
Nature on Record: Part One

Author: [René van Peer](#)

About This Series

This is the first part of a series of articles about recordings of sounds from natural surroundings that I wrote for the US magazine *Experimental Musical Instruments*. This publication dealt with "the Design, Construction and Enjoyment of Unusual Sound Sources," and did so with an open mind. Its editor, Bart Hopkin, decided to stop publication after having completed volume 14, in June 1999. The contents of the articles ranged from technical via practical to poetic or even surreal. It came with a reviews section. Part of the instruments featured were included in a tape that was compiled annually. Bart Hopkin continues to be active in the field of experimental instrument design. All the back issues will be kept available. With Ellipsis Arts he has produced two books with CDs devoted to this topic.

For information on [Experimental Musical Instruments](#), see below.

Introduction:

When Bart Hopkin mentioned an idea he had to devote pages in *Experimental Musical Instruments* to sounds from nature, I asked him if I could also be involved. My interest sprang from various sources -- curiosity for the kinds of sounds I might come across; awareness of the fact that such soundings have always (for a variety of reasons and purposes) been used by the human species in a cultural context; awareness that submitting these sounds to any medium irrevocably and fundamentally alters their character.

He had invited people who record natural sounds, to submit articles about their work. He also wanted a discussion of material extant on cassette, vinyl or CD. When I visited him in the Fall of 1993 it was decided that I would take that upon me. Bart had already collected several albums; in the course of the following year I obtained more through various channels. In the summer of 1994 the Canadian magazine *Musicworks* printed my article *Art of Coexistence* which touches themes related to those in the present article. 'Nature on Record' is by no way exhaustive; but then completeness has never been the aim, nor could it have been. It will come in three parts, each containing a list of records and details of labels and distributors.

NATURE ON RECORD PART 1

*In memory of my stepfather Bère Schoones (d. April 1, 1995)
who had a deep love for and a great knowledge of nature*

The area of sounds from nature on record is variegated and, above all, large. On one end of the scale there are people who mix sounds of the elements with classical evergreens, and release the result on albums; thus dishing up surreal scenes such as a Bach chorale being played on a grand organ on the shoreline. On the other end there are numerous albums of 'pure' sound, on which the human intervention (and therefore, presence) is less obvious. The intention often is to evoke images of natural domains that are untouched by human hand. However, the placing of the

microphones, the filtering of the sound spectrum, the selection and the processing of material, the objectives for playing such an album -- all imply human schemes. Perhaps if I could put such thoughts aside, my appreciation of the matter at hand would be different. As it is, only on rare occasions can I forget that there is always at least one human hand to position and hold the microphone, and another to switch on the recorder.

For me these recordings rarely work as a sonic sedative, which is how they are mostly promoted. On the contrary, I always come across sounds that arouse my curiosity, that tickle my fancy, that set my mind at work. I quite like that. Also it somehow pleases me to find that what the human species has devoted a huge amount of toil and effort to (sophistication in sound production) has been vocalized year in year out since times immemorial by beings that we consider less developed than ourselves. However this may be, in the end these animal voices as such speak with uncommon strength.

SKETCHING A MAP (ROUGHLY)

The purposes of catching natural sounds and then releasing them on sound bearers are manifold; they determine the form of the output to a large extent. There are the sound guides, giving brief fragments of animal calls; these are ostensibly put together for reasons of identification. Other recordings are meant to be scientific demonstrations of animal sound production. Another approach is to release recordings in the form of soundscapes or nature concerts, portraying animals as part of their surroundings but also introducing the notion of aesthetics to recordings of pure wildlife sounds. Most of the work concentrates on birds; there is quite some stuff around featuring whales. But outside those categories -- nothing. Or rather, virtually nothing. The exceptions are quite intriguing.

Another development shifts the emphasis from animals to the environment itself in acoustic impressions of glaciers, pebbly brooks, all types of weather, and so forth. I will not discuss urban environments and sound effects here, as they belong to the area of manmade sounds and therefore fall outside the scope of the present subject. Finally, there are some extraordinary human reworkings and interpretations of animal sound, other than just notating it for orchestra or putting the vocalizations on the procrustean bed of harmonic construction. Inclusion of recordings in any of these 'categories' does not mean they could not belong in another. In some cases they are put together for convenience's or for argument's sake. Some records would easily fit in more than one. Others form categories of their own. Which makes them all the more interesting.

