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EAST BAY EXPRESS

THE MUSIC ISSUE

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RESONANCE Wendy Reid has lived and co-composed with Lulu, an African grey parrot, for almost 2 decades.

Democratic Birdsong

Violinist Wendy Reid makes music with nature

BY LOU FANCHER

HUNDREDS OF THE world's finest modern composers live right outside our doors and windows. Making their homes in trees, bushes, wheelbarrows, under porches or roof awnings and in rare instances underground, birds and raptors arguably represent nature's most innovative music makers. Every day, even in urban areas, a person highly attuned can hear a virtual aviary concert taking place in the open air,

entirely free of charge.

"Just recently, I read an article that referred to our country as a 'single-species democracy,'" said Wendy Reid, a composer, violinist, producer and music educator. "It made me think about why more musicians haven't composed with birds instead of simply being inspired by them, and this is possibly why."

The dearth of composers working with live birds and animals might

also have something to do with the unpredictability of living creatures, which is exactly why Reid is connected—as if by an invisible, uncuttable steel rope—to Lulu, the African grey parrot she has lived and co-composed with for 17 and a half years.

Reid and Lulu appeared July 13 to headline Other Minds' 18th edition of The Nature of Music concert at the Dresher Ensemble Studio in Oakland. The annual event showcases composers who incorporate ambient sounds from nature and the environment into their contemporary music works. Joining Reid on the program, which included a conversation with Other Minds Executive and Artistic Director Charles Amirkhanian, were performers Krys Bobrowski, on glisglas, an invented instrument; vocalist Aurora Josephson; tuba-player Ron Heglin; koto-player Kanoko Nishi-Smith; percussionist David Samas; and sound-musician Jacob Felix Heule. With Reid on violin and Lulu singing—or not, but certainly present in the moment and therefore resonant—the ensemble

brought forth Reid's 22-minute "ambient bird – west oakland."

Born in Los Angeles in 1952, Reid is a classically trained musician. She holds a bachelor's from the University of Southern California School of Performing Arts and a master's from Mills College. Presenters often highlight her connection to music royalty; namely, having been a private student of Nadia Boulanger's in Paris and having studied with Terry Riley, Robert Ashley, Halsey Stevens, James Hopkins and film composer David Rakksin. Her ongoing series of new music compositions, *Tree Pieces*, of which "ambient bird" is a part, have been performed or broadcast throughout the United States and Asia by well-recognized ensembles such as the Bay Area's Kronos Quartet, San Francisco String Quartet and others.

"Ambient bird" is divergent from my usual scores," Reid said. "There's more improvisation. I prefer to perform it outside because that includes the ambient sounds. It's what I call 'freeing the birds' because outside it includes live, wild birds, not just Lulu and [bird voices] that are recorded."

Reid's process begins with creating sound pieces with the bird she lives with. The musical fragments that result from miniature improvisations are later developed and written into scores musicians read from the bottom up, instead of from left to right and from top to bottom. The scores, which would sometimes be 10 feet tall and require a ladder to read if they were not spliced into shorter paginations, resemble trees or inverted human skeletons. The scores frequently have vertical "trunks" with branches that shoot out in diagonal directions and upon which a musician playing one of the actual scored songs might venture off on their own improvisation.

Control—and releasing it in the moment—plays a fascinating role in Reid's work. A composition might have an ensemble playing a piece as it was scored, then a second ensemble improvising on the score, followed by a third ensemble improvising on what they heard the previous ensembles play, having never seen the score at all.

Likewise, the low tones and mechanics of a tuba might

Photo courtesy of Wendy Reid

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prevent a musician from playing the instrument in a way that resembles bird sounds, but it can sound “creature-like” and provide Reid with exactly what she seeks in a given composition. “I don’t want instruments to sound like robins or bluejays, but instead sound like invented birds, like their own creatures. Even my bird doesn’t sound like an African grey parrot, because she listens to classical music all the time. She improvises with me every morning, and we whistle back and forth.”

Lulu sometimes corrects the pitches of students she teaches at Mills College and Holy Names University by whistling the proper pitch when they are practicing. “She recognizes when something isn’t correct in any piece she knows,” Reid said. “She can sing the ringtones of my phone number and sometimes sings one note wrong on purpose, just to get my attention.”

