

Music Patron in Conversation: Music & Nature

In November, we took a deep dive into the rich topic of music and nature with celebrated nature writer and conductor [Lev Parikian](#) and three nature-inspired composers: [Emily Peasgood](#), [Stuart MacRae](#), and [Lisa Robertson](#).

Don't worry if you missed it! You can watch the recording, [listen to the audio](#) and scroll down to the transcription below. For more information about the panelists and Music Patron, head to our website.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

Thank you everyone for coming along to this music and nature discussion. I'm [Sonia Stevenson](#), I'm Head of [Music Patron](#).

Music Patron is here to reimagine philanthropy, and one of the ways that we reimagine that is to offer people the chance to connect with composers, kind of step into their wonderful creative world, understand their creative process.

I think that's very much what today is all about, it's kind of lifting the lid on these themes of nature and music, which so often go together, but maybe we don't get the chance to explore, and explore in the many different guises that you'll hear, what it means to each of these composers. But I thought before we start talking about lots of words, it'd be nice to ground ourselves in nature itself.

So, wherever you are right now, maybe you've got something natural you can see out your window or in your room or just in your mind's eye. Just take a moment to breathe and look. Really, really look and observe.

I am looking at these goose feathers. I picked these up on the island of Bardsey, the Welsh island. It's an amazing bird sanctuary. Yeah, they really spoke to me. So, they've sat on my desk ever since. They're a reminder of something very wild and far away.

Here we are all together. First, I'd like to welcome our wonderful host [Lev Parikian](#). I can't think of anyone better to host this than Lev. I'm sure he'll say a bit more about himself, but yeah, he started life as a percussionist and then a conductor, and all the while nurtured a love of birds and nature. And then found himself writing about nature. And now he's a proper nature writer with four books, four nature books under his belt.

He's a contributor to [The Guardian; Country Diary](#), to the to [The TLS](#), Birdwatching Magazine, and Lev you really have a way with words. Lev ran a [World Cup of random English](#) words on Twitter, which completely went viral. And I've forgotten which word one it was that won!

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

It was shenanigans.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

Oh, that's a good one.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

The things you do to, to keep yourself amused. And then it turns out you're doing it in public view, and everybody thinks it's a halfway decent idea. Strange time, but it was a great party. Great, great fun while it lasted.

Thank you so much for inviting me, and welcome, everyone, to what I hope will be a stimulating discussion with our wonderful composers.

Just very briefly about myself, as Sonia says, my life has been steeped in music and also nature, that really was a childhood love of birds, which literally sat in abeyance for quite a long time and then came surging back in the last 10, 15 years, and I think it's all the stronger for it, and that has, as I say, led to a parallel career as, for want of a better word, a nature writer.

So, I have feet in both camps here. I've got the creative thing; I'm not a composer, but I do create things, and I'm a recreative musician, leading musicians in performances of other people's work. It's always interesting to me to have a think about where - not just where ideas come from - that's the traditional question people get asked who are creating, where do you get your ideas? Usually from my experiences it's not having the ideas that's the problem, it's sifting out the ones that will fly, the ones that will actually be worthwhile, and then having the perseverance to turn them into something. So, I'll be interested to talk to all three composers about that part of it, but also the role that nature plays for each of them and I think they have certainly varying outlooks on this subject.

I thought I'd start by asking each of you to say a little bit about yourselves and in no particular order, but because I've got you first on the list, Lisa, would you like to just kick us off and say a little bit about yourself? I think where you live is important for this, and how nature affects your work as a composer.

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Okay! Hi, I'm [Lisa Robertson](#). I'm a composer and violinist as well, from the West Highlands of Scotland.

Nature has always been really fundamental to my music; I think largely from having grown up in a place like this that's very, I mean, nature is everywhere. It's very wild. It's very present, very inspiring. It's very much the topic of a lot of my pieces, but it's also really just at the core of the music, and I've always found it really important to consider my surroundings here as quite important really to my identity as a person and also, musically. So, it's sort of about situating my voice within the environment I've grown up in and live in now.

So, a few different aspects there!

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Excellent. Thank you very much.

Stuart, how about you? Do you live in the West Highlands?

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

I don't live in the West Highlands, but I am from the Highlands originally, so I'm from Inverness and my parents were both from Skye.

So, I spent all of my childhood holidays on the Isle of Skye, and that was, I suppose, where I first started to really develop a sense of a relationship with nature and landscape, and in some ways, I guess it's a very similar landscape to the one that Lisa is familiar with. That is where my roots come from in a way.

