

Hanna Tuulikki: the bird that never flew



photos by Laurence Winram





photos by Minttu Mänttynen

THE BIRD THAT NEVER FLEW

Live performance, 50 mins, 2023

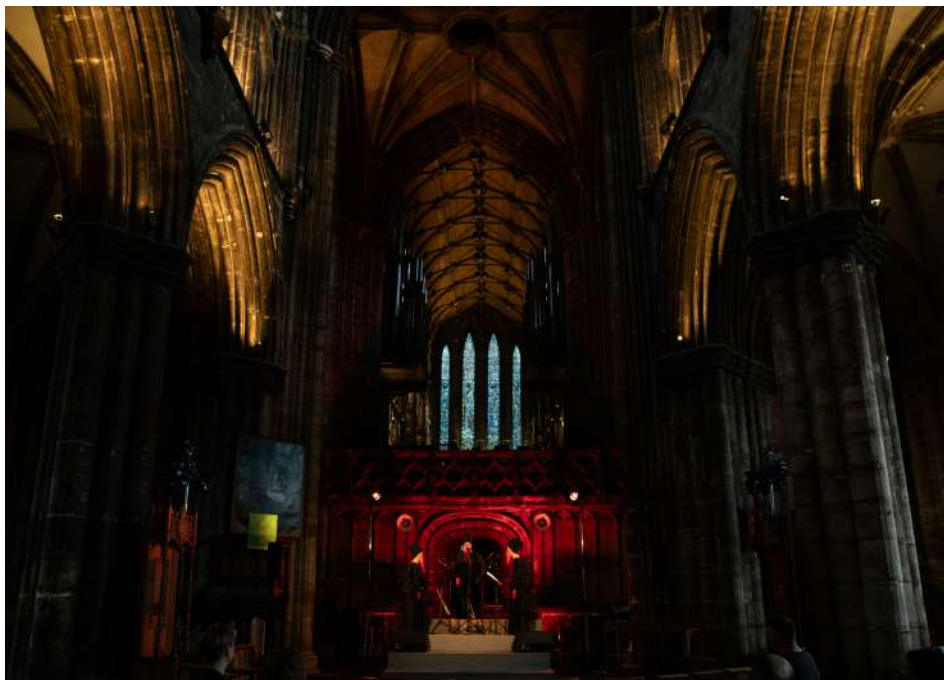
Commissioned by Historic Environment Scotland with Arts&Heritage, Hanna Tuulikki's *the bird that never flew* explores Glasgow Cathedral's roots in ornithological entanglements, bringing together sacred lament and political protest to raise the alarm for critically endangered birds. The premiere performances took place across two evenings in September 2023 and an album is due for release in 2024.

With its distinctive red breast and warbling song, the European robin plays a prominent role in the life of Glasgow's patron saint, St Mungo, who is said to have brought a dead bird back to life by holding it in his hands, smoothing its feathers, and praying until the lifeless creature revived.

In times of severe biodiversity loss, where numbers of wild birds in Britain have declined drastically, Mungo's story of empathy prompts us to consider how we might support other-than-human beings faced with severe decline brought about by human activity and, in acknowledging such loss, it may also provoke us to stand up, take action, and raise the alarm.

The alarm calls of birds are a way of signaling danger and, as a form of communication crossing species boundaries, a single alarm signal can save many recipients of different species simultaneously. As such, this seemingly altruistic behaviour poses a major challenge to the Darwinian evolutionary theory of the 'survival of the fittest', an idea that also underpins capitalist ideology.

As a starting point for composition, Tuulikki asks: "*How might we retune our senses and begin to listen with care and act with compassion? What if we were able to translate the alarm calls of birds into human language and discovered these signals were alerting all beings to the destruction of the earth? What if these alarm calls were a collective call to rise up and protest?*"



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the bird that never flew is a song-cycle for three voices, field recordings, bowed psaltery and electronics; an animal fable for tomorrow that weaves together what the robin knows of past, present and future. Set within an imaginary woodland, the cathedral's gothic columns become trees, the stone arches, a canopy. Slowing down, a dawn chorus takes the audience into 'bird time', and the robin, a sentinel translator, introduces the birds of the greenwood one by one, each sounding their alarm: the Mistle thrush, Capercaillie, Nightingale, Wood warbler, Tree pipit and Greenfinch.

In reality, of course, these birds tend to not coexist within a singular habitat, but in different types of niche woodland across the British Isles, from the Caledonian pinewoods of Scotland, to the scrub of the southern fens in East Anglia. What unites them, however, is their precarity; having suffered severe population declines due to ecological degradation, habitat loss, disease and climate chaos, each of these species (except for the robin) are critically endangered and on the *UK Birds of Conservation Concern Red List*, a list which currently includes a shocking number of seventy species.

It is in this context then, that *the bird that never flew* invites us to attend to the future of our shared biosphere, sounding a red alert through a cacophony of human and avian harmony.

"*the bird that never flew* is a spine-tingling song cycle for three voices, delivered against an immersive soundtrack of sampled birdsong and electronic drones, which played out as an avian alarm call of climate catastrophe from a succession of endangered woodlands species"

– ★★★★★ Fiona Shepherd, the Scotsman

"Tuulikki's work is poignant, beautiful, and sadly vital. But it is also full of hope. It is an honourable and difficult responsibility to urge us to reassess our role in a world where we so often other ourselves from the species we share this ecosystem with. *the bird that never flew* is a call to action, encouraging us to be more ecologically aware. Perhaps our own miracle would be to truly listen and act in order to reverse that damage that has already been done."

– Blue Kirkhope, Caught by the River



photos by Minttu Mänttynen

THE BIRD THAT NEVER FLEW

Performance history:
2022 Glasgow Cathedral

Credits:

Vocal ensemble: Hanna Tulikki, Lucy Duncombe and Mischa Macpherson

Director, composer: Hanna Tuulikki

Sound design and operation: Tommy Perman and Sam Annand

BSL interpreter (Saturday performance only): Karen Forbes

Outside eye: Peter McMaster

Field recordings: Pete Smith

Costume: Hanna Tuulikki

Millinery: Lydia Honeybone

Make-up artist: MV Brown

Technical manager and set: Nick Millar

Lighting: Jazz Hutsby

Producer: Lydia Honeybone

Front of House: Eliza Coulson

Production support: Connor Burgess and Anissa Praquin

With special thanks to: Glasgow Cathedral, Kat Jones and Ruedi Nager, Camilla Nelson, Liz Honeybone, Minttu Mänttynen, Laurence Winram, National Theatre of Scotland and GAMIS.

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