

Bird Songs

Nathaniel Handy speaks to composer Inge Thomson about her avian-inspired multimedia project with musician and ecologist Jenny Sturgeon, which tours the UK this autumn



Humans aren't born on Fair Isle anymore. This tiny three-by-one-and-a-half-mile speck in the ocean halfway between the Shetland and Orkney Islands is a 'non-doctor island.' Expectant mothers have to leave three weeks before their due date and head for what locals call the 'mainland' – the capital of the Shetland Islands, Lerwick. That's the town in which renowned accordionist and composer Inge Thomson was born in 1974.

But if any human can be said to be Fair Isle born-and-bred, it's her. And while a human birth would be a very rare exception these days, avian hatchings are plentiful. Fair Isle is the perfect landing platform and breeding ground for an incredible variety of bird life, and what draws them is a surrounding sea full of good things to eat. "If we don't look after the sea around the island then the birds don't get fed, and if they don't get fed then we lose them," says Thomson succinctly. "Everything comes back to the sea."

The elemental nature of the place gets into your bones. Thomson believes it's why she continually returns to nature in her work. "You can't move anywhere without hearing the sea," she explains. "If there's a rough swell then you constantly feel that deep rumbling sub-bass of the waves hitting the cliffs, and when it's calm you can hear the shingly sea noises. It's always there as a white noise in the background."

Her description of the sea is that of a musician, a sound artist, and is at the heart of her latest project. *Northern Flyway* is a 75-minute multimedia experience conceived when musician, bird ecologist and Shetland resident Jenny Sturgeon approached Thomson with the idea of creating a bird-focused body of music and song. It was an idea whose time appears to have come, since birds and the natural world are something of a cultural zeitgeist right now.

Thomson is a long-time collaborator with Edinburgh folk musician and singer Karine Polwart, whose 2016 show *Wind Resistance* (and subsequent album, *A Pocket of Wind Resistance*, reviewed in #134) was also inspired by migratory birds. Both projects also reach beyond musicians to incorporate sound artists, illustrating the interdisciplinary nature of the new creative trend toward natural history subjects. "There's a whole movement to try and reconnect people with nature," says Thomson. "I don't think it's limited to birds. We have writers and artists – such as Robert MacFarlane and Jackie Morris' book *The Lost Words* – asking why we are losing those nature words."

In the case of Thomson and Sturgeon, the link came in a meeting with sound recordist Magnus Robb at his Edinburgh studio and archive. "His job is to go around the world collecting bird sounds," explains Thomson. "He knows the language of birds intimately and has the most exquisite recordings. I love intricately dismantling a sound to get right inside the noise and find out how it works, where it sits in the sonic spectrum and what you can do with it."

Robb also introduced the pair to his sonograms – beautiful spectrographic visual representations of bird noises. They asked if they could use them as projections for their show. "Yes," came the reply, before a pause. "Actually, no. I think you'd like to do it yourself." So Thomson and Sturgeon set out to learn

how to make sonograms. In the show, they interweave with breathtaking film footage of Scotland's seascape and bird life sourced through SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, an initiative to reconnect the public with the natural world through visual media. "We used various bits from the Shetland filmmaker Richard Shucksmith and Ivan Hawick whose speciality is capturing the *aurora borealis* and night skies."

By this stage, *Northern Flyway* was becoming a project on a very different scale for a pair of folk musicians used to the traditional session setting. "Both Jenny and I are known in the folk world," says Thomson. "We could quite easily have got a guitar, a fiddle and an accordion and made a little folk gig. But we wanted to do something different." They also wanted a show that had a visual uniformity across the whole stage. This led them to Shetland clothes designer, Neila Nell.

"She designs the stage wear for Hjaltibonhoga, a Shetland fiddle group who play at the Edinburgh Tattoo," Thomson explains. "She uses very natural colours and has amazing attention to detail. Though you wouldn't notice from a distance, when you look at them closely the costumes have little sonograms actually knitted into the braided edges." Such a specialist concern for the little things and obsessive curiosity with exacting detail underpins the whole project. It is a theme that links all the musicians involved.

