* by Stanley Morris
- *Birdscapes: Birds in our Imagination and Experience* by Jeremy Mynott
- *Bird Symphony* by C.C. Vyvyan
- *The Charm of Birds* by Sir Edward Grey
- *Animal Musicalities* by Rachel Mundy (highly recommended)
- *Current Directions in Ecomusicology: Music, Culture, Nature* edited by Aaron S Allen and Kevin Dawe
- *Listening in the Field: Recording and the Science of Birdsong*: Joeri Bruyninckx



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