

Symphony and microcosm

Imagine that you could actually understand what musical instruments really say, when they play... maybe the flute sings that it wants some air (in fact flutes do need air, you know)... the violin might ask for attention (everyone needs a little attention now and again)... the oboe lies down on a summers lawn, whistling a melody.

And those instruments, in turn perhaps they understand the marine life sounds? The rivers rippling perhaps also want some air... the seabirds attention... dolphin's hanging out together, whistling their song.

Imagine that – then it all becomes a kind of aquatic music, an Oceans Life Music. A symphony of marine-life. And in my imagination it became a...

Symphony for the Waters

All of my life I've lived close to oceans and rivers. In springtime, as a kid in Sweden, I went down to the beach and sat and talked to "my Big Friend the Ocean". I told the Ocean what I had done since the last time we talked, and I listened to what the Ocean resounded back to me. If you go to the beach and you hear the waves for a while, and then you come back the next day, or the next month, and listen for a few minutes again, then you hear the same sound. It's beautiful, I'm quite sure everyone agrees, but it is repetitive and sounds every time the same. However... when I sat down by the beach and listened to the waves for a bit longer, maybe for an hour or yet longer, listening with my total concentration directed to the ocean... what I heard was that it is every time different. Every wave has a unique sound, the dynamic and tempo and texture and articulation is uniquely different every time. That is what I heard, sitting there reflecting and inventing my own kind of meditation.

I wrote the "Symphony for the Waters" in awe of those oceans. In fact my first inkling was to mimic the "whale song" myself. You can get a long way by screaming into an open Grand Piano, at least I did back in the 1990's. Later the idea of the full symphony came to me. In the evenings one summer, when my new born daughter slept, I was outlining the first version. Drowsy sleepy breathing, that same rhythm – always the same yet every time slightly different. Just like the waves I knew so well.

But there were of course other inspirations as well. Among musicians one main impulse is Mahler. Famously, in each symphony he would strive to create a "world of its own". The marine sounds which I use in this symphony are certainly a world of their own – and a world of sounds never used in this way. Furthermore Mahler is one composer who made Symphony Movements out of his Symphonic Poems. The individual movements of my symphony do work as individual Symphonic Poems. But they are intended to be played as one piece so that the symphonic continuity comes fully into its own. Back to the influence of Mahler though, writing a symphony of five movements might also be inspired by him. As I wrote this music it asked for this construction, it asked for these five parts. Though they decided that for themselves I think there might be a bit of Mahler in there.

The other main inspiration, among composers, is Edgard Varèse. He defined that "music is organised sound", in the sense that – once organised – the sounds of "anything" has become "music". There does not necessarily need to be a musical instrument involved. This

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kind of music became called “musique concrète” in that it uses noises made by “sound objects” – literally anything which can produce a sound. So not only musical instruments, but also objects which exist outside the musical world. Composers used steam engines, train or factory whistles, everyday tools like kitchen utensils and the sounds of other non-musical object as well. Via recording and manipulating, those sounds became a piece of “musique concrète” – or what we could perhaps refer to as a soundscape today. Listening to and studying Varèse’s music it grew on me that I could organise the aquatic sounds so as to make such a piece of music. We talk about whales singing, whale song, and I extended that to other marine and aquatic sounds. In fact creating it was in itself an investigation into how such a soundscape could sound; using those mammals vocalizations, and other marine sounds, as instruments.

When listening to the “Symphony for the Waters” I think one needs to hear these marine sounds as musical instruments. Just as if it were a trumpet. Even though I realise it might not be that easy to make this switch for the listener I think it will be rewarding for those who make the effort. Of course we’re quite used to hearing those marine sounds in documentaries or in their natural habitat. When listening to this symphony one needs to take the time to sink into it. Listen, breathe, and “exist” inside this world of its own marine-soundscape music.

After I created those soundscapes I started the search for which instruments to use. I tried to “sink down into” the sounds and listen until I could hear which various instruments would be suitable. The oceans themselves offered majestic percussive sounds straight out of nature. And indeed the repetitive character added a rhythmical quality to many of the sounds themselves. On the other hand I could easily imagine wind and string instruments as a fine accompaniment of the seagulls and the hippo’s and their aquatic friends. I searched in the rhythms, the flows, the tempos, the patterns, the metres, the accents and stresses, pulses, the time, the beats, the periodicity, the swing. Indeed that artistic research in itself was quite a trajectory. So I do understand if it’s a bit otherworldly for the first-time listener.

Now and again there is a musical instrument which has a solo role (sometimes more than one). That instrument then fulfils a foreground role – as a soloist. But these compositions are not instrumental concertos. The real soloists, also where there are such instrumental foreground roles, remain the marine aquatic sounds.

