

## The Common Glad Impulse

From W. H. Hudson's "Music and Dancing in Nature" chapter in *The Naturalist in La Plata*

"Birds are more subject to this universal joyous instinct than mammals, and there are times when some species are constantly overflowing with it; and as they are so much freer than mammals, more buoyant and graceful in action, more loquacious, and have voices so much finer, their gladness shows itself in a greater variety of ways, with more regular and beautiful motions, and with melody. But every species, or group of species, has its own inherited form or style of performance; and, however rude and irregular this may be, as in the case of pretended stampedes and fights of wild cattle, that is the form in which the feeling will always be expressed. If all men, at some exceedingly remote period in their history, had agreed to express the common glad impulse, which they now express in such an infinite variety of ways or do not express at all, by dancing a minuet, and minuet-dancing had at last come to be instinctive, and taken to spontaneously by children at an early period, just as they take to walking 'on their hind legs,' man's case would be like that of the inferior animals." (pg. 281)

The "universal joyous instinct," "gladness," "common glad impulse," a species specific "style of performance" for each species -- these are not a fundamental part of contemporary biological understandings<sup>1</sup> -- and the phrase describing contemporary humanity -- "the common glad impulse, which they now express in such an infinite variety of ways or do not express at all" -- is also ominous. For the cultural variety has indeed been giving way to "not express at all" during the century or so since Hudson put pen to paper. We can safely assume from the anthropological literature that for all of human prehistory human beings sang and danced together, often in appreciation and mimicry of the birds and animals who they participated-enacted-consubstantiated as totemic spirits embodying vital forces identical to their own.

We need to reclaim our song-and-dance connections to the natural world with all our children. We could music and dance to feel one with each other, to celebrate our "common glad impulse," to perform humanness co-evolving with species-forces in each locality. Who sings with the neighborhood birds or calls to them with a flute? Who dances with chipmunks, squirrels, bats, and shrews, never mind wolves? Who howls with the coyotes? Who trots with the foxes? Who struts with the turkeys? Who walks with the camels? Who mashes with the potatoes?

So far as I can tell, human toddlers are as eager as they ever were for a variety of ways to sing-and-dance, to drum-and-sing, to express "the common glad impulse." If, at present, most of us are inferior to "the inferior animals" because we have lost our way, our performance style, and no longer nurture our built-in capacity for an infinite variety of dances, songs and saving graces, it is still true that most of us wake up each morning with

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<sup>1</sup> Natalie Angier, "Mating Dances Go On and On: Some Creatures Produce Spectacular Performances, Even After They Have Paired Up" "Science Times" section of the New York Times, 7/10/01. Ms. Angier starts a summary of exuberant bird and animal after-mating behavior with a "they lived happily ever after" hypothesis in the first sentence, but the rest of the featured article reports a variety of scientific opinions about "manipulation," "exhortation," "monogamy maintenance," in which leading scientists project every nasty or narrow human purpose on to the "lesser" creatures, but never concede a bit of *joire de vive* or "common glad impulse" to them.

two feet, plenty of toes, two hands, fingers and the *melea* – Homeric Greek for “limbs in their muscular strength”, root of our word “melody” – to make life beautiful.

Pat Campbell:

Hudson’s excerpt may bring to mind “the land before time”, with living beings of various sorts joined together in living color. Together. Never mind that the film of that title was set in the prehistoric time of dinosaurs, there is still that sense of diverse forms of life happily expressing themselves, living side-by-side in peace, joining in the joy of the common glad impulse. Or perhaps Hudson reminds us of a greater tale, a paradise we seek, a peak moment of many-splendored moments all rolled together, that comes when we living beings realize the capacity we have of expressing ourselves.

It is what children deserve, this common glad impulse, in their everyday life. We adults can provide for them the windows of time and the spaces and places they need for the common glad impulse. More time on the playground? Sure. More time in the music room? Sure, if not during school, then before school and after school. More family time, together, with adults going along with children in their play, following rather than calling the shots. At school, there are so many occasions possible for joyful and expressive instances in the art room, the gym, the cafeteria, the classrooms and the halls. Instead of quartering off thirty minutes a week for music class (which is sometimes sadly located in a portable classroom at the far end of the schoolyard), we can make room for the common glad impulse of music throughout the day. As teachers, staff, and other caregivers awaken to a realization that they, too, are musical, the whole school can rock with the possibilities for singing and dancing together, and with great frequency.

