

When All the World's a Stage but the Audience Is a Tree

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Follow me into the forest. Join me in a music theatre experience entitled *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*. After a journey of a few hours across various logging roads that have been cut through a large boreal forest, we embark in canoes across the raw beauty of what we call Wildcat Lake, paddling toward our destination which is Patria, the forest that is our homeland. On the way we meet Tapio—the protector of the forest who reminds us that we are needed there. We are needed to call into their reunion the Princess of the Stars and the Wolf. Princess and Wolf are characters in the drama that we are enacting. They are characters who have been tormented by their fear and who are longing to know compassion. They have been tormented for thousands of years. We identify with their pain, and promise to work to build the Great Wheel of Life—a place where each of us has a necessary contribution to make—and in which these two characters can finally reunite and so restore harmony to the world. Our challenges as participants in this are many, and often intriguingly unknown. We pass into an electronic void—necessarily relying on the elements of water, wind, earth, fire, air, but abandoning the traditions of *Globe and Mail* articles, CBC Radio, BlackBerries, and passing lanes. We place ourselves into a fairly vulnerable state; we create campsites in difficult spaces, in stunningly gorgeous but sometimes dangerous terrain: steep granite cliffs, roaring waterfalls, mosquitoed meadows, wolves, bears. We remember to respect our surroundings—engaging with them for our sustenance only. But that sustenance is not so much physical as emotional: we listen to the world we have entered: we sing to it, and with it, and it plays to us and responds to us in many ways: We encounter chamber music without borders.

So often, in musical performance, borders, affected by walls and ceilings become such a salient aspect of the product that to think of not having them seems impossible. The sound bounces off a wall or ceiling surface and returns to the performer for analysis, for augmentation, for enhancement or improvement. These borders serve to mechanically reinforce the sound, and so we seek purity in the concert hall—a building is said to sing when it causes pleasure to the performer. Specifically for the singer, these borders create good or less good *ambience*, and sometimes even poor conditions for singing. At issue is the quality of the surface material and the acoustic space. Hard surfaces are better than absorbent ones; and this, together with the distance from the

singer to the reflecting surfaces, combine to affect the aural space created by the singer within the borders. But these same borders provide security and a relatively predictable acoustic environment within which the singers' arts are brought to life.

The scenario that I describe is part of the greater work of the Canadian composer, R. Murray Schafer. *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* is an annual eight-day event in which people from various parts of Canada and the United States, as well as from Brazil, Portugal, Greece, Germany, and France gather in a wilderness area of Ontario. Costs are minimal—usually to cover food purchases for the group, and some for those who are assisted with travel expenses. This excursion, affectionately known as The Wolf Project, is the epilogue of Schafer's large-scale, music theatre works, many of which take place in outdoor spaces.¹

Part of the challenge and release for singers in these works is the creation of art in and with the natural environment. Writing about the differences between a concert hall space and the outdoor performance spaces in his works, Schafer (2002) writes, "What distinguishes this from the traditional setting is that it is a living environment and therefore utterly changeable at any moment. Hence, the living environment enters and shapes the success or failure as much as or more than any human effort (p. 110)."

What are the differences between my singing in a typical enclosed concert space, compared to what happens when I stand on this rock and sing to an endless expanse of wilderness?² Firstly perhaps the most arresting aspect of standing on the rock is the visual space—no temporary blindness made by footlights or follow spots; no quizzical, expectant or even bored faces peering out of bodies trapped in armchairs. When I stand on this rock, I experience an endless expanse of nature. It is overwhelming, yet attractively inviting, enticing me into the realization of the duality of its strength and its frailty. I gradually seep into inclusion in this realm's mood, witness to, but also mystically becoming, an aspect of the susurrations of leaves and branches caressed by breezes and zephyrs; the lapping of liquid over the strength of stone; the conversations and proclamations of birds and animals; the redolence of transformation—bark to soil, root to tree, water to cloud.

"I am one with you, one with you, one...." sings the Princess of the Stars, and I sing this too.³

As my inclusion in this space envelopes me, I realize that I am involuntarily contributing to the soundscape, through breath and aspirated sighs. But I want to contribute my own proclamation—I am keen to enter this animal and mineral conversation. How will the birds respond? Will any animals investigate my sounds?

What songs will the rivers and lakes, the rocks and the trees sing with me? And that is the beginning of a transformation, when the audience is a tree.

Let Us Speak of Transformation...