SOUND GUIDES

Just as field guides are employed to recognize birds on sight, sound guides enable the bird spotter to find out what species make themselves heard. Although the procedure must have been cumbersome in the age of vinyl, the principle as such is valid; there's quite a number of birds that call when hidden; some species look alike but can be distinguished by their voices. These albums usually contain masses of different species, each represented with short fragments of its vocalization. Generally

speaking, such albums will be most valuable to bird fanciers who use these recordings to acquaint themselves with sounds they might come across, when preparing to go out in the wild. The advent of the CD must have meant a great step ahead, making it possible to carry a portable player and a set of albums, and matching track and live bird on the spot. In the US the [Laboratory of Ornithology](#) at Cornell University in New York State is an active producer and distributor of sound guides. The catalog of the British distribution company [WildSounds](#) holds an astonishing variety. Between them these two are able to sell you the sounds of the vast majority of birds on this planet -- on vinyl, on cassette and on CD.

The Russians also used to be active in this area. Melodiya released a collection called *Voices of Birds in the Nature* (available from WildSounds), recorded between 1959 and 1965. This is a box of five 10" discs, covering the former Soviet Union from West to the Far East. Unfortunately, they opted for a narrator who introduces, discusses and describes every bird on a particularly patronizing tone. This human agent has been allotted a role that is of greater importance than that of nature itself, which somehow adequately reflects how people in general treat their natural environment.

One title that may be appealing to a wider range of people, is [Sittelle's](#) *Our favourite garden birds*, that finds its American counterpart in Cornell's *Backyard Bird Song*. It is all there within reach -- the birds and the album, inviting curious listeners to find out what is stirring and singing around their homes and in nearby parks. I do use the Garden Birds CD every once in a while. Perhaps it is something of an academic delight to know what bird is calling out from one thicket or other at the back of my house, but I do derive pleasure from it.

Two of Cornell's sound guides illustrate how different they can be. "Experience Cuba" is how the Lab advertises its *Bird Songs in Cuba*. The record falls regrettably short of expectations raised by those two words -- it does not evoke a sonic portrait of any landscape. The calls and songs are much too isolated and fragmentary to be experienced as a convincing picture. *Voices of the Peruvian Rainforest*, on the other hand, is a beautiful piece of work. Set up as a guided tour the narrator first tells about the behavior and the surroundings of a species, then the sound itself comes on. The recordings are of exquisite quality. You'll hear each animal as part of its environment. Many of the species call out in amazing voices, often reminiscent of electronically generated sounds; you'll also hear how much variation there is in acoustic space and reverberation. Sometimes there seems to be an unlimited expanse; sometimes the calls go around flat and square, bouncing off what sounds like a dense palisade of trees.

Two other guides are worth mentioning. Sittelle's *Grenouilles et Crapauds* contains the calls of 20 different European frogs and toads. There's croaks, creaks, rasps, barks, burps, whistles, hoots; in solos, dialogs and choruses. One group of toads brings to mind panflute music from the Solomon Islands. The second, *Animal Sounds of Hungary*, gives an impression of wildlife in that Middle European country. It contains rarities such as slowed down recordings of a bat, a shrew and crickets, such as a cicada sounding like an electronic buzzer. Here one also finds an abundance of frogs in dazzlingly complex, hypnotic textures; but to top it all there is the standard classical music set-up in amphibian form -- a "frog quartet," consisting of two Fire-bellied Toads, a Tree Frog and a Green Toad.

In some cases sound guides are included on soundscape recordings as an index, pointing out the components of the overall image to the listener.

DEMONSTRATION RECORDS

This is a category that I have a soft spot for, no matter how dry some of the records may be. They embody a complex of approaches that seems to have vanished with the progression of time -- pure curiosity; academic idiosyncrasy; the wish to document the findings for a larger audience. The lines between scientists and record labels somehow were considerably shorter in the fifties and sixties than they are nowadays. The producers explored territory that was new at the time, and did so with apparent pleasure and dedication. They made analyses of animal sounds using methods that were as elegant as they were simple, and made the results perceptible to whoever cared to listen; the original sounds were enlarged, either by putting microphones close up or by slowing down the recordings.

