

BIRD



(Performance of BIRD at the Vladicin Han Arts Festival, Serbia)

'BIRD' is a piece inspired by many aspects of bird myth, language, community and physiology. As a piece, it asks the question if there had not come the "invention of language and the the formation of word, the analysis of ideas - the means of communication between one spirit and another" (Proust).What would have happened in its place? Both myth and music employ the same subconscious processes of metamorphosis and substitution, inversion and retrogression, elision and catalexis, augmentation and diminution, rotation and permutation.

In the Egyptian book of the dead, the Ka spirit, that it bestowed upon the individual at the time of birth, leaves the human body in the shape of a bird body with the face of the deceased. There are many images on Egyptian mummies depicting this. One aspect of the The Ka spirit, id the 'Ba' and it is precisely this aspect of the 'Ka' can then fly into the underworld so the soul can be weighed and evaluated (Luis Vinko Zabkar). The ka spirit is thought of, as the life force received by man from the gods yet exists independently from the person. The ka is a spiritual double that lives on even after the death of the physical self so long as it has a place to live. This is the reason why the Egyptians mummified their dead because if the body is allowed to decompose, the ka may die with it negating the person's chance for eternal life. In fact, the

euphemism of Egyptians regarding death was "going to one's ka". Tombs were made with houses of ka's for the spirit to reside. Offerings of food and drinks are also common to provide nourishment to the ka. It is also believed that the person might have multiple ka's that reigned supreme at death. In fact, Rameses II once claimed that he had as many as 20 ka's or even more. The Ka transcends what others think of as the idea of the soul. When the Ka acted, the person is well both physically and spiritually. It is believed that sin is an abomination to the ka. In this aspect, the ka spirits represented the conscience that leads the person to compassion, honour and most especially righteousness. In some, it is depicted as vigour, youth and anything that the person was believed to be desirable and right most especially eternal life.



(Performance of BIRD Dundee Art Gallery and Botanical Garden)

It is also intended as a 'post-shamanic' work, in that it takes the idea of transformation through the taking on of the form of an animal without taking on the spiritual aspects of shamanism. It is more accurate to say that it plays with the the idea of the performer transforming themselves through transcendental technique and a kind of circular breathing, giving the impression of singing themselves to death. Strictly speaking, shamanism is a religious phenomenon that comes out of and was first observed in Siberia and Central Asia, the word itself coming to us from the Russian 'šaman'. It was later, similar phenomena were observed in, for instance, North America, Mexico and certain parts of Indonesia and would be found in the context of other forms of 'magical belief' and religion. In relation to the piece 'BIRD' I am most interested here in two aspects of shamanism. Firstly the function of the shaman, and secondly the structure of a shamanic technique.

The role of the shaman in Central and North Asia was broadly to be on hand

whenever ceremonies that concerned experiences of the human condition and psyche were conducted. In other shamanistic cultures it was more as doctor or healer. In both cases, shaman and connected activities, was very much integrated into the society in which they practised. Although shamans use singing as well as drumming and sometimes other instruments, a shamanic ritual is not a musical performance in the normal sense. A shamanic ritual performance is, above all, a series of actions and not a series of musical sounds. Second, the shaman's attention is directed inwards towards her or his visualisation of the spirit world and communication with the spirits, and not outwards to any listeners who might be present. Third, it is important for the success of the ritual that it be given its own clearly defined context that is quite different from any kind of entertainment. Fourth, any theatrical elements that are added to impress an audience are of a type to make the contact with the spirits seem more real and not to suggest the performer's musical virtuosity. From a musical perspective shamanic ritual performances have the distinctive feature of discontinuity. Breaks may happen because a spirit is proving difficult to communicate with, or the shaman needs to call a different spirit. Typically, phases of the performance are broken off abruptly, perhaps to be restarted after a gap, perhaps not. The rhythmic dimension of the music of shamans' rituals has been connected to the idea of both incorporating the rhythms of nature and magically re-articulating them. It is this rather 'practical' element of shamanistic practice that I have utilised in the piece 'BIRD'.



Performance of BIRD - Ghetto Novo Venice

Sound is tactile; whereas visual information is experienced at the surface, auditory information seems to be both outside and inside the body. In oral cultures where survival is co-dependant on a close link to nature, sound and phonemes often connected inner thought to sonic features of the natural environment. In many cases, this holds also for the music in shamanistic practice, including initiation of animal and bird cries. The shaman's use of sound is to catalyse an imaginary inner environment which is experienced as a sacred space-time in which the shaman travels and encounters spirits. Sound, passing constantly between inner and outer, connects this imaginary space with the actual space of the ritual in which the shaman is moving and making ritual actions and gestures. This idea was put forward in 2013 by Shigeru Miyagawa, a linguist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston. He and his colleagues suggested that human language relies on two systems, both of which had previously evolved in simpler animals. The first system generates words. This "lexical" system is used by our primate relatives, such as chimpanzees. The second system is "expressive". It creates patterns that don't include words, such as a tune that you hum. It's this system that Miyagawa says is similar to those underlying birdsong. Birds like zebra finches learn their songs when they are young, usually from their fathers, and continue to sing those same songs throughout their lives. The songs don't contain words: they are just tunes with a certain pattern. Even nightingales, which are renowned for the complexity of their music, do not express meaning by singing. "A nightingale can sing up to 200 different songs," says Miyagawa. "But the purpose of these songs is pretty limited, usually to mate and also to assert territory. So each song doesn't have a particular meaning.

Through 'BIRD' I synthesise all these aspects into one musical concept. The idea being that the performer vocalises themselves into a shamanistic 'trance' via the bird as spirit animal and through the heightened use of the voice, although in shamanistic performance the performers virtuosity is not to the fore. From the journey from speech to sung phonemes and then to hyper-extended techniques, 'BIRD' seeks to suggest an ordinary human metamorphosing into to an extended version of themselves. This is expressed through imitating birdsong going into birdsong based lyrical extended vocals and ending with the pre recorded and live processed birdsong mash up and ending with lyrical extensions of the voice. The score is constructed of transcribed and transformed birdsong, combined with pre-recorded birdsong and instruction from a pilots manual. As a performance piece with film it also refers to the great clowns of film comedy Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin. Shot in black and white the intention is that comedy both deflects and deals with death that no other medium can quite manage.



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