Brooke Dufton, a friend, a fine soprano singer, and a keen adventurer, was drawn into the Wolf Project eight years ago. She says,

I have sung outdoors many times in various contemporary and/or exploratory projects (I would include the Wolf Project amongst these), as well as in more traditional media (outdoor opera, musicals, and choral concerts). Both are singing outdoors but they are entirely different experiences (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

She speaks passionately about the wilderness experience, its dangers, the physical fatigue of living with this environment, and the potential vocal strain of smoky fires, dehydration, the necessity of making oneself heard over loud waterfalls or across great distances, but concludes that the rewards far outweigh the stresses:

Trees make me breathe more deeply – the air in a forest is fresher and more welcome to the lungs. Singing into fog, at night when no one can see a thing, particularly from the middle of the water is amazing. When we sing in a hall we create atmosphere and reasons for colour with our imaginations, we call spirit into the otherwise dull room; outdoors, the atmosphere and beauty are overwhelmingly present. We respond to them, and create an art that is more sincere, more powerful, more genuinely moving than anything we could create with our imaginations, because human imagination is more limited than the imagination of the divine, with whom we are collaborating in a lakeside serenade (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

So another aspect of what occurs when singing from the rock is the knowledge of collaboration and the effect that this has on the soul—which is remarkably different from what occurs in the studio or concert hall.

After some quantitative analyses, Sundberg (1987), in his scientific study of the voice, alludes to the important influence that one's emotional state has on the ways the voice is used. He suggests that "if the atmosphere in the studio is not relaxed, the kind of phonation learned in that studio is not very likely to be relaxed either (p. 156)." If we accept this notion, then for singers like Brooke—when the wilderness is her studio and teacher and audience and collaborating performer—what we have is the natural environment influencing and caressing, in a profound way, the quality and nature of her song.

I think the interaction among these elements is one of vulnerability. And it is into this place of vulnerability that that we are transformed. That is the transformation. But how is this vulnerability realized? Despite what performers may hope, a typical concert hall or theatre is built with the experience of the audience at the forefront. This is because art has become a commodity. Without the audience fees, the art will not occur. Even when altruistic consideration for a universal experience of art is prevalent, the fact is that humanity creates the space within walls, or fenced enclosures, and the natural or divine world is excluded as a paying customer.

Richard Wagner, with his dream of the ultimate theatre space, insisted on a design that would provide "excellent sight lines for every spectator" and "an equal position socially for listening to his music (Forsyth, 1985, p. 187)." Furthermore, Wagner intended to establish what he called a *mystischer Abgrund* (a mystical abyss) between the performers and the audience through the use of a sunken orchestra pit, separating the stage area from the seats. This distancing between performer and customer is perpetuated and upheld night after night in performance spaces worldwide (*Ibid*).

Schafer (2002) invites a different approach:

To accomplish art that engages all forms of perception we need not only to strip down the walls of our theatres and recording studios, but also our senses. We need to breathe clean air again; we need to touch the mysteries of the world in the little places and the great wide places; in sunrises, forests, mountains, and caves and if need be in snowfields or tropical jungles. For too long the clement temperatures of our theatres have neutralized our thermic sensibilities (p. 93).

Schafer's work calls us into a different sort of *mystischer Abgrund*—one through which the performers and audience (which in his *oeuvre* are generally the same) must pass in order to experience art from the inside out.

In the Wolf Project, by reducing our tools of performance to the minimal (the body, the rock, the lake, etc.), we quickly shed the ordered linearity of our literate and regulated existences, and stand, exposed and open, fully vulnerable, to the influences and confluences of the world in which we find ourselves. What happens is that the imaginative realm is infused with a sense of adventure and awe; reality and readiness.

Jan Gillin, another participant in the Wolf Project, says,

My imagination as a story spinner causes my mind to run wild when I'm out on the edge of a lake at night, singing to the human and animal creatures. ...My heart races as I imagine it—not especially from fear, although I know that's part of it, but because of the thrill of singing a bear cub to sleep perhaps. Who has that privilege on any given day? During the daytime, I'm inclined to interact with the landscape...I love, for example, that dip in the forest horizon just before we enter the river mouth. The echoes are so incredible and such fun to play with (personal communication, June 16, 2005).

I think what occurs in these moments is an open state of delighted creativity combined with an acute and complete awareness of one's singing apparatus, technique, and emotion. The educator Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988) calls this *flow*—what he terms an “optimal experience.”

