

# Essay by Andrew Purvis

In Norse mythology, the great god Odin had two birds, a pair of ravens called Huginn and Muninn. They were sent out at the dawn of each day to traverse the length and breadth of Yggdrasil, the world tree, gathering knowledge, uncovering secrets, and observing signs and portents. At dusk, they perched on Odin's shoulders, and whispered to him all they had seen. They warned him of the coming of the Fimbulwinter, a sequence of three harsh winters, which were to follow one after the other, without an intervening summer. During the Fimbulwinter, gusts of wind would blow icy snow from every direction, decimating all life in Midgard and paving the way for Ragnarök, the twilight of the gods.

Birdsong is a language. It is a complex system of communication, which enables a variety of social behaviours, including attracting mates, claiming territories, identifying individuals, and warning of predators. Often, it is used to convey information across generations, which means that some bird species possess something that we would regard as culture.

Humans have developed the ability to recognise, interpret and even emulate bird calls and songs. In Ancient Greece, Ornithomancers read omens in the actions of birds. The Romans had an entire college of priests called augurs, who prophesied the future by observing their flight and listening to their cries. Now, in twenty-first century South Australia, expert bird surveyors travel to sites throughout the Mount Lofty Ranges to watch and listen attentively, interpreting the story told by birds.

For more than two decades, the Mount Lofty Ranges Woodland Bird Monitoring Program has tracked population declines of woodland bird species. Through the dedicated labour and generosity of volunteers, surveyors, and landholders, this program has generated a unique and immensely valuable data set. This statistical information is useful in a variety of conservation and land management strategies, but at its core it communicates an urgent message of an ecosystem under threat.

Science is detail oriented and data driven; it translates natural phenomena into useful, usable information. But it is possible that by separating out the statistics from the essential beauty of what is being observed, the findings become unrecognisably dire, rather than compel action and positive change they counterintuitively threaten to instil wearied, depressed surrender. It is important to be reminded of what is precious here, not just the quantitative scale of loss.

Though they may use analogous methods - research, immersion, and long, slow observation - artists and scientists approach the world differently. Rather than seeking to extract functional information, artists pull toward the nebulous; they work with the magic, to enlarge it, to channel it. Working in tandem with science, art has the capacity to help communicate a fuller picture, allowing for a more humanist point of access and greater engagement from the general public.

Amber Cronin's work, Dawn Chorus, is the result of a lengthy residency with the Mount Lofty Ranges Woodland Bird Monitoring Program. Beyond coming to grips with the data set, Amber visited the sites and spent time with the surveyors and volunteers, seeking to understand this community and connect with the source of their passion. A versatile artist working across a range of materials and processes, Amber recognised sound as a key element in this project. Working with vocalist Emma Borgas and composer Kaurna Cronin, Amber has created a complex and multi-layered soundscape that is plangent and affecting.

This work does not seek to improve on nature's melodies but, rather, it recognises the way in which human culture has been shaped and influenced by birdsong. Birds weave like a bright thread through the tapestry of our poetry and song, our myths and legends, and our visual arts and crafts. Magpie-like, Amber's soundscape is constructed from gleaned lines of poetry and musical motifs. As these elements coalesce, the work generates a kind of liminal language, one that speaks across the separation of species.

This work does more than honor the birds; it also recognises the human communities they touch. Haunting and elegiac, Dawn Chorus gives shape to a sense of loss, while also paying tribute to the beauty of birdsong.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

The land that this project was created on is Kaurna Land, and the creative team acknowledge the traditional custodians and respect their unwavering connection to this place.

This project was developed in response to the NCSSA's Woodland Bird Monitoring Program. Its realisation was made possible by the generosity and collaborative contributions of Emma Borgas and Kaurna Cronin.

Thank you to other artistic supporters Andrew Purvis, Ramsay Taplin and Tom Borgas. A special thanks to Jill Woodlands, for seeing the value in artistic collaborations and interspecies friendships.

This development was supported by the dedicated staff of Nature Conservation Society South Australia, particularly Bec Duffield, Kirsty Bevan, Ali Ben Kahn and the incredible team of volunteers and staff that have dedicated themselves to The MLR Woodland Bird Project across its long life.

#### PROJECT PARTNERS:



SCAN HERE FOR AUDIO



# *Dawn Chorus*

Amber Cronin

Single channel stereo recording  
10:10 minutes  
2022

Vocalist Emma Borgas. Mixed by Kaurna Cronin

