

ATLANTIC ODYSSEY - A Journey through Music

The Arctic Tern isn't exactly your characteristic Wiltshire bird, but the arrival of a flock of 125 birds in late April 2012 at the Cotswold Water Park marks the date when I began composing the extended choral work *Atlantic Odyssey*, which celebrates the circumpolar journey this incredible species undertakes each year. Now that the music is written it is time to orchestrate it, rehearse it and prepare for a performance in October with my choir, alongside the Warneford School Junior Choir, two professional soloists and a 20 piece orchestra.

My collaborator, Mike Polack, who just happens to live next door, is a gifted writer with a keen interest in natural history. Quite how it came about we are not entirely sure, but having thought about writing a piece about a Cornish fishing community devastated by a disaster at sea, we fell into the idea of celebrating the life of an extraordinary bird, the Arctic Tern.

Our *Journey through Music* begins in their northern breeding grounds, and a main theme inspired by a four note phrase from *The Skye Boat Song*. 'Fledgling' describes the vulnerability of a young tern tottering on a rock by an inhospitable sea, as it takes its first trial flights. As this song has a jumpy melody and an innocent feel to it, it seemed like a good one for the junior choir to take on.

The solo Soprano and Baritone have to play a number of roles, but in 'On the Beach' the girl, now alone, recalls times with her young sweetheart, walking along the beach amongst the terns, and finding their nests. It is well known that Arctic terns remain faithful to one partner and can live for up to thirty years despite their perilous travels, and so, in an attempt to echo this with a human parallel, the baritone repeats the song in the second half: now he is a sailor at sea looking forward to being reunited with his sweetheart, now his wife, and their child, back on the shore with the terns.

The Soprano has to turn into a goddess in each half: Sedna, a frightening Inuit Goddess of the Northern waters in Part One and Yemaya, a colourful African Sea Goddess in Part Two.

The Baritone often plays the role of a narrator, pointing to the dangers and disasters the birds are prone to and charting the ways in which humans have threatened and spoilt the order and balance of the natural world-global warming inevitably comes into the frame. Perhaps the most hard-hitting moments in the work involve a reference to the disastrous oil pollution resulting from commercial exploitation of the Niger Delta and another serious and extended song which includes some text from Margaret Atwood: 'How to Justify the Ways of Men to Birds'

One curious phenomenon in the Arctic Tern's life-cycle is the so-called 'Dread' - a period of silence in an otherwise noisy tern colony, prior to the

departure of all the birds south, on their long migratory journey. In the song 'The Dread' the sharp 'Kee-err!' calls of the terns are mimicked by the children and when the colony goes silent the chorus and orchestra create the atmospheric sounds of wind and sea.

The second half begins with 'Gliding', an instrumental piece which we hope to combine with slowed-down video footage of Arctic Terns filmed in flight on the Farne Islands - then later there is 'Resting', again supplemented with images, this time of a flock of birds roosting together along the shoreline. All songs will be accompanied by projected images and maps.

Mike and I have received much encouragement, advice and support information from Graham Appleton of the BTO, who studies migration in Iceland and is due to give an illustrated talk about the Arctic Tern to members of our choir and other interested parties in July.

Creating 'Atlantic Odyssey' has been quite a journey, and has left both of us amazed at the courage, skill and stamina of a bird, no heavier than an apple, that reputedly travels the equivalent of three times to the moon and back during its lifetime. Fiercely defensive of its nest, it can draw blood from the head of a human intruder, as some readers may know from personal experience! Recent research has revealed that its dispersal south is not via one route hugging the African coastline as has been assumed, but by two quite different ones. Tracking the birds has also established that they target specific feeding grounds in the mid-ocean: this was the inspiration for the song 'Mid Ocean Feeding'. Arctic Terns are capable, like Swifts, of sleeping on the wing as they fly, sometimes at great heights, and when returning north in the Spring they can cover a distance of 300 miles a day. These are just a few remarkable facts about 'Sterna Paradisaea', the Paradise Tern.

I hope that the Choir will share our enthusiasm for the project as they set about their 'Journey through Music' in July.

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