"We're all a little bit geeky about birds," confesses Thomson of the quartet of musicians touring the show from September 2018. Alongside herself and Sturgeon, there is also vocalist and flautist Sarah Hayes (of Admiral Fallow) and beatbox and vocal wizard Jason Singh. While Hayes was chosen for the exceptional directness and intonation

of her voice as well as her flute playing, Singh might appear a more left-field addition to a folk music line-up. "Yes, he's a beatboxer," says Thomson, "but he's also very good with his vocal mimesis, especially of bird calls and birdsong, and also natural elements such as the sea, the wind and the water. I worked with him on one of the Cape Farewell work-in-progress gigs and was completely blown away by his ability to create an entire soundscape just using his voice. His bird calls really could be the real thing."

Such attention to detail can illuminate fascinating realities. As Thomson sits talking to me, while looking out on the Shetland beach where she and Sturgeon held their first production meeting (while litter-picking plastic bottles as part of an island-wide Da Voar Redd Up event, in which the community come out together to clean up the beaches and verges), she explains how many seabirds migrate north, not south, in the winter. This was news to an English landlubber.

"They start coming at the beginning of April," says Thomson. "We have two types of guillemot – the black and the common. And we have gannets, kittiwakes, storm petrels, fulmars, puffins and all manner of gulls. They go away to the top of the Arctic – Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland – and winter up there. Then they come back down to us in the spring. They usually stay until about September or October."

But the real focus for Thomson's project were the rarer migratory arrivals with the more unusual bird calls. "Fair

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Sam Bancroft

Isle, because of where it is situated, is very good for unusual migrants," she explains. "We often get what we call blow-ins. If there's an easterly wind, you get birds that have just come off-course. Last year, we had scarlet ibis, pratincole, mandarin duck and bluethroats from Siberia."

The live shows will be accompanied by the release of an album in September, in which the epic 75-minute performance is reworked into around 50 minutes of material. "We have just recorded the live parts for the album at Mareel [the striking new Lerwick music and creative arts centre] up in Shetland," says Thomson. "We did additional recording at my studio and mixed it down in Pencaitland with Garry Boyle [of Slate Room Recording Studio]." The album feels like far more than simply a musical recording though, not only because its primary focus is the wild sounds of bird life, but also for its use of spoken word. "It's wonderful to have Magnus Robb's raw bird sound as a massive focus on the album," says Thomson, "and we've also woven little interview excerpts into the music, taken from a cross-section of the general public."

The interviews offer what Thomson terms "heartwarming little testaments" to people's love of birds and the natural world, and they offer a satisfying arc for this whole project. As she reflects on them, her daughter pipes up in the background

to say that she was one of the members of the 'general public!' Thomson laughs, but this captures the spirit of *Northern Flyway*. It is the same spirit manifest in Karine Polwart's *Wind Resistance* – one that sees our engagement and our awareness as a community as vital to our ecosystem's future.

In reflecting on MacFarlane and Lewis' *The Lost Words*, Thomson laments that some children can no longer identify the common starling. Not hers, she hastens to add. As Fair Isle youngsters, they know their birds and much more besides. Perhaps that is why so much space has been left for the birds themselves in this project? As Thomson says: "There are pockets within the show where we've left enough space for the birds to shine on their own. There was an understanding among all the musicians that we could have these quiet spaces." The result is 75 minutes of time out, of otherness. A space in which to take stock of what is all around us. Thomson sums it up simply: "It's a big exhale." ♦

+ ALBUM *Northern Flyway* is out September 14

+ DATES See *Gig Guide* for tour details

+ WIN We have three copies of the album *Northern Flyway* to give away. To enter, answer: Who designed the clothes for the stage show? See p19 for competition rules and deadline