The 1st movement starts it all off with a light-hearted chitchat of gibberish and fun; an Oceans Dance. The members of the ensemble, aside from the symphony orchestra, are dolphins, sea-lions, beluga whales, flamingoes. Plus water sounds from the respective habitats, and rivers and more. From a musical perspective it’s an organised chaos which draws on the so-called “new complexity” music. The marking “Largo, quasi Allegretto” would need an explanation – how does that work? A Largo and an Allegretto might in fact seem to be each other’s opposites. The Largo parts in this composition – music moving very slowly and rather heavily as if in constant slow motion – refer to the characteristically slow movements of the marine flora and fauna. Think of seagrass meadows, or the slowly pulsating squid making its way through the water. As an overlay to that there are the many extremely quick movements inside the seagrass meadows. That is then the “quasi allegretto” parts in the music. Fish, geese, crabs moving at lightning speed... fast jetting when the squid needs to flee... rain beating down.

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The 2nd movement most evidently picks up the dichotomy of the regular / irregular waves. Ever-repeating patterns, yet each time different. Always nearly the same, and yet never ever precisely the same - the sun sparkling, shimmering, glistening, sometimes repeated and sometimes just once. Just once, a wave reflection, and then forever never again. In this movement we hear the symphony orchestra with the sounds of waves and ebb/flood on sand- and rockbeaches, crickets, seagulls, birds recorded nearby a stream and more... ever ongoing variations of the same, fluttering, themes and patterns. That particular aspect is ever-present and omni-present in this Symphony for the Waters. Indeed it is the *point de départ* of the Symphony as a whole and it is the central feature of this movement.

The 3rd movement is the Symphonic Whale Song. That's where it all started, when I was a child. How I wanted to make an orchestra for those immense, yet so gentle, mammals! An orchestra for them to sing to! And if we call their vocalizations "whale song", and then match it to a Symphony Orchestra, it does of course become a Symphonic Whale Song. The Zarabanda was a dance first mentioned some 500 years ago in Central America (apparently in the area now called Panama). The dance then moved across the Atlantic to Spain. In those times it was reportedly a very sensual, fast, dance – in fact it was described as indecent. Later, in the European context it was slowed down and became one of the most important dance forms in the Baroque era. In this Symphony it is very much a dance, moving between fast and slow just as one does – or at least as whales do – under water. Zarabanda... both fast and slow.

In the 4th movement the symphony orchestra is accompanying frogs, with waves rippling on a rocky beach adding in the mix. Rhythmical and recognisable aquatic sounds, again repetitive but with endless variations and beautiful oscillations. At first a "solo frog" sets the tempo for the orchestra. Just after doing that though, the frog slows down the tempo just a fraction. However, the orchestra is playing in the tempo set by the frog, so now the amphibian is croaking slightly off beat. A choir of frogs move in to broaden the soundscape and we're off to a musically upbeat meditational journey. Breathing. Meditation.

There are two different endings to the 4th movement. One ending, the main one, is for the version which goes on attacca to the 5th movement. But there is also an alternative ending, for cases when the 4th movement would be played as a standalone Symphonic Poem.

The 5th and last movement showcases the even more "talkative" hippopotamuses. They are joined by their neighbouring birds, porpoise, waves and more. The title "Caccia" again is an older form of music. In the Italian 1500's there were several forms of imitative musical counterpoint music, some of which were called "caccia". Those later developed into what we now know as the fugue. As this is by no means a fugue – but holds lots of imitative counterpoint between the aquatic and the instrumental sounds – it occurred to me that this is in fact a Caccia. The talkative hippos are telling a story about strong winds, steam boats and huge waves, at sea. A story of rainstorms, thunderstorms and of earthquakes. I think you can feel the imaginary boat rocking, I think you can see their narrative on an imaginary screen – as they tell and sing and laugh their story when you listen to the music. At one point, near the end, I think you can nearly hear the hippo pronounce the words which I have chosen as the poetic title for the 5th movement.

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All of that said, we do not literally understand the “words” of our marine cousins – that goes without saying. Of course the singing of the whales is of unearthly beauty. But also all the other sounds, frogs and hippo’s and all the rest of them, are so special and intriguing. Their vocalizations do certainly have a purpose and a meaning in their internal communication, as the researchers among us are slowly starting to understand nowadays. But they also possess beauty as a sound, irrespective of the intrinsic meaning – just like a musical instrument and just like the human voice. These marine sounds can be enjoyed purely for their aesthetic beauty, just as we can enjoy humans singing in a language we do not understand – even though we do not understand the words.

This Symphony also explores this, what could perhaps be called, many-languages sensation. Sometimes, even though one does not understand the language, there can be a tone in what is said which conveys the meaning. That is, also when humans communicate, sometimes we can comprehend the meaning of what is said even though we do not comprehend the words.

And so it is in this “Symphony for the Waters”, even though we do not understand “the words” of this Oceans Life Music.

Enjoy listening a few minutes on the website. Lots of photos as well, and more reading.
<https://symphonyforthewaters.com/>

Amsterdam, February 2023

Anders Jallén

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anders Jallén', with a long, sweeping flourish extending upwards and to the right.