

Stephen Preston: musician/zoömusicologist

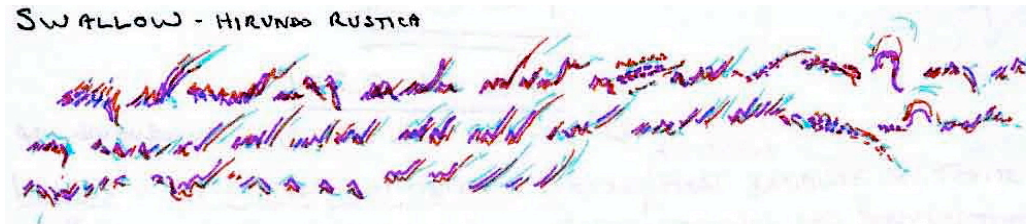


Stephen writes: “As a musician, my engagement with bioacoustic communication started with my researching new techniques and forms of improvisation with the baroque flute modelled on birdsong. The principal outcome of my research was the foundation of an approach to improvisation and technique that I called Ecosonics.

“Ecosonics grew out of my dissatisfaction with the predictability and inflexibility of pitch and pitch relationship in tone-based scale systems as a means for responding to birdsong. Rather than prise my response to what I was hearing into a system of sound organization created for human music, I began to approach the instrument as ‘syrinx’ and the player as ‘bird’. In other words, the physical possibilities and limitations of player and instrument are the fundamental means, an analogue of avian sound production (and, with obvious differences, of the human voice). The fundamental means precedes the learning of an externally imposed, culturally mediated system of sound-organization.

“In Ecosonics, improvisations and techniques, the systems come afterwards and are ephemeral, using bioacoustic models

but rarely mimicking them. I am most interested in the way bioacoustics offers such a wealth of models for improvisation, forms for sonic exchange, the communication of what is felt into sound and contexts of communication, the shape and flow, forms and systems of communication, of sound, and the incredible range of sounds.



Barn Swallow and House Martin from Stephen Preston's notes on songs.

"Thomas Clifton stated in 1983 in his book *Music as Heard: A Study in Applied Phenomenology*, "music is the actualization of the possibility of any sound whatever to present to some human being a meaning which he experiences with his body—that is to say, with his mind, his feelings, his senses, his will, and his metabolism."

"This, I believe, is axiomatically true, not just of humans but of other animals. There is a dimension of this that is extremely important to me as a musician. It is the basis of my understanding, reception, and practice of music, most particularly in the domains of bioacoustic sound, that a traditional music-as-culture approach finds utterly incomprehensible.

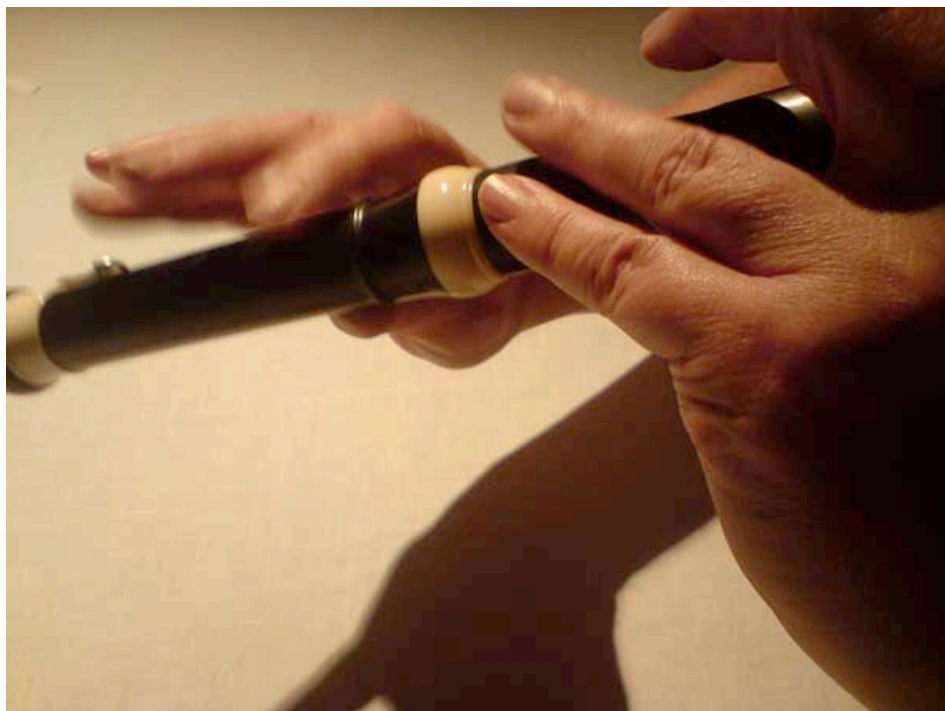
"Consequently, I regard music in two ways: primarily as founded on attributes of biological behaviour, and secondarily as cultural artifact founded on those attributes. Only when understood as biological behaviour is there the potential to understand music satisfactorily however it might be manifest, not only within and across human cultures, but most importantly, as a continuum between humans and other animals.

"For me, just as the continuum of sonic expressive communicative behaviour between human and non-human animals opens up realms of possibility for approaches to Ecosonic improvisation, so equally does the entire range of sounds produced present the most excitingly imaginative range of possibilities as sonic models.

“Ecosonics is an attempt to explore these sonic models in all their riches through improvisation and to integrate sounds that are felt and expressed by living bodies as they are heard, felt and expressed by the body of the improviser. Bird songs and calls, frog choruses, other forms of bioacoustic communication (including human), and complex natural sound environments provide models for Ecosonics.

“Improvisations focus on aspects of structure and form, sound quality, rhythm, timing and contour, and most importantly context, rather than imitation. Context shapes the structures and forms (for example, countersinging or duetting), and it’s here that I find affinities with human interaction such as gossip or argument, in which the sound of what is said carries far greater meaning than the words.” [See “Zoömusicologists” page for audio links to *Quarrelling duet* and *Antiphonal duet* inspired by countersinging and antiphonal exchange, *Duet* inspired by the duetting of the Tropical Boubou Shrike, and *Trio* inspired by human verbal antagonistic relationships:

Quarrelling duet, Antiphonal duet, and Duet (Stephen Preston & Amara Guitry, baroque flutes)
Trio (Preston & Guitry, baroque flutes; Thomas Gardner, cello)]



Hands (Stephen Preston: baroque flute). (Photo: © Kirsten Edwards)