

**BIRDS & INSECTS**  
ARLENE SIERRA  
VOL. 4

**BRIDGE**

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# **BIRDS & INSECTS**

## **ARLENE SIERRA, VOL. 4**

### **BIRDS AND INSECTS, BOOK 1 (2007) (14:46)**

- 1) Sarus Crane (1:36) 2) Cornish Bantam (1:45)
- 3) Cicada Sketch (1:25) 4) Titmouse (1:17)
- 5) Scarab (8:43)

### **BIRDS AND INSECTS, BOOK 2 (2018) (22:47)**

- 1) Painted Bunting (1:32) 2) Hermit Thrush (4:11)
- 3) Black and White Warbler (2:48) 4) Thermometer Cricket (3:08)
- 5) Bobolink (11:08)

### **BIRDS AND INSECTS, BOOK 3 (2023) (18:47)**

- 1) Lovely Fairywren (4:46) 2) Canyon Wren (2:20)
- 3) Great Grig (2:22) 4) Tawny Owls (2:59)
- 5) Troupial (6:20)

**BOOKS 1 AND 2 - STEVEN BECK, PIANO**  
**BOOK 3 - SARAH CAHILL, PIANO**

## **Birds and Insects Books I–III (2003–7; 2015–18; 2021–23)**

Alongside works inspired by forms of human contest, with allusions to game theory and military strategy, a related theme, throughout Arlene Sierra's compositional output, centres on the natural world, reflecting the subjects of landscape, evolutionary biology, and the sounds, processes and behaviours of birds and insects. Works in the latter category include *Aquilo* (1999–2001), an ancient Roman term for the Northeast wind, *Cicada Shell* (2006), inspired by ancient Chinese battle tactics that compare the Cicada shedding its skin to an army deploying false appearances to mislead its enemy (the inspiration for which came from a movement on this disc – ‘Cicada Sketch’ (2004)), *Colmena* (2008), Spanish for ‘beehive’, *Game of Attrition* (2009), in which instruments, akin to Darwinian species, battle it out for survival, *Nature Symphony* (2017), with respective movements devoted to a stark landscape, butterflies and bees, *Bird Symphony* (2021), each of whose four movements draw on the song of a specific bird, and *Kiskadee* (2024), for orchestra, based on this central and south American bird's call and sounds from its environment. These pieces reflect the beauty, strategies and struggles of the natural world.

Bird song has inspired musicians and composers surely for as long as music has existed, and in Western notated music at least as far back as the vocal imitation of the cuckoo in the thirteenth-century English round ‘Sumer is icumen in’, as well as imitations of bird song in fourteenth-century poetry and music, for example by Machaut. The invention of recording technology, however, afforded new ways of incorporating bird song into art music, the earliest examples including the cellist Beatrice Harrison’s 1924 duet with nightingales, broadcast live by the BBC from her Surrey garden, and the recorded nightingale in Respighi’s *Pines of Rome* (1925). The ability to listen over – to scrutinise – bird song via recordings opened up opportunities to composers to work with these ‘found objects’ in multiple ways, from the poetically nuanced versions of Ravel to the more virtuosic effusions of Messiaen, most obviously in his *Catalogues d’oiseaux* (1956–8), for solo piano. However, where Messiaen’s emphasis is on faithfully realising the detailed transcriptions he made, Sierra is concerned with extracts of the songs, essences from which she builds longer forms.

Sierra arrived at bird song via the poems of Pablo Neruda (1904–73), specifically his *Odes to Common Things*, which reflect on nature and memory. A valuable source for Sierra’s interest is the Cornell Lab Data-

base of bird song, and she has included playback of such recordings in some of her works – including ‘Hermit Thrush’ and ‘Tawny Owls’ on this disc. In the first such piece, *Urban Birds* (2014), for three pianos, the pre-recorded bird song provides the work’s structure – in the outer movements, for example, long loops of bird song are used like a looping drone. Experience playing synthesizer in a teenage band, followed by a degree in electronic composition at Oberlin in the early 1990s, schooled Sierra in the art of sampling, loops and layers of ostinati. Consequently, whereas a piece like Jonathan Harvey’s *Bird Concerto with Pianosong* (2001) extemporises on and gradually transforms recorded birdsong, elaborating its ornate figurations through electronic and acoustic instrumental means for over half an hour, Sierra places bird song as if under a microscope, examining its abstract beauty through a focus on concise, defining elements or ‘building blocks’, as she puts it, in a series of relatively short pieces, lasting between 1 and 9 minutes.

In this way, Sierra avoids any Romanticising of what the bird song is or does. Rather, she understands bird song as something structural, purposeful and serious, as sounds that assert a bird’s existence, its territory and need to survive. This double consciousness – a scientific awareness of the intricacies of bird song and greater knowledge about its function,

coupled with an awareness that it is under threat and in many cases disappearing – leads to an aesthetic vision that she describes as ‘modern pastoral’, which we can hear in the often darkly energetic quality of her music.