- Stop into a school sometime. Stand in the middle of the hallway and listen to the sounds that surround you. Hear the tone colors of voices that sail past you, the highs and the lows of expressive phrases, the longs and shorts of individual syllables, and the tempo of many utterances. The sounds of voices are there, joining the sounds of feet shuffling, clothes rustling, hands clapping, or slapping. Much of these sounds approach the quality of music. Some of it will be right there – in the middle of the hallway! – the common glad impulse of children at work and at play.
- A refreshing look at inventive ideas for making music in schools more enticing to children, particularly through the facilitation of their very own personal expressions, may be found two books by Rena Upitis, [This Too is Music](#) (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1990), and [Can I Play You My Song? The Compositions and Invented Notations of Children](#). (1992, Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann).

More thoughts on the music making capacities of other living beings:

Anthropologist John Blacking’s definition of music as “humanly organized sound” might not exclude the possibility that whales, some primates (such as rhesus monkeys and gibbons), and birds are capable of producing vocalizations that may be perceived by humans as musical. Humpback whales fascinate biologists for the long, complex, repeating patterns of sound they emit (Payne, 2000). They rarely sing alone, but rather sing simultaneously with others, overlapping randomly with them. Although

their collective sound is more like tone-clusters than clearly individual melodies, when the voices of whales are separated, they repeat the same phrases and themes *in the same order*. Depending upon where they are in their waterworld, and what the season may be, their songs will change with both geography and time. The changes in the songs of whales are attributed to imitation and improvisation rather than accident or as conveyors of information.

The natural vocalizations of primates were studied by Darwin, and more recent observations of rhesus monkeys offer a grand variety of grunts and coos, and (on finding high-quality, rare food items such as coconuts) even warbles, harmonic arches, and chirps (Hauser, 2000). The songs of gibbons, loud and long and often in well-patterned duets in the morning hours, may well be a precursor to human singing; they are known to bring humans to tears. The presence of a beat in their songs is rare among non-humans, and may have evolved to keep groups of apes together in their participation (Geissman, 2000).

As for birds, they are known to call to one another in simple ways but also to produce, across 4,000 species of songbirds, a rich variety of complex vocalizations. While they may be vocalizing to attract mates and repel rivals, their songs are perceived with pleasure by humans, who hear the functional communications of nightingales, starlings, and chaffinches as both tonal and rhythmic utterances of great beauty. Is it music—these songs of whales, monkeys, apes, and birds? Perhaps music is in the ear of the beholder, so that what is a sonic means of sexual selection and social bonding for some beings is certainly that (and more) for humans. The making of music may be best within the realm of humans to do at a very high level, and yet the sounds that emanate from other living beings go a great distance in enriching our world.

- One colorful compilation on the subject of music across life forms is found in The Origins of Music, edited by Nils J. Wallin, Bjorn Merker, and Steven Brown (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000). The authors, in disciplines ranging from anthropology and linguistics to neurobiology and zoology, are calling the realm of their work biomusicology, and also evolutionary musicology, and are looking to music-making as an ultimate human cultural activity evolving from earlier stages of the development of the vocal tract, acoustic-communication signals, societal structures, emotional and behavior manipulation through sound, and even the localization and lateralization of brain function. See especially these chapters: Slater, Peter J. B., *Birdsong Repertoires: Their Origins and Use* (pp. 49-64), Hauser, Marc D., *The Sound and the Fury: Primate Vocalizations as Reflections of Emotion and Thought* (pp. 77-102), Geissman, Thomas, *Gibbon Songs and Human Music from an Evolutionary Perspective* (pp. 103-124), and Payne, Katharine, *The Progressively Changing Songs of Humpback Whales: A Window on the Creative Process in a Wild Animal* (pp. 135-150).