The earliest example that I have been able to lay hands on is *Music and Bird Songs*, a radio presentation from 1952 that was transferred to vinyl. It was produced by Peter Paul Kellogg, professor of ornithology and biological acoustics at Cornell University and founder of the Laboratory of Natural Sounds, and by James H. Fassett, presenter and supervisor of music with CBS Radio. *Music and Bird Songs* was the result of experiments by professor Kellogg and CBS' chief tape editor Joel Tall in 1951. Its aim was obviously to show how musical these vocalizations actually are. As if by magic chirping and twittering turn into melodies and timbres that can be sublime as well as uncanny. The presentation also demonstrates the astonishing ability found in many birds to produce different sounds simultaneously, because they can control the sides of the syrinx (the tubular vocal organ of birds) independently.

The most recent example is *The Unknown Music of Birds* (1987), [\(1\)](#) an LP on which the Hungarian researcher dr. Péter Szöke condensed thousands of recordings that he had collected over the years. He studied the relation between music and bird song from a positivist angle. According to him it is the structure of a song that determines whether or not it is musical. The species that he uses to support his theory, sing regular intervals, regular rhythms, transpositions of melodic lines and strophic forms -- which is amazing. But then he also has a category of species singing "forms of non-musical [\(2\)](#) tonal structure...our 'contemporary music' in birds." He ranks the Winter Wren among these. "Appealing...remarkably complex...sounds like expert whistling...I love that plaintive little slur at the end...sublime," is what Fassett says about the American variety of the same species -- but then in the same breath dubbing the Loon's melancholy wail "ridiculous." Which sounds a bit like aesthetics gone haywire.

Szöke, who categorizes the Loon's call as a "complex musical motif," wanted to avoid the pitfalls of aesthetic judgment. To this end he took musical conventions as the basis for his theoretical framework, oblivious of the fact that these too developed along subjective lines and will change according to fashion or insight. Szöke made it his lifework to go through countless fragments, eventually deciding whether they did or did not support his theory and then discarding those that didn't. Kellogg and Fassett seem to enjoy the wonders they have come across when slowing down the speed of their tapes. They, more than Szöke, worked from a policy of inclusion. Above all, *Music and Bird Songs* shows an open-minded view on music, that is still very pleasurable.

[Folkways](#) used to have a 'Science'-series, with titles like *The Birds' World of Song*, *The Lyrebird*, *Sounds of North American Frogs* and *Sounds of Insects*. The first two

albums are further explorations into the structure of bird song. *The Birds' World of Song* was recorded by Hudson and Sarah Ansley. In 1954 Hudson Ansley (3) had published an article in which he argued that many birds hear better than we do, in two senses -- they distinguish successions of notes so rapid that we do not hear them as separate entities, and they discern tonal differences in the high registers. On the record Ansley shows how the Mockingbird, when imitating the Whippoorwill, articulates five syllables as the mimicked bird does, whereas we can make out only three. He also analyzes songs of several kinds of birds. He identifies tiny snatches of tunes, shows how they may vary between individuals of one species, and how they can be heard with slight differences in different species. He compares singers with only a few songs to those that have an apparently boundless repertoire, the Mockingbird a champion with 276 different songs, *La Cucaracha* one of them.

The Lyrebird takes structural analysis to a level of higher sophistication. According to K.C. Halafoff this species could well be the best avian singer in the world. Not only is the Lyrebird an accomplished mimicker of sound sources in its vicinity, be they other birds or inanimate objects; not only does it produce a sheer endless range of timbres, from melodious to percussive. Halafoff points out that the bird also puts these together to striking effect -- it is actually composing in the academic sense; i.e., a conscious arrangement and manipulation of sound material. In his analysis he draws parallels between the structure of Igor Stravinsky's *Symphonies for Wind Instruments* and the song of a Lyrebird. Listening to this animal gives me the sensation of an improvised concert. Matchless sounds and a wild, anarchic personality. When slowed down the sounds become even more intriguing, with accelerating arpeggio's and an effect resembling early echo boxes used in rock'n'roll.

The tracks of *Sounds of North American Frogs* would just fit on a single CD, as there are 92 separate entries on this tape. This is perfect material for a frog museum, and it's great to listen to. The diversity in calls of these amphibians is approached from different sides. Given the time of release (1958) the recording quality is surprisingly good. This album comes close to being a sound guide, but then there are beautiful environmental portraits as well and explanations for the differences in frogs' voices. One of these is that a connection exists between size and pitch. The call of a small frog slowed down to half its speed sounds exactly like that of a related species twice its size. The liner notes are lavish and interesting; they come with 53 pictures, among these the Little Grass Frog sitting on a fingernail.