But I live in Edinburgh now, so I'm looking at different patterns of nature. And I think that's appropriate for me because I've always kind of thought of the interesting

relationships between humans and nature and the idea of the two being integrated and, in some sense, that the semi-rural areas that I have around where I live are just as interesting to me from a nature point of view as the wild kind of highlands.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Absolutely. I visit Edinburgh once a year every summer, and I'm always amazed at how close nature is to the center of the city. I mean, if you walk along Water of Leith, which is ten minutes' walk from the center, a bit of an uphill walk, but you can find Dippers, Grey Wagtails, Herons, everything! It's just fantastic.

Thank you. That's great. So, Emily, you are neither from the Highlands nor Edinburgh. Was your upbringing slightly different?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah. I'm a sound artist and a composer, but I also am a visual artist, and I make work that is outdoors in nature and makes people want to be in a specific place or connect with the land in some way.

I use field recording as part of my process because I want to create a sense of awe and magic for the natural world. I just spent three months in the West Highlands and the Hebrides [recording sounds for an album that I'm working on](#), which is comprised entirely of natural sounds because I want to find the music in nature.

It inspires my work immensely. My visual work and my sonic work, and I'm particularly interested in how humans and nature interact and the symbiosis, the sonic symbiosis can be found between them. Yeah.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

That's brilliant. Thank you.

The sounds of nature, I think, are something that are obviously going to spring up, and we'll probably come back to, because it's maybe one of the first things that people will think of, because it's the most obvious thing.

I'm thinking, something that I've written and spoken about quite a lot is the representation of birdsong in music, which has a long and varied history. That's an obvious thing too to draw on. The music of birdsong that we have been surrounded within throughout our existence, I think there's no doubt it has deep roots in a lot of music. I'm an urban person. I live in South London, where you might think that there isn't that much, but again, like Edinburgh, it's definitely there if you look for it.

The West Highlands seem to have a great draw and certainly as a city dweller I find myself, when I have the chance, drawn more and more to the wilder places, which I think, tapped into something that I've pondered quite a lot, which is what do we mean by nature? Everybody, I think, has a different meaning of nature that they understand. It's broadly understood, but for some people, I think especially nowadays, this connection has been slightly eroded and their contact with the natural world might only be through a TV screen. They might watch a David Attenborough program and think, oh, okay, that would be wonderful and then they go out and look for something and the reality of it is completely different, because what they're used to is seeing the exciting bits, beautifully shot with a thrilling soundtrack, and then they go out and try and find some birds on an expanse of mudflat and are slightly disappointed by the lone Shelduck that's sort of dabbling around it in the distance.

Thinking of the different places we all live in and our surroundings, I'd like to tap briefly into the beginning of the process, and for each of you where a piece begins. I know this is something I don't like talking about with my own work, so I'm going to make you talk about it instead!

Lisa, you say you're surrounded. You're obviously surrounded by the natural world and wildlife, and you live in, for the British Isles, certainly a very wild place and quite remote for many people. Do you start your compositions while out on walks in the Highlands or is it a desk process from the beginning?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

I spend a lot of time outdoors, just in daily life. It's not sort of an active thing to go out and seek inspiration, but it certainly kind of seeps in just from daily life, certainly.

I think ideas tend to start from research, whether it's kind of actively reading things or quite often recent pieces have been sparked by conversations I've had with people in my local area who are experts in some kind of environmental issues. So, I'm quite involved in some environmental groups. One piece was inspired by a conversation I had

with the ranger of a nature reserve in my area, and something he pointed out to me that was really interesting. So that sparked some ideas, and then, yeah, musical things tend to be, I tend to use natural sounds quite early in the process to kind of create material.

So transcribing birdsong being the one we've discussed already, the obvious tangible one, and also, other kinds of soundscape sounds and recreating those in the music.

So, from a material point of view, I suppose being outside, witnessing these sounds, recording some of them, taking them home and transcribing them would be quite early in the process as well.

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Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

I'm just interested in this transcribing thing because of course birds generally, very often they make sounds that are quite elusive to represent in musical form.

How do you transcribe? Do you find it a bit of a torturous process, or do you find a way, your own language, to express that and write it down?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, I'm really interested in that. I think it varies depending on the piece. It depends on what sources it's going to be for, who's going to be playing it. Sometimes you're adjusting what you hear a little bit to simplify it for the purposes of the performance. In other pieces I'm really trying to be as painstakingly accurate as I can with my ears.

Although we know that we're sort of translating it into a human way of experiencing it and recreating it, which is not ever going to be quite the same kind of richness and complexity of sound that we hear.

So, yeah, I find that quite interesting. It's like the sort of human translation of the bird sounds, and there are different degrees to which you can do that.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

There really are. I ran for a while on Twitter (you can tell I spend a lot of time on Twitter), a daily project called [Twitter Birdsong](#) because it occurred to me that people would be enlightened and interested and it's something I'm passionate about.