Structure and control of audible outcome are not forsaken entirely by Reid. Timeframes determine when instruments enter, and careful selection of the musicians who perform her work add a degree of essential certainty.

“I choose my musicians very intentionally,” Reid said. “They have a mindset and an aesthetic that matches mine. It’s more than just playing every note right; it’s like a spiritual understanding. I’ve gone to their concerts and have heard their improvisations and how they interact. They understand their instruments and are interested in getting into a deeper side of the music.”

They also understand silence, a signature aspect of *Tree Pieces*. “Sound and silence are not opposite, as many people mistakenly believe. They work together,” Reid said. “I bring my bird to concerts and people sometimes say they didn’t hear her do very much. But I don’t train her to have to perform. She is there listening and that is valuable. People I work with understand silence and how to allow it in their improvisation.”

The philosophies and artistic approach of visual artist Paul Klee are touchstones Reid refers to often in conversations about her work. “He has little arrows in his paintings sometimes. I picked up on that and when I write

scores, I have little arrows pointing at bird fragments,” she said. “Klee used them as a hint for where his eye traveled, showing in a subtle way the way his mind was going. In my work, if you don’t use them, you’ll still be fine. To me, I want my music to be organic. It’s not a classical, rigid form. It starts out like a cell and grows.”

Although she and many of the musicians with whom she works own electronic instruments and make use, on occasion, of synthesizers, Reid prefers the nuanced sounds of her acoustic violin. Coaxing from her instrument organic sounds like the timbre and textures of a human voice and breath or the vibratory, ambient sounds of nature that might roam from melodic to percussive to non-musical terms like “scratchy” or the catchall “throbbing,” she feels a symbiotic closeness with her acoustic instrument she has never experienced with her electronic violin. Ironically, for a composer so willing to release control to a bird and the improvisational leanings of musicians performing her works, she said, “There is always for me a lack of complete control with an electronic instrument.”

Importantly, a high degree of curiosity means that Reid, while revisiting past works and introducing her audiences to recent investigations, focuses on the next “branch” of an internal, egalitarian-centric score she seems to keep.

“What I think should be coming next is the relationship we have with birds,” Reid said. “So many musicians work with bird or animal sounds, but they could be working with the actual creature. We haven’t treated creatures as musicians, except to work with them as sound effects. This is a new stage to work on, not on a circus level, but on the level of music that sounds more birdlike than human, which is what has happened to my music.”

She added, “This is not entertainment. We have enough trouble with democracy for humans, but now we’re attacking nature and all sorts of things. Instead, we can live with awareness and evolve to communicate with animals—and each other—more democratically.” ●



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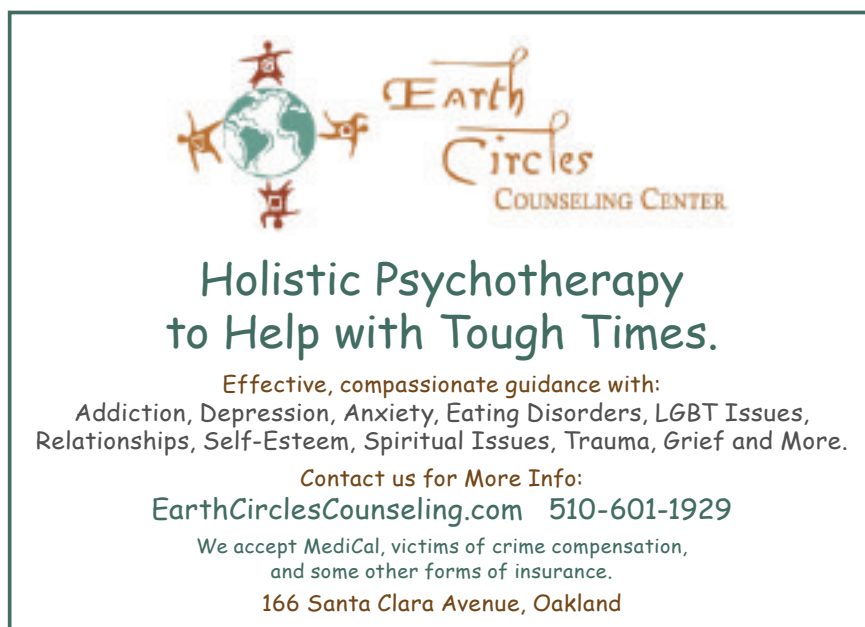
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