

curtainup

faces of
the week

BARACK OBAMA
LAUGHING at American presidents is nothing new - though it's usually because they've been an ass. Thanks to his flawless turn in a Spielberg short - playing Daniel Day Lewis playing Obama - the president is now the hottest comedian on the circuit. Watch out Seinfeld, there's a new kid in town.



DIANA RIGG
If your fondest fantasies concern feisty Emma

FOR mystical French composer Olivier Messiaen, birds were "God's own musicians". For Glasgow-based Anglo-Finnish musician and artist Hanna Tuulikki, whose choral work *Voice of the Bird* comes to the city's Tectonics weekend on 11 May, birds are a gateway into folk culture and a heightened awareness. And for Alaskan-based John Luther Adams, featured composer at this year's East Neuk Festival in July, they represent only the start of a profound understanding of the natural world.

Whether it's down to plain admiration, spiritual inspiration, or sheer professional jealousy, human musicians have long been obsessed by their avian colleagues and the astonishingly diverse and inventive music they compose. And compose really is the right word: the humble blackbird, for example, writes a fresh song each year, beginning with a few simple phrases in mid-February, before selecting the bits it likes most and developing them throughout the spring into a full-blown song - just like the mellifluous elaborations a singer brings to a Baroque opera aria, perhaps.

In fact, it's often the dowdier birds that have the most spectacular songs - think of the blackbird, thrush or nightingale and their elaborate arias, while the magnificent peacock can do little but squawk. As well as singing to stake out their territory, birds also sing to attract a mate - if their drab plumage won't do the trick, perhaps their music will. And if you're in any doubt about the richness and variety of birdsong, BBC Radio 4 can help: the new series *Tweet of the Day*, presented by David Attenborough and beginning on Monday 6 May, will showcase the songs of 265 British birds in 90-second snippets just before the *Today* programme.

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MAIN: It's not the brightest bird to look at, but the blackbird has a song to be cherished; **BELOW:** Hanna Tuulikki (rear) performs *Voice of the Bird* in a scene from a film by Daniel Warren of her recent show at Tramway, Glasgow
Pictures: Getty

TWEET
MUSIC

As a Radio 4 show celebrates birdsong, **David Kettle** argues that try as they might, great composers from Beethoven to Messiaen simply cannot match the colour and complexity of avian airs





DIANA RIGG

If your fondest fantasies concern feisty Emma Peel, you'll be as upset as we are to hear that Dame Diana's no feminist. She wants doors opened for her, a bit of frippery, and prefers not to face female interviewers, because they can be bitchy. Well, they will be now, dear.



ZACH BRAFF

The actor came under fire for crowdfunding for his follow up to *Garden State*. Many say he should raid his own piggy bank. But the real question, some critics point out, is not whether he should pay for the film, but whether he should bother making it at all!

LEE RANDALL

of the blackbird, thrush or nightingale and their elaborate arias, while the magnificent peacock can do little but squawk. As well as singing to stake out their territory, birds also sing to attract a mate – if their drab plumage won't do the trick, perhaps their music will. And if you're in any doubt about the richness and variety of birdsong, BBC Radio 4 can help: the new series *Tweet of the Day*, presented by David Attenborough and beginning on Monday 6 May, will showcase the songs of 265 British birds in 90-second snippets just before the *Today* programme.

Composers have been carefully listening to the birds for centuries, and attempting to emulate their songs in their compositions – with varying degrees of accuracy, and usually, it has to be said, because of the associations and symbolism that birdsong brings with it, rather than for any inherently musical reasons.

One of the earliest medieval English rounds, "Sumer is icumen in", imitates the cuckoo as the herald of longed-for spring – and with its distinctive, easy-to-copy call, the same bird has been a regular visitor to classical pieces ever since. In Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, it sings a trio along with a quail and nightingale (on clarinet, oboe and flute) as part of the composer's depiction of an idyllic woodland scene, and in Delius's evocative tone poem *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*, the clarinet cuckoo is almost hidden among the lush orchestral harmonies conveying the composer's mystical awe at the wonders of the natural world. There are plenty of birds fluttering around in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, and Ravel made them a speciality, in his poignant piano piece *Oiseaux tristes* and a spectacular dawn chorus in his ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*.

Things changed with Messiaen, however – the first composer to put birdsong at the centre of his music. Indeed, his *Réveil des Oiseaux* (which depicts a dawn chorus) and *Oiseaux exotiques* have nothing but birdsong in them, and his massive cycle of piano pieces *Catalogue d'oiseaux* is a musical encyclopaedia of French birds and their habitats.