So, I did a bird a day and said a little bit about each bird on the recording. A friend of mine who's a musician, a brilliant musician, emailed me saying "I've got this bird in my garden and it's singing, and I don't know what it is", and she transcribed the song in, I think it was in $\frac{3}{4}$ and it completely flummoxed me because I just thought, I can't! I've read through what she'd written and there was no doubt, you know, she put sharps and flats and everything, and it was all very meticulous, but I couldn't make head or tail of it. I couldn't marry that transcription with any birds I knew. So, I asked her if she could, you know, listen out for it and grab a recording, and in a nano-second I knew it was a wren!

I'm really interested that you start with the natural sounds. Certainly, in one piece that I listened to the other day, '[am fior-eun](#)' which is an orchestral piece that you had played by the RSNO. There are some very visual and visible natural sounds that you recreate. Perhaps you can talk a little bit about those in that piece and how the music grows from it?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah! So that piece was about the local eagle population in my area. The title is the old Gaelic word for eagles.

I started with the sound of the golden eagle call, which kind of repeats throughout the piece. So, it became quite a fundamental part of the material, which kind of underpinned the work and grew and developed. For that piece I was really interested in - I spent a lot of lockdown watching Eagles flying around the place, and I got quite obsessed with the different kind of flight modes that they have - so I wanted to represent those in the piece visually.

I tried to recreate that movement where the bird kind of slides across the orchestra. So, the sound traveled between the players and there was a sort of swooping gesture at various points and a kind of dive bombing, to try and recreate that kind of visual movement, and then you could sort of hear the sound traveling as well.

So, yeah, those two things and then kind of recreating some of the sounds in their environment as well, like wind and their kind of airspace.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Oh yes. I love that.

One of the things I loved is that spatial feeling for a live performance. If you're wearing headphones, you could probably do a crossfade from ear to ear, but if you're in the hall, you can almost see the sound moving across the orchestra. Underpinning that, I think you incredibly effectively recreate these background sounds of wind and so on. Perhaps you can just talk a little bit about those techniques that you use to do that?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, so in that piece I created a few various things that make kind of white noise.

The wind and brass players were playing air notes, so it is a lot of wind sounds there as well. Then in the percussion, they were using paper on the head of the timpani drum, bass drum and kind of swooshing it around to make swooshy wind like sounds that kind of had gusts and different shapes. In the end, it's really effective, I think, because it's kind of there, but not overpowering, it's just something that is like the wind in the background.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Stuart. We talked just then about some very specific nature subjects, eagles. I'm incredibly envious of having eagles on your doorstep, there's not many around here in South London. Your interest is equally deep, but do you find yourself representing natural things in that way, or would you say it underpins your work in a more, I don't know, not subtle but pervasive way?

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

Well, the answer is kind of both, and in some ways, I was really struck by something I think Lisa said there, which was "human translation of sound". That's a really good way of putting it.

I think something that I've been quite interested in in the last few years is the impossibility of accurately imitating certain natural sounds with orchestral instruments or

even with a piano, but embracing the kind of flawed results that, that, that come from an attempt to do so.

So, you know, for example, in my opera [Anthropocene](#) I was constantly trying to grasp this sound of, you know, sometimes if you throw a stone across, some ice that's on a lake or on top of the sea, and you get this weird kind of whistling, burbling sound? I tried to think of so many ways of producing a sound a bit like that in an orchestra, and none of them really got close to it.

But, as a byproduct, I had about 5 or 6 really interesting sounds that somehow, emotionally felt like they were related to ice and to that kind of surface of ice. That was something that I found really fascinating and interesting, because I wouldn't have come up with those musical ideas without that initial impetus. In the end, I didn't care about the fact that I didn't have that original sound, it was the fact that it had branched out into many different possibilities for me.

So, I suppose in a way I'm harvesting those natural sounds as a resource, as a composer, rather than trying to put people literally into that place at that time, which I think is a great thing to be able to do.

But the reason I didn't do it in [Anthropocene](#) was because part of the story is it's about a crew, a science expedition on a ship, and they get stuck in the north of Greenland over the winter, and all their technology breaks down, their communications breakdown. I thought it would be quite interesting to reflect that breakdown of technology, and something we rely upon very heavily for our survival, to represent that by the imperfection of the imitation of natural sounds. So rather than using field recordings, kind of real sounds, I use these imitative sounds that in the end branched quite far away from their original sources.

Once you notice something like that happening in your work, you tend to think, oh, I could do more with that, so I've explored that in a couple of other things as well.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah, that's really interesting. Also, the realization that where you originally intended to go with something isn't the ultimate destination, but the ultimate destination is perhaps even more interesting and takes you, as you say, with branches going off in different ways. That's really interesting.