Loosely arranged into three Books (the pieces may be performed separately or together in any order), *Birds and Insects* comprises 15 movements in total, most lasting between 1 and 3 minutes. The final pieces in each Book are more substantial, however, ranging between 6 and 11 minutes. Composed across a twenty-year period, these pieces originated mostly as individual commissions for specific performers but, in some cases, as a group of works. Book I was commissioned by various pianists, including Daniel Becker (‘Cornish Bantam’), Clive Williamson (‘Titmouse’), and Thorsten Kuhn (‘Scarab’); ‘Cicada Shell’ was conceived as a children’s piece, hence its gently irregular, repetitive motifs. The first four Book II pieces, by contrast, were dedicated to the performers who premiered *Urban Birds* – Xenia Pestova, Clare Hammond, Kathleen Supove, and Sarah Nicolls. The tape part in ‘Hermit Thrush’ was included for the benefit of Supove, and prepared piano techniques in ‘Thermometer Cricket’ (the strings dampened by a plastic card, and fingers strumming the piano strings) were introduced for

Nicolls. ‘Bobolink’ was commissioned by Marilyn Nonken, with whom Sierra shares a connection to the composer Dominique Troncin, one of Sierra’s former teachers. The concentration on sonority in the middle section of this piece reflects Troncin’s and Nonken’s expertise on Spectralism. Book III was commissioned by the Barbican Centre for Sarah Cahill.

The complete set is characterised by the use of three processes (not necessarily in every piece): spelling the title name in pitches, employing a transcription of the animal’s song from nature, or recalling its physical movement in various ways. The majority of the movements are concerned with individual birds, but four pieces are inspired by insects – two in Book I, and one each in the remaining collections: one is a beetle (scarab), two are crickets (great gig and thermometer cricket), the other a cicada. From the birds, the majority are small, relatively rare species, with high-pitched songs. For example, upper partial overtones are suggested by freely composed stratospheric sounds in ‘Hermit Thrush’, heard in conjunction with playback of the bird itself – the idea of height is emphasized by a series of low pedal notes (a similar device is used in ‘Thermometer Cricket’, although here to evoke the sense of a buzzing heat) – and in ‘Painted Bunting’, based on an actual transcrip-

tion, and ‘Black and White Warbler’, in which a high, Ligeti-like continuum sets off a swinging, propulsive motion, where Nancarrow meets honky-tonk.

Similar in spirit are the insistent upper-register patterns in ‘Lovely Fairywren’, and in ‘Titmouse’, the latter inspired by the gift Sierra received of a stuffed toy of the tufted titmouse that, when squeezed, emitted a screech. Sierra has real fun with this idea, passing frenetic versions of a simple eight-note pattern around the keyboard, as if the bird is playing a game of hide and seek with the listener. ‘Bobolink’, on the other hand, initially explores a more fragmented yet richer, mid-register texture, with use of crushed notes. These shapes gradually coalesce, in the middle of the piece, around a sustained, ‘Heavy and bell-like’ sonority, with a range of resonances from strumming the piano strings. By contrast, a final third section is characterised by an extended, muscular texture, built from a ‘long-short’ rhythmic motif – a *tour-de-force* in generating virtuosic material from very small means.

Four of the birds stand somewhat apart: the Sarus Crane, for its obvious physical differences and rasping call (reflected in the music’s ponderous movement and resonant calls), the Cornish Bantam, which is a chick-



en (conveyed musically by a jerky, pecking motion, evoked through strong dynamic contrasts and irregular rhythms), the Troupial, a brightly-coloured, larger bird which possess a strong voice and incredibly diverse repertoire (Sierra's setting conjures a mischievous, dance-like quality), and the Tawny Owls. Other musical outliers include movements more concerned with the environments in which the animals exist, for example 'Canyon Wren', in which slow resonant chords evoke the bird's spacious rocky habitat – its distinctive song, which descends gradually from repeated high notes, as if unfolding a scale, is alluded to only briefly a couple of times. And in 'Tawny Owls' the piano creates an echoey environment in which to frame playback of the owl's haunting calls.

The collection was initially inspired by the huge scarab beetle sculpture in the British Museum, and knowledge that the actual beetle navigates using magnetic fields. This movement's title surely evokes Ravel's virtuosic 'Scarbo', the final demonic movement from *Gaspard de la nuit* (1908). There is something similarly scampering, spectral and otherworldly about it, with rapid note repetitions and echoing, dark sonorites; Ravel's low opening motif (rising semitone then fifth) is slightly altered at one point (rising fifth then semitone), and there are echoes of a strik-

ing short-long motif Ravel uses to unsettle the texture. A softer section, towards the end, marked *Lontano ma fluttuante*, explores the magnetic navigation idea with the C above the treble staff functioning as a kind of pole. In ‘Great Grig’, also, there is play on the idea of a focal pitch, although here it is a competition between E and E flat, perhaps intended to evoke the insect’s trilling mating calls. Similarly, in ‘Thermometer Cricket’ – an insect whose speed of chirps change according to the temperature (hence its name) – the music mirrors the insect’s behaviour through a series of tempo fluctuations.

