Robert Burrell: composer/zoömusicologist

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Major research: recording birdsong, birdsong transcription and analysis, composition based on birdsong.

Leaving home early and apprenticed to a trade, Robert began his music-making initially as a self-taught church musician. In his mid-twenties, he was accepted to study music composition at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music. After graduating with distinction, he worked in Mackay in local government as the Regional Music Co-ordinator, before returning to study to gain a Graduate Diploma in Education. For the past 18 years, he has been active in secondary education, heading up the music departments of St. Rita's College, Clayfield and then Saint Stephen's College, Coomera.

Robert is currently a student again completing a higher research degree. Intrigued by birdsongs, in particular the pied butcherbird, for over thirty years, he has begun recording birds and soundscapes. He is also interested in the heterophonic effects of multiple calls of mixed species sounding simultaneously, as they are encountered in the wild.

His birdsong compositions range from woodwind and brass quintets to mixed percussion ensembles and string orchestra, as well as electro-acoustic works of mixed soundscapes with acoustic instrumental performances. He has also used birdsong as source material in several musique concrète works.

Robert at Diamantina Lakes National Park in Queensland, Australia.

Robert writes on his process of birdsong transcription: I began by transcribing by ear, sometimes running back to the piano to clarify what I had notated, making any corrections I deemed worthy. When I began my current research, I downloaded a program called *Transcribe*. This program does not transcribe an end product, but does assist you in the decision-making process and thus helps to 'get down' the data, by allowing you to 'see' it as a visual waveform. At the same time, it gives approximate indications of where the notes might be on a keyboard. Different coloured dots on the keyboard indicate the stronger notes, the ones more in the center of the tone and also places dots 'between' notes to show microtonal elements. It shows what harmonics are present also. Pied butcherbirds can and do produce more than one tone at a time and sometimes seem to 'fluttertongue' on one pitch whilst sounding another pitch against it. The program allows one to loop sections to hear them repeated endlessly and also to slow the performance without altering the pitch. With all this information, one then has to make a decision as to what one hears as the dominant tone. I sometimes then place sections of the recording into another program (Cubase) to lower its pitch, or I notate it lower to bring it into the range of instrumentation.

Compositions Using Birdsong as Source Material

Woodwind Quintet: 1. *Dance of the Willy Wagtail*
2. *Chorale*
3. *Rondo (Various calls from Diamantina lakes)*

Brass Quintet: 1. *Butcherbird (Pied Butcherbird)*
2. *Dappled Light (various calls from Wynnum Mangroves)*
3. *Fantasia (Eastern Whipbird, Figbird, Thornbill, Southern Boobook)*
4. *Finale: Grey Butcherbird*

Dying to Grow: For SATB choir (melodic extract from Superb Wren)

Grey Butcherbird: For xylophone and marimba

Red Wattlebird: For xylophone and two marimbas

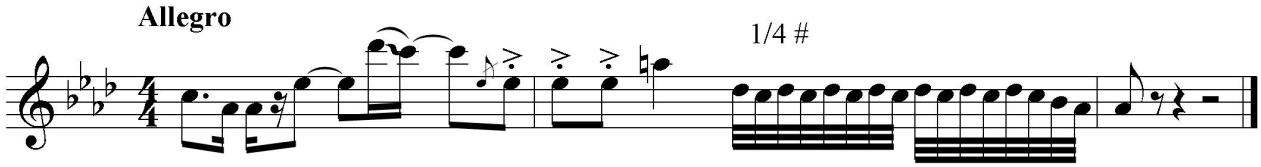
An Ear to Hear: For solo flute and soundscape (recorded at Mt Mee)

String Orchestra: 1. *Fast movement (Grey Butcherbird)*
2. *Slow movement in homage to Samuel Barber (Pied Butcherbird)*
3. *Scherzo (Grey Butcherbird)*
4. *Finale (incomplete)*

Musique concrète: *Pied Butcherbird*
Red Wattlebird

Robert writes: This work it derived from a pied butcherbird motif from our local bird. Here is my transcription, followed by the first movement of my *Brass Quintet* (see "Zoömusicologists" page for audio link):