So, you mentioned field recordings there, which brings us neatly to Emily! You use field recordings of various kinds quite a lot in your work. I wondered if you could maybe talk a little bit about, [Sounds of the subaquatic](#), which is a recent work you've done using a lot of field recordings.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

I want my work to be outside because I'm interested in how we access sound and music, and I really feel a lot of people feel alienated from Western music because of this feeling of exclusivity, and so, part of using outside and certain sounds of nature is to encourage people to experience sounds in places where everyone is welcome, essentially.

A bit like Lisa and Stuart, I try to sometimes translate sounds.

I think it's quite interesting that the sound of birds is quite like their physical movements, quite sharp and fragmented and lively and quick, and then in contrast, whales sound like, sort of slow, long, like syrup moving through water, and then humans, our music tends to be based on walking, on the sense of walking and pace and meter.

I always think, how can I create something that's from a different perspective? And that's what drives my interest in field recording.

With a piece I did called [Birds and Other Stories](#), I wanted to know, what do we sound like to birds? What do we sound like to species underwater? How do humans sound? And could we create a piece from their perspective, from that perspective? And then I thought, why are women, you know, why are we women, why are women and girls often considered to be birds? Why are we called birds? Why we called chicks? So, I wrote this piece called [Birds and Other Stories](#), and it visually looks like a tree with birds in it.

Lots of people have done interpretations of birds, and it involved transcribing bird calls, but it was more transcribing women bird calls. There are birds in it, but there are transcriptions of women talking about their experiences of being called birds.

But yeah, I'm very driven to think about how other species hear us and that's why I record sounds from that perspective and, [Sounds of the subaquatic](#) was a project where I was trying to capture biodiversity in about nine different wetland ponds. It was a project for the [Royal Parks](#), and ultimately it resulted in discovering that biodiversity is disappearing from freshwater ponds because of people feeding the ducks. There was music in that. There's music in the loss of sounds, and it was a really interesting project.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah, I presume you also, when you're making these field recordings and you listen to them over again, you come back to them and you'll hear things that you didn't hear at the time, maybe? I mean obviously when recording underwater there are things, like sort of accidental sounds.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

And atmospheric sounds that then can cause something.

An interesting thing about feeding the ducks, I'll so often I see a sign by the pond, and it says, "please do not feed the ducks bread because it's bad for them" and there are people quite happily doing that.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

It ruins the biodiversity, and what you are left with is noise. I mean, underwater sounds, it sounds like a field full of song underwater.

I mean, I recorded loads of insects and beetles, and it sounds like chirping. They sound like birds, and what's really interesting is I had a collection of what I thought were insect sounds of beetles and in fact it's the sound of photosynthesis which I captured. It's this percussive sound and it sounds like a glockenspiel. It's incredible. And you lay them over each other, and they create these amazing polyrhythms. I'm working on a piece with that right now, actually. Just the photosynthesis is so musical and beautiful.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Absolutely fascinating. I would, I don't think anybody would have thought that photosynthesis has a sound.

I suppose advances in technology have helped your work a lot. I'm thinking about some of the earlier, you know, when recordings started being used. I think the first one I can think of is [Respighi's Nightingale](#) the, at the end of the Pines of Rome. The glorious thing about that being, the music stops for a second and you hear this lone bird captured 100 and whatever it is years ago, and it's still alive as part of the music in every performance.

But with things becoming more sophisticated now and compositional techniques, as you were talking about Stuart, trying to find a way of representing the sound of a stone on ice and the reverberations afterwards. Do you sometimes find that there's almost too much choice at your disposal that you've got to consciously be selective about how you write things once you start?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

One of the biggest problems, I don't know if you guys have this, but once you start recording sound and capturing sound, it's very addictive. It's really hard to not hear something and think I've got to record that, that could be useful.

Yeah, but also, in my three months away, where I just woke up, I stayed in a van, I drove to remote places and just did field recording every single day. I drove to remote places and just did field recording every single day. I think from three months, I actually only have about an hour of really usable sound, so I don't know if that's true.

Like you said, you can go on a mudflat and just, there's one bird. Yeah, I try and record that bird really well.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah. We're all nodding there. That whole thing of we've all written reams and reams of material and then in the end, you end up cutting it back and cutting it back and getting rid of it. What we all want as creatives is the shortcut where we get it right first time and we don't have to go through writing 50,000 words to get 1000 or whatever it is. But it doesn't work like that, does it? Unfortunately.

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

I think I'm quite utilitarian in that aspect in that when I'm looking for ideas or inspirations or materials from nature, I'm mainly looking for what's useful to spur my imagination to make the piece, because my pieces usually don't have to be very much about a particular thing.

So, in a way, once I've found the things that are going to make me write the piece in the way that I want to write it, then I sort of stop looking around for other materials, and I just focus on that material.

