

Wings and Songs – Interpretive Program Outline

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Theme: The songs and behaviors of birds have captivated the imaginations of classical composers, resulting in some of the world's most beautiful music.

Location: Sawhill Ponds

Props: Have a couple bird books along, binoculars, maybe some feathers or pinned-out bird wing, owl talons, etc.

iPod and portable speakers

Introduction by the parking lot

- The presence of birds really livens up a place! Just close your eyes and listen for a moment!
- Everybody loves birds – we love their colors, their engaging behaviors, their songs.
- These aspects of birds have made them particularly inspirational to composers. In fact, bird songs may have been the inspiration for some of the very first music created by human beings!
- We'll walk through Sawhill Ponds and enjoy all the birds we see and hear, and I'll share musical excerpts to illustrate how composers have drawn their inspiration from birds.
- Point out that there was so much to choose from the repertoire that it was really difficult to pick the selections for the program – and I'm sorry if I don't play one of your favorite bird-inspired pieces.
- As we go, imagine that you are a composer, and that you are trying to capture the experience of Sawhill Ponds, and its varied birdlife, in your music – what aspects of our walk would you include? What parts of this hike would make it into your composition? And how would you musically describe what you observe?
- Birds can evoke a lot of different feelings – comedy, awe, majesty. For the latter, let's listen how Camille Saint-Saens (a little background about his life) captured the experience of seeing flights of birds in his *Carnival of the Animals* (excerpt from *The Aviary*).

Stop 1: First pond overlook

- Swallows are common at Sawhill Ponds. We've got 3 types – tree, barn and cliff swallows here.
- They are insect eaters, and fast, acrobatic fliers. Look how they are chasing down bugs on the wing.
- When I was a kid, I wanted to be able to fly like a swallow.
- How would you capture their flight in music? Play Bergmuller's *L'hirondelle*

- Point out that this music isn't trying to reproduce sounds made by swallows, but rather their essence – what a human might feel while observing a rapidly-flying swallow.

Stop 2 – Cottonwood Grove

- Boulder has many migratory song birds that spend the winter in the tropical jungles of Latin America, then return to nest here.
- Listen for bird calls in the trees – there will probably be some neotropical migrants. Point them out and identify them.
- A beautiful migrant here is the Western Tanager. It has an eastern relative, the Scarlet tanager (show pictures.)
- Tell the story of Antonin Dvorak, the Czech composer, visiting the Czech community in Iowa and hearing the song of the scarlet tanager and writing it down. How he worked American themes into some of his music, e.g. Native American melodies.
- Play excerpt from Dvorak's American String Quartet – 3rd movement, and highlight the song of the Scarlet Tanager – play tanager song by itself, then play the music again.

Stop 3 – Cottonwoods by Boulder Creek

- Besides Dvorak, many other composers have tried to capture bird songs.
- Popular European birds include the nightingale, and the European cuckoo. Play recordings of their songs. Both sing at night.
- Many different composers have paired these two night birds up – I'll play some samples, and see if you can hear the cuckoo and the nightingale signing a duet.
- Excerpts – Vivaldi Four Seasons "Summer" cuckoo and nightingale duet
- Handel organ concerto - cuckoo and nightingale duet
- Beethoven 6th Symphony 2nd movement - cuckoo and nightingale duet (with quail call)
- Point out that this is another way composers capture birds – by duplicating and elaborating on their calls and songs with musical instruments.

Stop 4: Cattail overlook

- Marshes like Sawhill Ponds are important habitat for birds.
- Listen for a moment to all the bird sounds you hear in a marsh.
- Birdsongs of the marsh inspired Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara – explain how *Cantus Articus* was written, using recorded bird calls from the marshes of Finland.

- European composers used the songs they were familiar with – European birds. But in the case of *Cantus Arcticus*, we have some very similar birds in Colorado - Our sandhill cranes are a lot like the European cranes in Finland, and we also have several kinds of curlews here.
- Play excerpts of *Cantus Arcticus* – European cranes, and curlews, with interspersed calls of our local cranes and curlews to show the similarity. Show pictures in the bird books of these birds.
- Point out that this is another way composers can capture birds in music: using recorded calls and songs. This was first pioneered by Italian composer Ottorino Respighi in the 1920s, when he stunned audiences by including the recorded song of a nightingale in his *Pines of Rome*.

Stop 5 – Duck pond

- Background natural history on geese and ducks – look for and identify some of the water birds.
- Territorial behavior of geese – may be able to observe – notice all the honking and vocalization
- Point out that swans are closely related to ducks and geese, and they have also been inspiration to composers.
- Play Saint-Saens’ *The Swan* while walking to next stop. This lovely graceful piece captures the essence of a swan, or one’s feelings watching a swan, rather than trying to reproduce the sounds made by swans (which aren’t at all melodic!)
- It is fascinating how the composer is able to take a primarily visual experience – watching a swan – and translate it into a totally different medium, an auditory / musical experience that still resonates with us, and references our experience of swans.

Stop 6 – Meadow by Pond 7

- Sawhill Ponds wasn’t always a marsh. Before it was mined for gravel, it was a short grass prairie that provided habitat for ground-nesting birds, like the horned lark.
- Horned larks live in the USA, but are also found in Europe on the steppes and tundra. In fact, Rautavaara’s *Cantus Arcticus* features the song of a horned lark slowed WAAAAY down in the second movement.
- A closely-related European bird, the Skylark, has a spectacular mating flight and song (describe) which inspired Victorian English poet George Meredith to write a long (very long) ode to the song of the Skylark. Excerpt:

He rises and begins to round,
 He drops the silver chain of sound
 Of many links without a break,
 In chirrup, whistle, slur and shake,
 A press of hurried notes that run
 So fleet they scarce are more than one,

Yet changingly the trills repeat
And linger ringing while they fleet,
For singing till his heaven fills,
'T is love of earth that he instills

- The poem in turn inspired composer Ralph Vaughn-Williams to write a musical description of the flight of the skylark over the English countryside. (tell a little about Vaughn-Williams and his love of England / English melodies and settings).
- Play excerpt from The Lark Ascending – music so emotive it has been described as “the music that plays when a departing soul takes one last look back at its life before moving on.”

Stop 7 – near the bird blind

- As I said earlier, birds inspire many feelings in us: comedy, awe, majesty, a sense of mystery. I want to linger on that last one with a musical selection by American composer Charles Griffes (a little background on him).
- His travels in Europe provided some of the inspiration for his music, including a visit to an Italian garden where he observed a white peacock stroll into view and spread its tail. The scene so impressed him that he wrote a tone poem called The White Peacock to capture the magic of that experience.
- Play excerpt

Conclusion – Wooden fishing pier

- Recapitulation – Imagine a world without birds. Think how much they give us with their presence, their songs, their antics. Their inspiration.
- Without them, some of the world’s most beautiful music could never have been written.
- After your walk around Sawhill Ponds, observing birds, what would you incorporate into a musical composition? How would you musically characterize the things that you experienced during this walk: bird songs, behavior?
- Thanks them for coming, and walk back to the cars playing an excerpt from Ottorino Respighi’s The Birds “The Hen.”