

Begin with the Song of Listening: An Introduction to R. Murray Schafer

Rae Crossman

Dawn. We take the path to the edge of the lake. No one speaks. We begin with the song of listening. Footfalls and morning birdsong. Only a hint of wind in the leaves, slight lapping on the shore. We gather beneath a cluster of pine overlooking the water, expectant. Two crows start a conversation. Fly off. We wait.

As delicate as mist, notes from a clarinet rise and float in the air. Ripple of attention in our bodies. In the distance, an oboe begins to deepen the enchantment. Straggling lines of geese clamor overhead. Now a trumpet enters and affirms the rising sun.

Across the bay, two canoes edge out from behind a point. First the curved bows appear, then the startling emergence of winged figures rising out of the canoes. The costumed dancers, standing in the canoes, astonish us with sweeping movements of their twelve-foot wings. The music summons them to us. They move across the water, resplendent in the strengthening sun. The lake is alive with their mythic presence—the Dawn Birds have arrived!

Soon the Princess of the Stars is evoked by the incantation of the music. She, too, appears on the lake in a canoe and sings her otherworldly aria over the water. We sense the thread of a narrative: distraught love, compassion, and redemption. Amidst an aura of mystery, we are attuned to the dawn and the unfolding revelations. Our lives are quickened. This is why we have come. A pilgrimage, of sorts. To listen, to marvel, and to be changed.

The 2014 Sound in the Land festival/conference included a dawn concert at nearby Columbia Lake, inspired by R. Murray Schafer's natural-environment music, including excerpts from his *Princess of the Stars* hierophany, or sacred drama.

A Canadian, Schafer is a highly honored composer, educator, author, visual artist, and environmentalist. As a pioneer of acoustic ecology, he

coined the term “soundscape” and has examined our acoustic environment in natural, rural, and urban settings in his seminal book *The Tuning of the World*.¹ Devising exercises to sensitize our hearing, he has also advocated for the creation of desirable soundscapes in which to live.

It was his own lifestyle change, moving to live in the country, that created a shift in the context of his musical creativity, taking music out of the concert hall and into the wild places where it was born. Music made along forest paths, in rocky gorges, across lakes, under the stars. Schafer has reaffirmed the ancient relationship between music making and nature—to recover a sense of the sacred. In so doing he connects performers and audience with the natural environment as a way to affect deep attitudinal change and to foster a sense of reverence. To elicit exaltation!

Senses alive. Wonder alive. He invites us to rediscover the miraculous through the transformative power of art. He invites us to listen.

For more than twenty years, in canoes and along forest trails, Rae Crossman has lived the roles of several mythological characters in R. Murray Schafer's natural-environment works. Crossman is program director of 'Waterloo Unlimited' at the University of Waterloo.

¹ R. Murray Schafer, *The Tuning of the World* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977).