I mean, I can give an example, maybe, I don't know, 15 years ago or something like that, when I was a bit fitter, I used to go and walk up munros by myself and I went to Glen Affric, which is this beautiful, unspoiled bit of the Highlands. When I was there it was a horrible, rainy, misty day, but I had a great time going up a couple of hills there and didn't see another soul all day.

I sheltered beside this big rock at the top of the mountain. And because there were no kind of, not the usual kind of grand views and things, I started focusing on the very tiny things around me and one of the things I saw was this amazing little lichen that was kind of trumpet-like in form and I'd never really noticed anything like that before, but there were really, you know, lots of little trumpets sticking out of this rock while I was having my sandwich.

That was the memory that I took away from that day, and then many, many years later, when I was asked to write a piece, by the [Sequoia duo](#), inspired by some type of Scottish plant life, I chose this, not really a plant, but this lichen. What fascinated me was that it was a symbiosis between an alga and a fungus. That idea of the symbiosis of two things kind of coming together to make something else seem to me to fit with this idea of a violin and cello duo. I wrote [the piece](#) kind of about that experience of finding that little lichen, but it was the structure of the thing and the knowledge about the way it is constructed that informed the piece.

There's a certain weirdness about the piece as well, atmospherically, that reflects my feelings about the day, so that there are a couple of different layers to it, but that's the way I use it, in a sense. I've kind of put it in the memory bank, and then when I'm writing a piece, something about that structure from nature comes through in the way that I form my material musically.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

That's brilliant. A couple of things that occurred to me as you were talking about that. Firstly, the thing of going, you know, climbing, going for a walk and something that most people will think of is “oh, the wonderful view, the huge expanse that you'll get, the wonderful view of the whole world”, and yet you find yourself, your eye, because you're observing, caught by this very tiny thing, and taking something like that.

Brilliant. Just 50 yards from our house, we have a postbox on the corner. and for many years it was very kind of peeling red paint and quite decrepit, but on that little dome top there was this miraculous world, which was a mixture of peeling, crusting, old red paint and three different lichen species that were growing quite happily, yellows and greens and grays. I took photographs of it on my tiptoes with my phone like that [mimics taking photograph with phone above head], I was pretty sure I was the only person to have noticed it because most people just, you know, post their letters. I'd make sure I looked at it and checked in on it to see how it was going.

Then two years ago, they repainted it and I entered a period of protracted mourning for those lichens and hoping that they'll grow back one day.

So that thing of the symbiosis, but also the, as I say, the looking for one thing and then finding another.

Lisa, I'm going to pivot quite outrageously here to your seagulls. Unlike many nature writers I embrace the word seagull. You'll get a lot of birders going “oh, there's no such thing as a seagull”, but it is fine, people know what you mean by seagull. Your piece Seabirds...

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

[Seabird Cities](#)

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

You write about visiting St. Kilda, and the seabird colonies there, but contrasting that experience with moving from the wild place to the city and encountering the same birds in a different environment, perhaps you could maybe just expand a little bit about that?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

For me, growing up, spending time in my home in the West Highlands, but also, you know, going further out into the Hebrides, out to St. Kilda even, just hearing these incredible bird sounds was very much a part of my life, my childhood particularly. So, there is that kind of feeling of belonging or something with those sounds.

Then when I was in Glasgow studying at the Conservatoire there, spending time in the city and feeling it was a bit kind of alienating from the place I was from, and then just hearing the sound of seagulls, it feels like quite an out of place sound in a way. It kind of brought me back to those kinds of wild places that I was used to.

And yes, it's just very interesting being in completely different locations and seeing how they behave in the city. People are often not very fond of them in the city. They think they cause problems, whereas if you're in a beautiful, wild, cliffland landscape, they're seen in a different light as well. But yeah, there's particularly the sound and how you could be going about your day not thinking about it particularly, and then you just hear the sound of one of these birds, and that kind of takes you to another place.

I found that really, really interesting and moving as well. That kind of sparked this piece where I was kind of contrasting the two different sound worlds, I suppose, where these birds found themselves.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

That's fascinating.

Certainly, gulls in cities are something people, as you say, most people don't like them very much.

The constant complaint is, "oh, it nicked my chips", well, don't eat your chips out in the open. They're notorious klepto-parasites, they're notorious, they will have it. It's free food. So, perhaps they're the clever ones and they're not so stupid.

I remember very well last summer in Edinburgh, in the center. You know, early morning is a good time for this because the bins haven't been taken away yet. Seeing a Lesser Black-Backed Gull, on Princess Street having at a huge bag of crisps and opening it, ripping it open and gobbling up all these crisps. That was fantastic. Not only was it very close to it but it was so caught up with getting any food that it didn't really mind how close I was, but also urban birds can be very trusting and allow you to get close. But the inventiveness of it too to find this food while also warding off the attention of competitors.

