

## **Enriching Guided Hikes with Classical Music**

### **David Sutherland**

Interpretive Naturalist  
City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks  
P.O. Box 791  
Boulder, Colorado, 80306  
(303) 906-7391  
sutherlandd@bouldercolorado.gov

### **Abstract**

Since 2013, City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) has partnered with the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra to present a series of outdoor guided nature hikes that highlight upcoming nature-themed pieces to be played in the concert hall. Hikes use musical sound bites (played on portable speakers in the field) to explore how nature influenced composers, thus deepening our understanding of both the music and the science behind our natural topic. For example, the Wings and Songs program led participants on bird-watching trips while sampling music of Vivaldi, Vaughan-Williams, Beethoven and Saint-Saens to show how these composers used music to capture the essence of birds. Other agencies can develop similar partnerships locally.

### **Keywords**

interpretation, classical, music, musical, nature, symphony, philharmonic, concert, orchestra, composers, birds, hike, guided walk, guide, interpreter

### **Introduction**

Since 2013, City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) has partnered with the Boulder Philharmonic Orchestra to present a series of outdoor guided nature hikes that highlight upcoming nature-themed pieces to be played in the concert hall. Hikes help promote the concerts and provide a local natural context to interpret the music and the science behind it, while encouraging community members to join us outdoors on our wild land system. As a result, OSMP's award-winning programs engage a new audience: concertgoers connect with nature, and nature lovers experience the concert hall!

### **Integrating Music into a Nature Hike**

The classical music repertoire is loaded with music inspired by nature. Composers such as Beethoven, Sibelius, Debussy, Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky and Vaughan Williams have been moved deeply by natural settings and experiences. The Boulder Phil has chosen to perform many of these nature-themed works in concert. Our pre-concert hikes interpret the music (played with portable speakers) on the OSMP land system to celebrate and explore how nature influences the creative process. Concert works – and the associated guided hikes - have included music about lakes and rivers, birds and wildlife, scenic landscapes creating a sense of place, geology of the Rocky Mountains, and the moon and stars.

Some composers have sought to incorporate musical representations of natural sounds, such as bird songs, prairie dog vocalizations, or rushing water, into their work.

Others prefer to musically capture the “essence” or feelings surrounding a natural experience, such as Saint-Saen’s piece “The Swan” from *Carnival of the Animals*. The music does not reproduce sounds made by swans, but instead expounds upon the grace and beauty one might feel while watching a swan. Elsewhere in the same work the composer musically simulates the sounds of chickens clucking in a barnyard, or the lonely sound of a cuckoo calling at night in the forest.

A typical musical nature hike includes 1 – 3 minute “sound bites” of music of both these types, stored on an iPod and played through portable speakers at various stops during the course of the hike. For example, when the Boulder Phil presented a concert featuring two works inspired by rivers (Smetana’s Moldau, and Beethoven’s 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony), we developed a nature hike along a local creek to look at seasonal water flow dynamics, the creek’s importance to wildlife as a riparian corridor, and a source of beauty and water for people. We spent time admiring the creek and listening to its sounds, then played excerpts from these two featured concert works and other music inspired by rivers at key points during our walk. Where flooding had torn the creek’s banks, we played the wild storm sequence from Beethoven’s 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony. At a calm and tranquil pool, we listened to Debussy’s Reflections on the Water. At an irrigation ditch and water diversion structure, we heard the peasant dance from Smetana’s Moldau to highlight water as the life-blood for local agriculture; and we used the opening of the same work (flutes simulating the splashing spring waters that give rise to the mighty Moldau) to talk about watersheds, snowmelt, and the birth of creeks. The aquarium movement from *Carnival of the Animals* musically expressed what it might feel like to be a trout lurking in the dark hole under a tree trunk. And for the final walk back to the trailhead, we celebrated with Strauss’ joyous Blue Danube waltz.

Throughout the program participants were encouraged to think musically - like composers - about their creekside sensory experience and consider what aspects of that experience they would capture in their own creek composition, what instruments they would choose, and how they would represent their experience to a concert audience. At the end we shared our favorite moments of the creek hike and considered how we could express them in a musical work.

Organizations wishing to develop similar partnerships with performing musical ensembles in their communities should seek out the music directors of their local orchestras. In 2013, the Boulder Philharmonic chose “Nature in Music” as their season theme and developed a concert schedule with many example pieces. This year their season theme is “Open Space,” again with many performances of music that celebrate scenic landscapes and a sense of place. Local symphony groups may be excited to partner with natural land agencies to develop concerts in conjunction with interpreters that showcase nature-inspired music. Joint promotion of pre-concert nature hikes and in-the-field performances will attract new audiences to interpretive programs.

## **Conclusion**

The creative intersection of the Boulder Philharmonic’s concert schedule with OSMP’s nature hikes took the organizations to the Kennedy Center to kick off the 2017 SHIFT festival in Washington, D.C., where we showcased our guided programs at Rock Creek Park. We encourage other agencies to explore similar partnerships with performing musical groups in their communities – either through live music performed in a natural

setting, or through “sound bites” that present and interpret music in a natural context as a pre-concert activity. Participants find the music greatly enriches both their outdoor guided nature experience, and their enjoyment of the subsequent concert.

## References

Sample program outlines are available at <https://BoulderColorado.gov/osmp/Elearning>

Cooley, Mary. 2017. SHIFT: Dave Sutherland, Boulder Naturalist. Radio interview on WETA (Washington D.C. Public Radio). Aired March 2017.

<https://weta.org/fm/features/classicalconversations/shift-dave-sutherland-boulder-naturalist-576373>

McCrary, Jaime. 2017. Interdisciplinary Inspiration: SHIFT Festival’s Guided Musical Hikes Explore Music and Nature. *On Tap* magazine. March issue: 52.

<https://ontaponline.com/2017/03/04/interdisciplinary-inspiration-shift-festivals-guided-musical-hikes-explore-music-nature/>

Ross, Alex. 2017. Rite of Spring. *New Yorker* magazine 4/7/17:76 - 77

SHIFT Festival Guided Musical Hikes: BYT at Large March 29, 2017

<https://brightestyoungthings.com/articles/photos-shift-festival-guided-musical-hikes>

City of Boulder Channel 8 TV Interview with Patrick Von Keyserling

<https://vimeo.com/132478694>