Overall, the collection amounts to a remarkably varied, creative celebration of the tremendous diversity, colour and ingenuity of the natural world.

*Dr. David Beard is Reader in Musicology at Cardiff University. He specialises in contemporary music and has published extensively on music by, among others, Judith Weir and Harrison Birtwistle.*

95 *p subito*

98 *f p subito*

102 *p f p subito*

106 *mf*

111 *p f p subito*

\* - see performance notes





**Arlene Sierra** is a London-based American composer whose music is lauded for its “highly flexible and distinctive style” (*The Guardian*), ranging from “exquisiteness and restrained power” to “combative and utterly compelling” (*Gramophone*). Her work has been commissioned and performed by the Albany, Alabama, Boston, Dallas, Detroit, Seattle, and Utah Symphonies, New York Philharmonic, Tokyo Philharmonic, BBC Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, ensembles including Lontano, Psappha, Riot Ensemble,

International Contemporary Ensemble, London Sinfonietta, Österreichisches Ensemble für neue Musik, Chroma, New Juilliard Ensemble, the Carducci, Daedalus, and Mivos Quartets, the Fidelio, Peabody, Bakken, and Horszowski Trios, and New York City Opera VOX. She has worked with conductors including Thierry Fischer, Andris Nelsons, Kevin John Edusei, Fabio Luisi, Susanna Mälkki, Oliver Knussen, Jac Van Steen, Shiyeon Sung, Odaline de la Martinez, Jayce Ogren, Grant Llewellyn, and Ludovic Morlot. Her music has been performed at festivals including Aldeburgh, Aspen, Bowdoin, Cheltenham, Fontainebleau, Huddersfield, Dartington, Tanglewood, and the BBC Proms. Awards include the Takemitsu Composition Prize, a Charles

Ives Fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, PRS Composers Fund and Women Make Music awards, and a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. Sierra's orchestral showpiece Moler was nominated for a Latin GRAMMY for Best Contemporary Classical Composition, Born in Miami to a family of New Yorkers, Arlene Sierra holds degrees from Oberlin College-Conservatory, Yale School of Music, and the University of Michigan. She currently serves as Professor of Music Composition at Cardiff University School of Music and resides in London with her husband, composer Ken Hesketh, and their son, Elliott.



This season pianist **Steven Beck** appears with the orchestras of Austin, Princeton, and Chattanooga, can be heard in chamber music in Chicago and Oklahoma City, and repeats his annual Christmas Eve performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations at Bargemusic, which has become a New York institution. As a soloist Mr. Beck has performed with the New York Philharmonic and the National Symphony and has appeared at Carnegie Hall, David Geffen Hall, Alice Tully Hall, the Kennedy Center, and the Library of Congress; summer concerts

have been at the Aspen Music Festival, Chamber Music Northwest, and Lincoln Center Out of Doors. As an orchestral musician he has played with the New York Philharmonic, the New York City Ballet Orchestra, and Orpheus.

An experienced performer of new music, Steven Beck has premiered works by Charles Wuorinen and Fred Lerdahl. He can be heard on over 40 CDs, including the first complete recording of George Walker's piano sonatas, for Bridge Records. Mr. Beck is a member of the Knights, the Talea Ensemble, Quattro Mani, and the Da Capo Chamber Players. He is on the faculty of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the Sewanee Summer Music Festival. A Steinway Artist, he is a graduate of the Juilliard School, where he now teaches orchestral piano.



**Sarah Cahill**, hailed as “a sterling pianist and an intrepid illuminator of the classical avant-garde” by *The New York Times*, has commissioned and premiered over seventy compositions for solo piano. Composers who have dedicated works to her include John Adams, Terry Riley, Frederic Rzewski,

Pauline Oliveros, Julia Wolfe, Roscoe Mitchell, Annea Lockwood, and Ingram Marshall. She was named a 2018 Champion of New Music, awarded by the American Composers Forum (ACF). Recent performances include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Barbican Centre in London, The National Gallery of Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, Black Mountain College Museum + Arts Center, and an NPR Tiny Desk concert. She recently premiered Viet Cuong's piano concerto, *Stargazer*, with the California Symphony. Sarah's discography of more than twenty albums includes *Eighty Trips Around the Sun*, a four-disc tribute to Terry Riley. Sarah's radio show, *Revolutions Per Minute*, can be heard every Sunday evening from 6 to 8 pm on KALW, 91.7 FM in San Francisco. She is on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory and is a regular pre-concert speaker with the San Francisco Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic.



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Robert Starobin, webmaster | Email: [becky@bridgerecords.com](mailto:becky@bridgerecords.com)

Bridge Records, Inc. • 200 Clinton Ave • New Rochelle, NY • 10801

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