I always find it fascinating seeing and hearing birds in city centers, to see how they've adapted to us and how we react to them because we generally, and that's reflected in what you said, we generally don't like them to be too close, for the nature to be too close. We might admire a swarm of bees in the distance, but when it comes there, we have the same thing. Particularly in London, we have parakeets, which, you know, are very divisive amongst people because they come too close, they invade our space and they're quite noisy and intrusive.

With this underpinning of nature, with all your work, what effect do you think it has on the listener and whether it makes a difference to the listener to know in advance this piece is nature inspired or how much one needs to necessarily know about a piece of music in advance?

I don't know, does anybody want to chip in on that idea and how that informs the way you write?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

I mean, I like to think of it as being, like, sort of layers.

A listener should be able to enjoy the piece and get a lot from it and hear your voice and form their own impressions of it if that's the level they choose to experience it on.

If they want to read the program notes, then they'll understand that on the next level.

If they want to look into it even more, then they'll access something even deeper than that. I think that's quite exciting, but it's important, I think, that a listener should get a lot from it without knowing anything in advance too.

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, I agree with that.

I always want pieces to work in their own right, regardless of whether you know what they are, what they're inspired by or what they're about.

I tried for a while writing pieces that had completely abstract titles, and deliberately not revealing some of the ideas behind them, but I think people find that a bit hard to relate to.

I think I found a kind of happy medium whereby I was a bit happier to talk about the ideas behind a piece and maybe reflect that in the title of a piece, but without expecting the audience necessarily to have to relate to it on that level.

If I'm writing a piece that for me is inspired by a place on the Isle of Skye that someone else has never been to or seen, then it's not going to mean very much to them unless it speaks to them in another way, human to human.

That's why there's, as Lisa says, more than one layer to it, and if you invite people into any one of those layers, then you give them a better chance of enjoying your music, I think.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

The invitation to imagination as well.

Emily, a lot of your work is different. It actually will involve people; you know there'll be community projects and things so your approach might be slightly different maybe?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah. I mean usually it's fairly implicit.

I did a project with an artist called [Alison Neighbour](#) called [Beacons](#), and it was a collective call for climate action. We took all this work and went to do this in communities.

Our first one was in Folkestone, and we basically invited people to search for Sea Gooseberries, which, if you know what they look like, are sort of round and glassy and really beautiful, and they sometimes wash up on the seashore. We buried them in little wooden boxes in about a ten mile area for a month and people had a map and had to find these things, and they then put them in their window, and when they glowed, they then brought them to the beach for this really unusual, magical performance, which was a collective call for climate action. That was quite a big project. I think around a thousand people came to that, to the performance.

And then other projects I've done, I did one called [Isle of Sound](#), where I asked people what their homes sounded like. How would you characterise your town in a soundscape? I taught local people during lockdown, and it attracted a lot of people. I

think for that reason, hundreds of people took part in schools, and they went out with their phones and recorded sounds and captured the sense of their location. In each location, there were seven locations, each sounded quite unique. I then made a long form composition from them, in which each area had their own soundscape which was installed in a station. When you hear them all at the same time, it forms like a symphonic piece. They sort of layered together.

Those projects I do it's often part of the process that people know it is inspired by nature. It's not a conscious decision. I don't think what I'm going to tell them, it just is part of the context I suppose.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

You find yourself doing it.

The idea of soundscapes always fascinated me. It was [R. Murray Schafer](#), wasn't it?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Murray Schafer? Yeah, he did an amazing video called '[Listen](#)' where he talks about it. I show it to my students because I teach field recording.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

It's the first thing I show them.

But yeah, soundscapes are interesting because they're rejecting, they can be done quite musically, like there's, there's the [Empire of Coffee](#) that [Matthew Herbert](#) did where he recorded sounds of a coffee machine with his field recorder and made a soundscape, but it's a very musical piece.

But it's almost like some of them totally reject the form and structure of traditional Western music I suppose and then it's not about having a meter, it's about creating

textures and feelings. So, yeah, I really enjoy them and I'm trying to embrace them more because it might create a new kind of creative freedom to not be led by forms and structures that I think I previously adhered to.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

It's an enticing way, and it's an invitation when you say, what is your silence? For so many people, they may not have thought for a second that there are different silences. You know, [John Cage](#), obviously he didn't want just total silence, it was about the silence that you experience in that particular room, and everyone is different. This idea that every place sounds different, that's not necessarily a musical idea, but it's a life idea. The way you turned it into something musical is, I think, really interesting. It's to do also with creating the atmosphere of a work.

I mean, obviously there are, and this applies to writing as well, the way you use notes or words to create a world that you're instantly in. Stuart you'll know this from writing a lot of opera, which is that the world you create is made with that first gesture.