In comparison the quality of *Sounds of Insects* is more ambiguous. The sounds come from the tiniest of creatures, which means recording them was a feat in itself; it features different stages in the flight of insects, their footsteps, and the creepy chewing of wasps. It also shows signs of having been done too quickly. Especially the way in which Albro T. Gaul recorded his own narration, impresses me as careless. Nevertheless, a record of insect sounds is exceptional. As Gaul writes on the insert, "They may be listened to as a technical study, or as a background to thoughts of summertime and days spent in the country."

This atmosphere of halcyon, dog days leisure is captured in *Crickets and Katydid's, Concerts and Solos* by Vincent Dethier. It is an account of field trips around New England during three consecutive summers in the early thirties to collect and identify as many species of these insects as possible. Dethier sets his experiences and his descriptions of these songsters (or sawyers) in a mood of relaxation that is as desirable as it has become unattainable. This book has a remarkable freshness. More about it next time, when I will discuss soundscapes. Lie back, close your eyes and let

the buzzing approach.**April 10, 1995: René van Peer****Footnotes:**

- 1. This was before the fall of socialism, of course. Capitalism would have precluded the release of an album such as this. No commercial potential. Some copies still available through Sittelle. [^](#)**
- 2. Szöke defines non-musical tones as sounds having continuously changing, gliding or other irregular pitch. [^](#)**
- 3. I tried to trace Ansley for interviewing him about his work, without success. [^](#)**

List of albums discussed in this article:

Ansley, H + S	The Bird's World of Song	1961	Tape	Folkways 06115
Bogert, Charles M.	Sounds of North American Frogs	1958	Tape	Folkways 06166
Gaul, Albro T.	Sounds of Insects	1960	Tape	Folkways 06178
Halafoff, K. C.	The Lyrebird	1966	Tape	Folkways 06116
Kellogg, Peter Paul	Music and Bird Songs	1953	Tape	Cornell Lab of Orn
Ország, Mihály	Animal sounds of Hungary	1992	Tape	Hungaroton MK 19151
Parker, Theodore A.	Voices of the Peruvian Rainforest	1985	Tape	Cornell Lab of Orn
Reynard/Garrido	Bird Songs in Cuba	1988	2LP	Cornell Lab of Orn
Roché, Jean C.	Our Favourite Garden Birds	1992	CD	Sittelle 04708
Roché/Guyetant	Grenouilles et crapauds	1991	Tape	Sittelle 10613
Szöke, Péter	The Unknown Music of Birds	1987	LP	Hungaroton LPX 19347
Veprintsev, e.a.	Voices of Birds in the Nature	1965	10" LPs	Melodiya WildSounds

Crickets and Katydid, Concerts and Solos, by Vincent Dethier (1992, Harvard University Press)**Addresses:**

**[Sittelle](#)
rue des Jardins
38710 Mens
France [^](#)**

**[Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology](#)
The Crow's Nest**

**159 Sapsucker Woods Road
Ithaca, NY 14850
USA [^](#)**

[WildSounds](#)

**Cross Street
Salthouse, Norfolk NR25 7XH
UK [^](#)**

[Smithsonian/Folkways Mail Order Service](#)

**416 Hungerford Dr., Suite 320
Rockville, MD 20850
USA [^](#)**

[Experimental Musical Instruments](#)

**c/o Bart Hopkin
P.O. Box 784
Nicasio, CA 94946
USA [^](#)
e-mail: ExpMusInst@aol.com**

**Author: René van Peer
Bachlaan 786
5011 BS Tilburg
The Netherlands
E-mail: r.vanpeer@wxs.nl**

René van Peer (1956, the Netherlands) is a freelance journalist who writes about experimental art, contemporary and experimental music, and traditional music. He works for several Dutch newspapers and magazines. He has written articles and reviews for the US magazine Experimental Musical Instruments. The Canadian magazine Musicworks has printed his articles. Art and music venue Het Apollohuis in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, commissioned him to write 'Interviews with Sound Artists', a book that was published in 1993. His interest in sound developed from his acquaintance with unconventional music. A survey article of his about European record labels for traditional and world music appears in the magazine of the Society for Ethnomusicology (Summer 1999). An interview with sound recordist and composer David Dunn (Santa Fe, NM) appears in Leonardo Music Journal (MIT-Press) of 1999. He has contributed several other [articles](#) to this website.
