

In the middle of the sadness of the coronavirus pandemic and the silence of the lockdown, city-dwellers have found consolation and connection in the sound of birdsong / By MARY COLWELL

Listen to our singing planet

THE DAWN chorus of the lockdown flows in through open windows. Suddenly, an atmosphere that is usually dulled by the humdrum of working life is vibrating with cadences of joy.

The liquid-gold song of a blackbird is a warm bed of thoughtful phrases; he is a black-frocked preacher with the voice of an angel. A wren provides the power, a trilling, a pulsating aria that cannot be ignored. It contrasts sharply with the self-consciously pretty song of the dunnoek, who seems too shy to take centre stage, and, anyway, has forgotten the words. “Goodbye my mother-in-law. Goodbye my-mother-in-law” chant the irascible blue tits, too busy with greenfly to waste time with lyricism. Then, like a sprinkling of sugar, goldfinches flutter into the trees and tinkle. No choir of seraphims could sound so sweet. All these characters have lived in my city garden for years, but now I can hear them. Now at last I have the time to listen.

Further out, in the woods that fringe the city, I walk my dog to music that is developing in complexity as more musicians join the orchestra. Nuthatches send an urgent piping through the leaves, which is more assured than the scratchy wail of a tree creeper, or the tiny, high-pitched whistle of a goldcrest.

CHIFFCHAFFS, unfazed by their exhausting migration over desert and ocean, announce their arrival from Africa with their rhythmic tick-tocking. Their lives beat to a different rhythm to ours, one dictated by subtle changes in day length and heat, and barely discernible alterations in the breeze. So small, so light, so tough, these little beings feel the yearly changes and take to the air. Chiff-chaff, chiff-chaff. This simple song brings the heat of the Sahara and rolling ocean waves to a beech tree in Bristol.

They keep rhythm for the maestros of complexity, the blackcaps and garden warblers, who tell of their migration journeys in tumbling songs that transform the woodland into a concert hall. If you are lucky, you may live in a square where nightingales sing.

Above them all, sailing on powerful wings, a buzzard’s mewing makes our eyes

turn heavenwards. This workhorse of the skies tells us a very different story. Its tale is of abundance, then loss and now recovery. To hear and savour its soul cries is to be reminded of our hold over the planet. Once common across Britain it was persecuted to virtual extinction by the beginning of the twentieth century. With protection, it is returning to reclaim the fresh winds over farmland and copse. It is a privilege to hear it without the roar of motorway traffic.

Our enforced slowing down has left us with these fellow travellers as singing companions to cheer us through the days. Each has a story to tell about finding its place in our human-made world. Out there, among the rose bushes and the hawthorn, singing storytellers ask us to listen to their tales.

Many are finding it restful to be treated to this natural music every day. On Twitter recently I came across this moving post: “I wake to the first birdsong every morning and am so thrilled to hear it and know I’m still alive. I could weep to think it’s taken terminal illness to make me so aware of this beauty. What a waste it’s been, waking to the alarm for work all my life.”

A bird singing in the garden had produced an intense connection to what it is to be human. The music of nature can prompt us to question ourselves; it draws us to a reality that does not need our participation, or even our presence. We are a sideshow to their world. Birdsong existed before we hunted and gathered, before we lived in cities, before we created gardens. The music of the birds has enlivened our planet for many millions of years; it is humbling to have come so late to the journey of this singing planet.

St Francis knew this, of course. His life danced to the music of nature and its sacred connection to God.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis turns our gaze from the concerns of modern life to the insights of this holy man of the earth. We are asked to share in the awe and wonder that the saint experienced every day. “Just as happens when we fall in

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A blackbird “with the voice of an angel”; inset, the high-pitched whistling goldcrest

love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise.” And when we are in love we meld our lives to the other, bringing out the goodness of ourselves and of that which is loved – and that includes the earth.

ST FRANCIS understood that all beings sing to God; that we are part of a massed choir whose notes reach heaven. This global orchestra can only be heard in its entirety by the creator. Each of us in our own section only perceives the immediate music around us, but this is just one small part of a vastly greater whole that stretches to infinity. We hear the birdsong, the wind, the sound of rain on leaves in our own patch of the earth, oblivious to the rest. Some songs may seem discordant to our ears, but they are one part of the perfect and harmonious score of the planet.

God hears the endless symphony of the universe in its entirety. What it is to be one phrase of that music, to be just one element that is broadcasting our sacred presence among a countless throng, is a privilege we must never forget.

A scientist friend wrote to me from America this week. “For me,” she says, “lockdown has made me more aware and more connected in many ways, especially this morning. It is in these gentle moments that I feel the closest to nature and I can truly breathe. I just now feel like I am breathing much deeper.”

Mary Colwell is a producer and writer. Her latest book is *Curlew Moon* (HarperCollins, 2018).