Certainly, in the writing world, there's a lot of obsession with writing courses and things like that with getting the beginning right, because that's what you sent to agents and publishers, so it's got to be perfect. I'm interested in that, but I'm also interested in how to how to finish. But perhaps we can talk about beginnings.

Stuart, for example, do you have, when you know a piece, do you know how it's going to begin and then it goes from there? Or does it vary, or is it a range of approaches?

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

It varies.

Some pieces I start at the beginning, and I don't necessarily work my way through to the end, but I sort of know that the thing that I start with is the beginning, and it sets a certain atmosphere and pacing.

In operas in particular, it's slightly different. I kind of have developed a principle where after writing most of the opera or even all of it, I do go back and see if I need to rewrite that beginning because so much has happened along the way that you need to make sure that you are setting it up in the right way.

So sometimes that means adding a few seconds at the beginning. Sometimes it means rewriting, sometimes it means just zhuzhing it up a bit so that you really are kind of launching people into the piece that you now know, with the knowledge of what it's going to be. But at the beginning of that process, you don't really know what the whole piece is going to be.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah, yeah.

Lisa, do you know what the beginning of every single piece you've ever written is going to be? Or is it much vaguer than that?

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, I don't know if I really, yeah, no, I usually do start at the beginning. So that's probably the first challenge to address.

Really interesting point though about a longer form and then coming back to the beginning, I think that's really interesting. Yeah, maybe it becomes more important the longer the piece is, that's really interesting.

But yeah, it certainly sets up the piece for what it's going to be. So it takes some thought.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah, I think so certainly from the layperson's point of view.

Looking from the questions I've been asked about books and about pieces of music I've conducted, this fascination with how the ideas come, but also how they're developed sometimes if it's an immersive piece or something that, you know, you did, [something with lifts](#) didn't you?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

I just think lifts are really beautiful, yeah. I was really obsessed with them as a kid. I thought when the doors opened, it would be really cool if something magical was there, and so I did this piece where... well, normally my ideas happen when I'm on the toilet or in a shop or on a walk.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Or doing the washing up.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah. And they're stupid, the things that people would say are stupid. You know, we all have crazy ideas, and we think, "oh, no", but I really indulge in those. I think that's where the juiciest ideas come from.

Yeah, the [lift piece](#). I just was looking at the lift in [Turner Contemporary](#) where I used to lead a choir, and I thought, this is huge, I could fit 100 singers in here, and that's where the idea came from. We did like an ASDA supermarket tour, and it was more about how we perceive music when we experience it in different venues, we assign more value.

I don't know if you know about Christopher Small's concept of [Musicking](#) as something we do, and how going to the opera or a concert hall, it's a whole ritual.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Yeah.

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

When you're listening to something in a lift, yeah.

The ideas I get are usually random ideas that I just indulge in, but I never know how to start a piece. I sometimes just blur it or, you know, splurge it all out. Yeah, I have loads of ideas and then I go through the piece like a writer would, and I edit it, and I get rid of all the red herrings and things that aren't really essential.

Then I might decide, well, that's how I should open it. Yeah, I rarely start with the start. It's like painting, like a recipe, like ingredients. Yeah. And then I can figure out how to bake it.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Interesting.

So, the editing process, I really enjoy it. Cutting out the things that you recognise are the things that aren't working and then, fixing it is, is, yeah, a hugely enjoyable part of the process. I mean, very, very satisfying.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

I've got a wonderful question from Ellis Coopey. How do you approach translating complex or abstract concepts from the natural world, such as the immensity of ancient woodlands or the duality of day and night? - I love those phrases, they're very poetic - into a cohesive, expressive musical composition, especially when these ideas may not have direct musical analogs?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

I would approach that in terms of texture and if somebody said to me, I want you to commission a piece that captures ancient woodlands, I would go into ancient woodlands with my field recording kit and put a contact mic on a tree, or a Jio Phone in a tree and capture the sound of the tree creaking over a 24 hour time lapse, and maybe make a very expansive, broad piece.

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

I think that each of those things would just spark an idea about one direction that I might take it in, and then I'd kind of focus in on that. Like if I'm thinking about the expansiveness of Highland landscapes, for example, I often think about very expansive harmony, and that becomes the thing that I kind of focus in on.

With woodlands, it might be about the kind of, interconnection between species and thinking of that as a kind of musical device. So, yeah, it probably becomes picking 1 or 2 ways of manifesting each thing.

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

Some of that is intuitive for me.

The idea of immensity is a question of perspective, isn't it? It's about feeling the immensity of time or scale compared to ourselves and the span of our own lives, and therefore thinking about what creates a sense of perspective within music, whether that's distance or the pacing or timing of things.

