

Magnus Robb: wildlife recordist/composer/zöömusicologist



From *Petrels Night and Day*, the original caption reads: "Magnus Robb trying to record Boyd's Shearwaters *Puffinus boydi* on a moonlit night when he should have known better, Santo Antão, Cape Verde Islands, 24 February 2007." (Photo: Ilse Schrama).

Magnus writes: Am I really a zoömusicologist? Not sure. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I am a musician who "went zoo"! I used to compose music for a living, typically pieces based on the sounds of birds or other animals in one way or another. Then gradually I became more interested in listening to the animals (especially birds) that inspired me, and less interested in recycling their songs.

Now I spend most of my time working with bird sounds, trying to refine my ear, learning to distinguish more sounds in the field, and to work out from the sounds what is happening around me. I work for The Sound Approach, a small team that is trying to document the sounds of Western Palearctic birds as completely as possible. With these sounds, we publish a variety of books, always containing CDs and using sonograms in which colours are used to pick out the sounds we are interested in, without removing the background context.

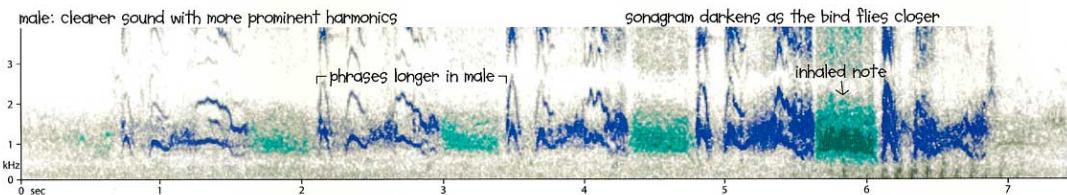
The first book our team published was *The Sound Approach to Birding* (Constantine & The Sound Approach 2006), an illustrated guide to how birds use sounds, and in

particular how birders can use bird sounds in the identification of species, age and sex. Then I wrote a book called *Petrels Night and Day* (Robb, Mullarney & The Sound Approach 2008), which studied nocturnal seabirds at their colonies, mostly from the perspective of what we can hear. It was also a bit of an adventure story, as so many of the colonies are on remote, uninhabited islands.

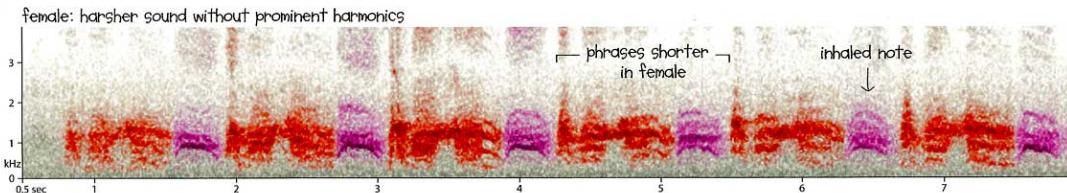


Manx Shearwater, St. Kilda, Scotland. (Photo: Magnus Robb)

CD1-44 Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* Hirta, St Kilda, Western Isles, Scotland, 01:36, 24 July 2007. A male calling in flight as he flies past at very close range, almost touching the microphones with his wings. Background: Leach's Storm Petrels *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*. 070724.MR.013610.00



CD1-45 Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* Skellig Michael, Kerry, Ireland, 00:39, 26 August 2006. A female calling in flight as she flies past. Background: British Storm Petrels *Hydrobates pelagicus*. 060826.MR.03939.20



Sonogram prepared by Magnus Robb of a male and female Manx Shearwater, the same species as in the photo above.

Another major publication we are working towards is a guide to the owls of the Western Palearctic region, which even includes the Western Brown Fish Owl *Bubo zeylonensis semenowi*, recently rediscovered in Turkey by my colleague Arnoud van den Berg. For this book I already recorded in

some 15 countries, from the Cape Verde Islands to Siberia, and my colleagues went to several others. With such exciting work to do, I'm not in a hurry to get back to composing, but perhaps I will some day.



Magnus Robb recording *Oceanites oceanica* in Portimao, Portugal.
(Photo: Pim Wolf)

Magnus writes: Here I am recording Wilson's Storm Petrels at sea on 12 September 2010. As far as I know, I have made the first sound recordings of this species anywhere in the northern hemisphere or at sea.

Selected Publications and Compositions

- Robb, Magnus. 1991. *Delphi*. Glasgow: Scottish Music Centre.
- Robb, Magnus. 1993. *Skyn*. Glasgow: Scottish Music Centre.
- Robb, Magnus. 1994. *The Ancient Language of the Birds*. Glasgow: Scottish Music Centre.
- Robb, Magnus. 1995. *Summoning Dawn - the rubythroat dreaming*. Glasgow: Scottish Music Centre.
- Robb, Magnus. 1998. *Sprosser*. Glasgow: Scottish Music Centre.
- Constantine, Mark & The Sound Approach. 2006. *The Sound Approach to birding*. Poole: The Sound Approach.
- Robb, Magnus; Mullarney, Killian and The Sound Approach. 2008. *Petrels night and day*. Poole: The Sound Approach.