"I doubt that one can find in any human music, however inspired, melodies and rhythms that have the sovereign freedom of bird song," Messiaen wrote. He would stalk the countryside of France and further afield, meticulously noting down the birds he heard, and transplanting the songs as accurately as he could

WELL IN MUSIC

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PICTURE: DANIEL WARREN

vising with geese. "I began by listening to the sounds they made and tried to imitate them, playing flutes and clarinets. The geese would respond, so the process evolved into a kind of human-bird improvisation."

The event she brings to the Tectonics weekend, *Voice of the Bird*, forms part of a larger project exploring birdsong in Gaelic song – Tuulikki has unearthed the calls of the oystercatcher, whooper swan, manx shearwater and raven, among many other birds, embedded in the music and poetry of the Western Isles. "At Tectonics, we'll premiere the new nine-voice composition, making use of the Old Fruitmarket balconies and floor space to create an immersive experience that evokes the sounds, movements and interactions of several species of birds within a Hebridean landscape," she explains.

Composer John Luther Adams has similar concerns, and he's clear about what drew him to avian music. "I began working with birdsong for the same reason I made my home in Alaska," he says. "I wanted to step outside culture and get closer to the original source of all human creativity: the miraculous beauty and complexity of this world we inhabit." He's been called an "environmental" composer, and as well as drawing inspiration from the natural world in his more conventional concert music, he has composed for outdoor performances, specifically in order to harness unpredictable environmental sounds in his works. "I no longer want my music to be about nature," he says. "I want my music to become nature."

into his music – well, lowered by a few octaves, maybe, and with the birds' tricky microtonal inflections mostly ironed out. Birds don't stick to the notes on a piano keyboard, unfortunately, and you have to be realistic about what we simple human musicians can actually play.

Real accuracy could only come with recording technology – launched by Respighi with the phonograph of a nightingale he asks to be played during his *Pines of Rome*. Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara went further, incorporating birdsong recorded near the Arctic Circle in his haunting *Cantus arcticus*, and the recently deceased English composer Jonathan Harvey applied electronic manipulations to the songs of Californian birds in his wittily titled *Bird Concerto*

with *Pianosong*, stretching them in time so that human ears can truly appreciate their beauty.

Glasgow-based Hanna Tuulikki continues the line of musicians inspired by birds, but she takes quite a different approach. "More than other sounds," she explains, "it's birdsong that draws me out of my conscious mind to full engagement with the here and now. When I listen to the sound of a bird, I become aware of the wider soundscape, the aural environment that surrounds me." She has long experimented with playing music outdoors to respond to the natural sounds around her, and from there it was a natural step to engage with birds themselves, which she did in the sound installation *Call and Response* that saw her impro-



One such outdoor piece is Adams's *Inuksuit*, performed by 30 percussionists in the Cambo Walled Garden as part of this year's East Neuk Festival, whose conclusion is a shimmering evocation of birdsong on piccolos and bells. "It's my hope that a piece like *Inuksuit* may help expand our awareness of the never-ending music of the world around us, transforming seemingly empty space into more fully experienced place," Adams explains.

Back indoors, also at East Neuk is Adams's *songbirdsongs*, which evokes a long walk in the deep woods, with only birds and the rustlings of nature (on piccolos and percussion) for company. Like earlier composers, Adams is unconcerned about slavish authenticity to specific birds' songs, but his aim, he says, is to draw our ears to the environment around us. "Too much precision can deafen us to such things as birds and music," he says. "The vocalisations of birds are incredibly complex. Even if it were possible to reproduce them with human musical instruments, what would be the point?" It's a question that composers have been grappling with for centuries. But authentic or not, as Adams's and Tuulikki's events demonstrate, there's no denying the admiration and affection that avian musicians continue to inspire in their human counterparts.

● Hanna Tuulikki's *Voice of the Bird* will be performed at the City Halls, Glasgow, 11 May, 8pm, as part of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's Tectonics weekend. www.tectonicsfestival.com. John Luther Adams's *songbirdsongs* and *Inuksuit* are performed on 6 July as part of the East Neuk Festival. www.eastneukfestival.com

● For more on Tectonics, see page 10

AVIAN ORCHESTRA



Where to find your favourite birds in classical music

Curlew, above

Messiaen: *Le courlis cendré* from *Catalogue d'oiseaux*

Blackbird

Messiaen: *Le merle noir*; Englund: *Symphony No 2 'Blackbird'*

Chaffinch

Messiaen: *Un vitrail et des oiseaux*

Cuckoo, below

Traditional: *Sumer is icumen in*; Daquin: *The Cuckoo*; Delius: *On Hearing the First Cuckoo in Spring*;

Mahler: *Symphony No 1*;
Britten: *Spring Symphony*



Goldfinch

Vivaldi: *Flute Concerto in D, RV428 'Il gardellino'*

Hen

Rameau, *La poule*; Biber: *Sonata rappresentativa*

Nightingale

Beethoven: *Pastoral' Symphony*; Respighi: *Pines of Rome*