So, you know, as I say, that would be an intuitive decision in the composition, but delving deeper into how I would do that, that would be the technical way of doing it, I suppose. Yeah.

And duality. Well, in some senses that's a temporal thing, isn't it, it's that you look at one thing at one time and then you move on and go into a different phase that has notably different characteristics.

Those characteristics are so varied, and the possibilities are so many that even if you gave those as challenges to a bunch of composers, you'd come up with a bunch of really different pieces that somehow all had something that unites them, I think.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

We've got another question from Hannah Siddiqui. Have you composed or do you have an interest in composing work that plays on the similarities, or sometimes the friction points between natural processes and sociological ethnographic processes, for example, bird migration and human migration?

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah, it was it was the piece I mentioned earlier, [Birds and Other Stories](#), where I was trying to compare women and birds and explore why we were compared to birds and create soundscape that sounded like the two.

I also did a project called [Crossing Over](#), which was about migration, and that included bird and human migration, actually, which is quite interesting. I've just remembered that one. Yeah.

That's something that I find interesting; comparing human nature, processes, yeah, symbiosis I suppose.

Lisa Robertson (Music Patron Composer)

Yeah. I've written pieces about bird migration as well, perhaps reflecting human migration too.

I've done a recent one kind of comparing, making cultural connections between Scotland and Finland, and then I used bird species that migrate between the two countries.

A lot of my pieces look at climate change. Quite often I've connected human things and natural things to kind of show the combined impact on, on everyone, of the challenges.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

Okay. A question from Brian Balcombe; Emily's piece is described as a collective call for climate action. I wonder what role can music play in the need for the change of attitudes and behaviors in the face of the climate crisis?

Emily is rearing to go!

Emily Peasgood (Music Patron Composer)

The one I did at the Royal Parks, and obviously [Beacons](#) was about a collective call for climate action, and it had a huge amount of engagement. I don't know how effective it was, and if you can prove that it improved things in any way.

As musicians, I don't think we're supposed to save the world with our music, but I have a comment to make on field recording. You can see that more and more people are realising that by field recording certain environments you can actually monitor biodiversity and monitor changes, and it can be as effective as other forms of scientific research.

And so, when I was commissioned by [Royal Parks](#) to record sounds, it wasn't as a composer, they hired me as a field recordist who's experienced in recording microscopic insects and in a field recording tank. They wanted me to do a survey of how healthy each of the different wetland environments across nine different parks were through what you can hear and what species are there.

I then made that into something musical separately, but, but it was interesting because you could clearly see that there was a major problem at Regent's Park, where they're losing whole food chains and so that was interesting because it was sonically demonstrated. You can listen to it, I don't know if I consider that a musical piece though, but you can hear the biodiversity disappearing. It's I don't know if it was music or not, but sound? Certainly.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Well now we're getting onto a whole other track, which is what is music? Yeah, and what is nature? What is music?

Stuart MacRae (Music Patron Composer)

I think about that, I would just like to say very briefly that I think Emily's right that we can't necessarily claim impact on these kinds of questions of climate change, and the environment.

But I think obviously as humans, we're all aware of it, and that's something that is interesting to all of us as humans, and therefore, if we reflect these things through our music, all it can do in a way is hope to stimulate thought and emotional responses in our listeners to something and keep it at the forefront of their imaginations.

In a way, the solution has to come from the whole of society, and not just from somebody writing a piece of music saying, stop destroying the environment, you know? So I think we can play a tiny role in doing that as artists, but our main role is to communicate to other humans, I think, on a human level.

Lev Parikian (Host, Nature Writer)

Absolutely.

I think that from my point of view with the written and spoken word, that what I find most effective is engagement, trying to be enthusiastic about something so that people take an interest in it. Once they're on board, then you can do it. I think there's a danger, it's a really easy trap to fall into, which is the the lecturing position of "we must do something, you must do something, why aren't you doing something?" rather than, you know, which I prefer just to try and be childishly enthusiastic about things and hope that that sticks with some people.

Sonia Stevenson (Head of Music Patron)

Thank you all.

We're going to need to draw it to a close now, but I hope you've all enjoyed this deep dive into such a fascinating and rich, rich subject.

As I said at the start, [Music Patron](#) is all about connecting with composers and kind of going on this deep dive journey. We talked about the layers of imagination, the layers of getting to know a piece. You know, maybe you just listen to it without any understanding of what the background is behind the inspiration, but at Music Patron, you have the opportunity, if you wish to go very, very deep with the composer as they share to their patrons that creative journey.

And also, to connect with [Lev](#)! If you like, I would recommend reading his wonderful books. He has a great newsletter, and he's brilliant on social media too. He's really a force for good there in these dark times of social media.

But yeah, huge thanks to our [three composers](#) today and to Lev and to all of you for joining us.