Here is Brooke again:

Connecting to God, feeling a permission to do what I love, and feeling that it makes sense, and belongs. I feel grateful. I recall the time singing Wendy's part at end of the Bear encounter that I was absolutely in a trance.⁴ I didn't realize time passing whatsoever, [this is] very special. That trance state has happened up there numerous times, and I can't recall it happening similarly elsewhere at all. Is perception of outdoor singing equally moving? The night aria, sung outdoors with the accompaniment of loons is

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transporting—not just beautiful (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

But, I asked, can we access the frailty of this experience—the collaborative spirit, reached through the mystical abyss of vulnerability, and bring it back to the 10 cubic metre studio or the concert stage? And Brooke's response:

Yes, you can recall it...or at least use a kind of sensation-memory to reference it...I don't want to believe that it can be called up without that outdoor interaction. I like the Romantic idea of participating in creation with something greater than myself, but I guess this doesn't deny that interaction. The experience outdoors can work as an opening, allowing the connection to be made in other situations. I guess my example would be the Schafer recital, with the Princess aria at St. George's.⁵

With these vignettes, I have attempted here to portray the phenomenon of singing in a wilderness experience and space. We who are fortunate enough to be able to participate in Schafer's work are exposed to these transformations, and know the freedom that allows a total self-emptying in our song. As Brooke points out:

The fear of making so much noise in such an expansive, public space—overcoming this leads to an acceptance of your sound as is, and of your capacity to impose upon the sonic landscape without guilt. It is an intoxicating freedom, and leads to exploring sound (your voice and any other 'instruments' you can find or devise) in much more creative ways. This perhaps has something to do with why there is so much comfort in improvising at Wolf, speaking as one who has difficulty improvising in many other settings. It is good for the psyche, to sing out in nature, and it is, at least for me, a marvellous spiritual release! (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

Many of us have found that we are able to return to that transformed place with similarly opened and free senses, allowing a new commitment to vulnerability to the music being sung and the sound created. I think this arises from a new commitment

and necessity for feeling the music in the wilderness, rather than relying on hearing, analysing and reacting to one's product in relation to a potential or typical audience. In the wilderness there is only the self-emptying. The audience—the trees and rocks and lakes—is vulnerable and also open. There is no difference in state between singer and hearer.

Jan suggests,

I'll start with the word *offering*, because that's essentially what I think we all do. It's not a performance really...and it's closely linked to the word 'hospitality' too. Those of us who dare to sing alone or with others as part of the project are offering something to the creatures in whose house we stand...to the granite who listens with big ears, to the ferns and leaves who wiggle and respond in the wind, to the stars who I can imagine are twinkling and encouraging me to sing softer, to the nocturnal critters who I imagine stand perfectly still in amazement or horror or awe at what they're hearing (personal communication, May 25, 2005).

These offerings come from a deep and centred place and flow essentially—almost involuntarily out of love—resulting in a self-emptying void of concern for notoriety, status—even perfection. I would not say that such centeredness is not possible without singing to and with a tree, but the potential for transformation of one's sound and being is enormous. Standing, or sitting or lying on this rock—makes it easy to—in echoes of William Shakespeare, "Bequeath to Death your numbness."³

My principle work as a performer involves conducting, particularly choirs. I have learned that my most profound efforts occur when I am able to be completely vulnerable in front of the groups I lead. What this vulnerability allows is a free flow of music to and from and with the singers. Our audience and indeed the oneness of our being: the music itself. And if, after pre-rehearsal problems or performance-thwarting events, I return to this rock – this space of self-emptying – my numbness recedes and music has the life that we all crave it to give us.

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Endnotes

1. A brief synopsis of the *Patria* cycle and *Patria Music Theatre Projects* is available from the *Patria* website at www.patria.org. For a more detailed discussion of the *Patria* cycle and of R. Murray Schafer's concept of the theatre of confluence, see Schafer's *Patria: The Complete Cycle*.
2. The oral delivery of this paper included slides and soundscapes of a wilderness space. The space shown is a rock emerging from a shallow lake.
3. The Princess of the Stars is a prominent character in both the *Prologue* and the *Epilogue* of the *Patria* cycle. As she joins the Great Wheel of Life, her aria includes reference to being one with all the creatures in the forest and one with the lakes, flowers, trees, rocks, and hills.
4. Brooke is speaking about an aria traditionally sung at the end of an encounter, created annually by the members of the Bear Clan that allows Wolf Project members to hear again the story of Shalana, the Shining One, whose voice is heard in the rocks and rippling waters of a deep gorge through which participants climb on their way to Shalana's resting place. The very evocative final aria is heard cascading through trees.
5. From Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Act V: Scenes 1-3.