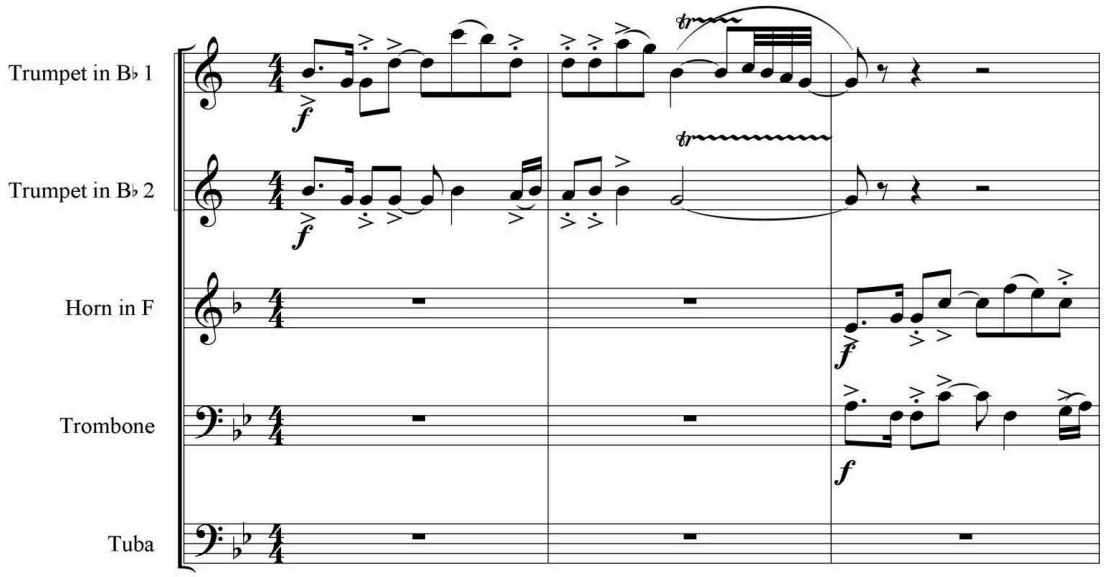
Butcher bird

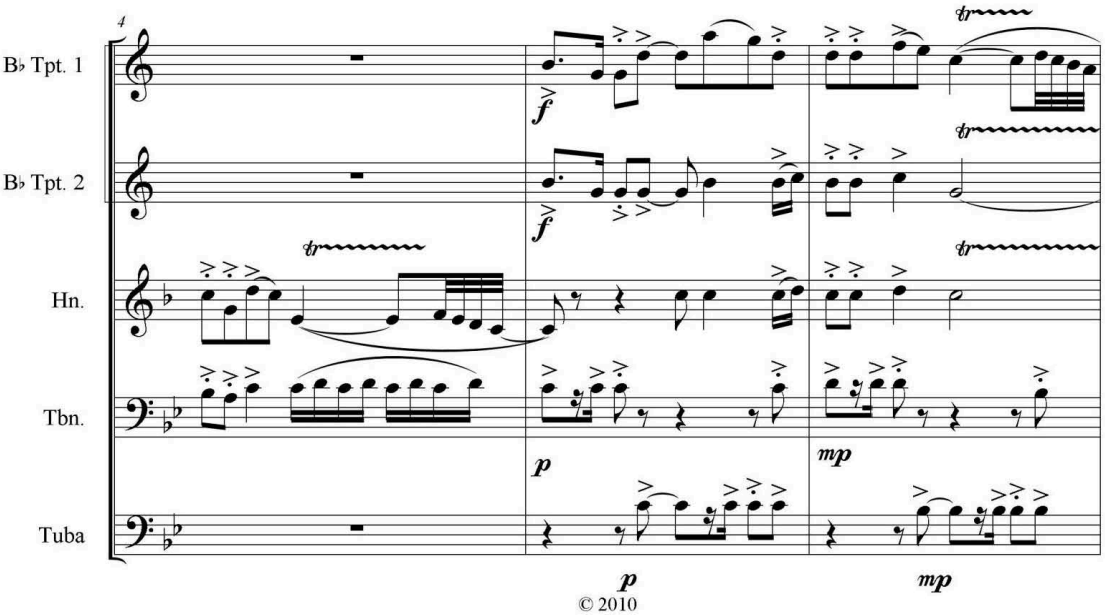


Butcher Bird

Score

Robert Burrell





Robert writes: This is my transcription of a figbird, which figures in Fantasia, the third movement of my *Brass Quintet*: