

Birdsong for Prisoners

Joe Osmond



Birdsong for Prisoners explores the ways in which we interpret sound, recalling memories of chords and phrases that trigger new stories and challenge our perception of a world where sound is only available with accompanying still and moving images. Created from a variety of sources including birdsong, improvised jazz and the creative use of piezo mics to record the rarely heard sounds of the human smile.¹

BIRDSONG FOR PRISONERS is a composition based on the premise that memory and sound are interrelated, using original instrumentation and digital sampling to create an atmospheric response to the idea of solitary confinement. Structured to reflect the lasting effect of the absence of sound, through deafness, or restricted access to other human contact, *Birdsong for Prisoners* explores the ways in which we recreate experiences through the visualisation of what may be termed as emotional auditory triggers. The idea that a particular composition may lead to a visual or dreamlike response informs this work although it is primarily intended as a contribution to an ongoing debate about the marginalisation of sound. Arguing that sound composition, as an independent and creative force, is rarely heard without an accompanying moving image, whether in terms of promotional videos, film scores or as a

contribution to a multi-media or performance package, *Birdsong for Prisoners* is intended to be heard without formal visualisation.

Creating a composition using sounds that may be considered as abstract or non-musical, *Birdsong for Prisoners* may also be said to challenge our perception of what is meant by music, and how audiences respond to non-melodic composition. Seeking to question individual perceptions of compositional structures, not least by using improvisational sequencing and digital rendering to reach a compositional conclusion, the concept that underpins *Birdsong for Prisoners* can be said to reflect an on-going commitment to define the relationship between the composer and listener.

Developed in association with research into John Whitney's desire to achieve digital harmony, this composition concerns itself with the relationship between what is heard and what is seen. Whitney saw the opportunity to establish a mathematically based compositional form through the development of digital technologies although this required an acceptance of a number of prescribed conditions, not least that sound and the moving image should co-exist within the compositional framework. Challenging this perception has led to further consideration of the role of digital sound as an independent entity.

Reduced to background music in lifts and shopping malls, digitalised music provides an auditory blanket that may muffle or conflict with sounds that provide prior knowledge of subsequent events. On the simplest level, this use of sound may be presumed to create a feeling of well-being leading to a calming retail or travelling experience. In reality, it is this misplacement of music that may emphasise the listener's ability to 'switch-off' to sound, leaving merchant visualisers to consider associating sound with a strong visual image that they will provide.

But what if the listener is removed from this scenario, whether through physical disability or through imprisonment? A prisoner, unless retained in a soundproof environment, will still hear sounds that provide clues to location, time and social interaction. A blindfolded man will not only hear the world differently but also experience heightened sensory perception leading to the misappropriation of sound as an instrument of torture in violation of the Geneva Convention to intimidate prisoners held in captivity.

But why choose to create a composition entitled *Birdsong for Prisoners*? Informed by conversations with prisoners and working with deaf and blind communities throughout Europe, *Birdsong for Prisoners* grew from a number of experiences associated with the capacity of sound to transcend physical and/or emotional barriers. Arising from associated work with international projects throughout Eastern Europe and the Islamic world, the composition reflects journeys to what may have once seemed inaccessible places.

Capturing sounds from street musicians, sirens and student demonstrators, the piece is intended to reflect the internal memories held by prisoners and participants long after the dust has settled. But what of emotions that may be recalled in moments of isolation? In conversation, prisoners remembered specific songs, familiar phrases and events but also how a loved one smiled. Following consideration of the practicalities of recording what may be termed as unheard sounds, this composition includes the sound of someone smiling, created by taping a small *piezo* microphone to the face and recording the outcome.

Other compositional techniques employed in the development and recording of *Birdsong for Prisoners* were enhanced by the interaction of technologies. These included on-location recordings of birdsong, police helicopters and other ambient sounds in London (UK), Hampshire (UK) and

Tilburg (NL) using *H4 Zoom* and *DW90 Olympus* digital recorders. Additional recordings were made at the composer's studio in Hampshire (UK) featuring an *Arbiter* soprano saxophone, *Tanglewood* six string and *Hudson Acoustic* Bass guitars. Further recordings were completed with a *Marshall MXL* microphone linked via a *Tascam US-122 USB* Audio/MIDI Interface to a PC. The final composition was produced in association with *Cubase* and *WavePad Sound* to create an MP3 soundtrack.

But in the end, why write about sound or a specific composition? It seems that there is often too much written and too little listened to when considering sound. This short paper may enhance an understanding of the compositional structure of *Birdsong for Prisoners* but in the final analysis, the intention is for the composition to be heard without further explanation.

Notes

¹ Joe Osmond, *Birdsong for Prisoners*, (Electronic Visualistaion and the Arts London, 2011; BCS Swindon, 2011), p. 245.

Works Cited:

Osmond, Joe: *Birdsong for Prisoners*, (Electronic Visualistaion and the Arts London, 2011; BCS Swindon, 2011), , pp. 245-249

Osmond, Joe: *Birdsong for Prisoners*, mp3 (London and Hampshire, 2011)

Whitney, John: *Digital Harmony: On the Complementarity of Music and Visual Art* (Peterborough, New Hampshire: Byte Books/McGraw-Hill, 1980)