Magnus writes: Next is an excerpt from *Summoning Dawn*, which is based on a transcription of the song of the Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*, recorded in Kyzyl, Tuva in 1995. The 'text' consists entirely of onomatopoeic bird names in a variety of languages, and is notated using the International Phonetic Alphabet. The singer is Linda Hirst, for whom the piece was written.

The opening of *Summoning Dawn* by Magnus Robb. (See "Zoömusicologists" page for audio link.)

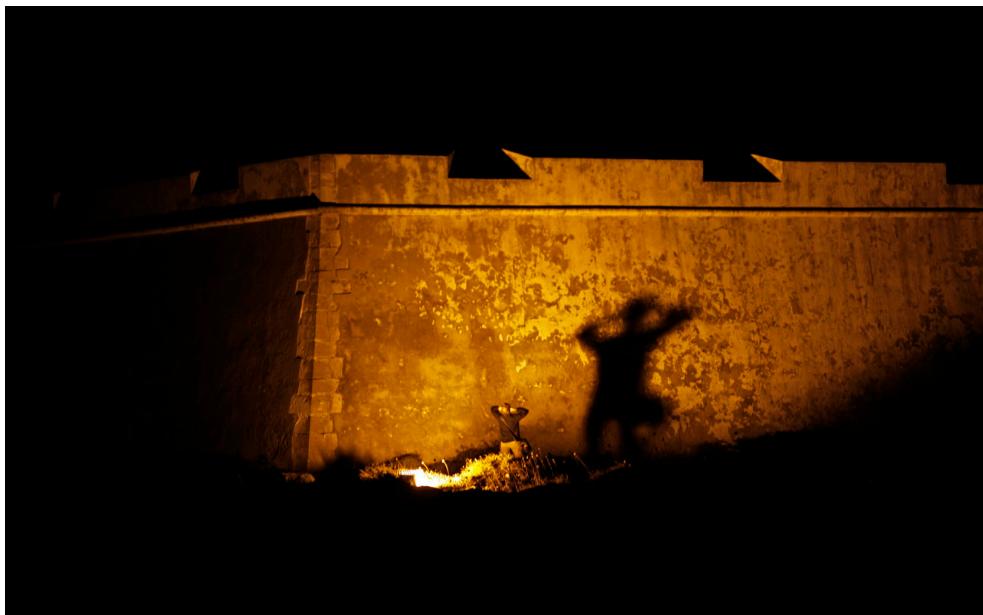
Magnus writes: If I were to undertake an academic study of animal sounds from a musical point of view, I think it would be to try to discover in detail, with as little prejudice as possible, the harmonic or rhythmic 'language' hidden within a given species song, as recorded from a single individual over a period of at least a few weeks. In order to discover something new, it would be best to avoid using traditional musical notation, using instead something more objective, perhaps cents. A solution would need to be found to notate satisfactorily sounds that are in motion.

Birds have a very elastic approach to pitch, and rarely sustain a given pitch for very long, but tend to be always in motion (it would be cheating to study only those rare species that avoid glissandi!). So, it would be a real challenge to

decide at what point we can talk of a given unit of song having a pitch. However, the approach should be holistic, taking into account how the sound would sound to an intended receiver in the bird's natural habitat.

So for example, a forest neighbour at 100m may not hear a glissando, but only the loudest moment of it, which resonates among the trees and produces an identifiable single pitch. (A more difficult challenge would be birds that call in flight – do they ever adjust pitch for their listeners, compensating for the Doppler effect, for example if they don't want their trajectory through a neighbour's territory to be discovered?)

The aim would be first to find out what intervals dominate, and if they don't satisfy our taste, too bad. If two of the bird's favourite sounds are separated by a 'fifth' that averages ten cents too small, there is probably a reason for this. Instead of rounding it up to a just fifth, or worse still an even tempered one, let the 'too small' fifth take us on a voyage of discovery. Only by listening to the natural world 'at its own pitches', and not by glossing over the fine details, can we truly hope to learn anything from it.



Magnus Robb at Fortaleza do Sagres, Portugal. (Photo: Pim Wolf)

Magnus writes: One of my recent obsessions is listening to the flight calls of nocturnal migrants. On this occasion, I was at the fort of Sagres, Algarve, Portugal, which guards the SW corner of Europe. From here, thousands of passerines leave Europe for a long (500km) sea crossing to Africa.