

The Music of Living Landscapes

Transcript by Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc on 15 June 2022 from the original radio programme, The Music of Living Landscapes, broadcast on 12 November 1996 on BBC Radio 4.

Perhaps I should tell you that I studied land surveying and astronomy as a young man. That was really the launching pad for expeditions into the deep, forested rainforests of Guyana, so that I became intimately and profoundly involved with the landscapes, and riverscapes, of Guyana.

As a surveyor one is involved in mathematical disciplines, and astronomy, and one has, or I have, the sensation that the part of the cosmos in which we live, and the rainforests, are the lungs of the globe. The lungs of the globe breathe on the stars.

It seems to me that, for a long time, landscapes and riverscapes have been perceived as passive, as furniture, as areas to be manipulated; whereas, I sensed, over the years, as a surveyor, that the landscape possessed resonance. The landscape possessed a life, because, the landscape, for me, is like an open book, and the alphabet with which one worked was all around me. But it takes some time to really grasp what this alphabet is, and what the book of the living landscape is.

Let me begin my address by asking:

Is there a language akin to music threaded into space and time, which is prior to human discourse?

Such a question is implicitly imprinted in legends of Guyanese and South American landscapes, preternatural voices of the Gods in rivers, rapids, giant waterfalls, rock, tree.

A fish leaps close to where I stand on a riverbank, in the great dark of the South American rainforest night, and look up at the stars.

Theatre of memory! I hear that leap or voice of rippling water all over again across the years as if it's happening now, this very moment, within the Thames of London beside which I have often strolled since arriving in England.

And one meditates here by the Thames as one meditated there not far from the Amazon or the Orinoco—upon the fate of the earth and its species.

As if of there obviously as involved in mathematical disciplines and astronomy and one has or I have the sensation that the stars and parts of the cosmos in which we live, and the rainforest are the lungs of the globe. The lungs of the globes breathe on the stars.

Outer space is steeped in dangers and in environments hostile to life. Yet, it is said, the human animal is a child of the stars.

That child must carry, surely, an instinct for creation. Not only an instinct for the fury of creation, the fiery birth of constellations, but an instinct for immensity and silence, the music of silence within contrasting tone and light and shadow as they combine to ignite in oneself a reverie of pulse and heart and mind.

Inner ear and inner eye are linked to eloquent silences in the leap or pulse of light in shadow, shadow light, as if the fish in remembered rivers fly through an ocean of space and witness by enchantment, it seems, to the miracle of living skylscapes, oceanscapes, riverscapes wherever these happen to be, on Earth, or at the edge of distant galaxies.

I was born in South America and I left British Guyana for the United Kingdom at the age of thirty-eight.

Guyana is a remarkable wilderness. It has known Spanish settlers, then French and Dutch rule but became a British colony in the early nineteenth century.

Its population is less than a million but encompasses peoples from every corner of the globe, Africa, India, China, Portugal.

In area it is virtually as large as the United Kingdom and one sees graphically, I think, on a map the two oceans, so to speak, that flank the narrow strip of coastland along which the greater body of the population live and sound their drums of India and Africa. One flanking ocean—with its subdued, perennial roar against sea-wall and sea-defences—is the Atlantic, the other is green and tall, unlit by the surf of electricity on rainforested wave upon wave of wind-blown savannahs running into Brazil and Venezuela.

There are Amerindian legends which tell of sleeping yet, on occasion, singing rocks that witness to the traffic of history, the traffic of expeditions in search of El Dorado that Sir Walter Raleigh would have contemplated when he voyaged up the Orinoco before he lost his head in the Tower of London. The rocks sing an unwritten opera of El Dorado adventurers. Amerindians such as the Macusis, the Wapishanas, the Arawaks—whom Raleigh would have encountered—are still to be found in Guyana and South America. They have suffered—since Columbus's and Raleigh's day—decimations and the continuous depletion of their numbers at the hand of Europe across the centuries.

They were close to extinction at the beginning of this century but have survived in small numbers against all the odds.

I came upon them frequently—indeed they were sometimes members of my crew—in land surveying – expeditions into the heartland of Guyana and was drawn to their still demeanour and mobile poise as huntsmen and fishermen. Through them I learnt of the parable of the music of the fish in a rippling stream. They baited their fisherman's hook with a rainbow feather from a macaw or a parrot and with a twist of the wrist—as if they addressed an invisible orchestra—made it dart in the stream towards the leaping fish. Feather from a wing and eager fish were united, it seemed, into an orchestra of species and a sacrament of subsistence they (these ancient peoples) had long cultivated since their ancestors emigrated twelve thousand years ago from Asia across the Bering Straits into the continent we now call America.

Emigration—in distant ages as in modern times—is the nerve of spiritual enterprise in all communities; it is driven by private necessity as well as economic and historical impulse, by hope, desire, promise and innermost vocation.

I took a night job for a few months in the winter/spring of 1960 in a North London factory. On leaving the workplace early mornings I took away the hoarse call of the wheels of industry and the clamour and the grind of sliced metal as dawn broke like a white-feathered bird in the early spring blossom of a horse chestnut tree at the gate through which the factory workers streamed to kick-start a motor bike or take a bus or drive a car. Layer upon layer of noise drowning noise.

Even as I moved through the gate in the stream of workers I knew the rainforests in Brazil and Guyana were under threat, erosion of soils was occurring in the United States and around the globe, weather patterns were changing.

In the rainforest of Brazil today and Guyana, huge forest are being swept aside sometimes they use the axe, which is a crude instrument, but sometime they used sophisticated swords, other time they may be able to use laser apparatus for all I know. The sophistication doesn't diminish the fact that one is challenged profoundly to understand this technology, because technology can do great injury or on the other hand it could bring enormous benefit. It's a question of how we encompass technology within living landscape. So the technology could come into some kind of rapport with nature, which is lacking at the moment. To simply rely on technology by itself as a medium of salvation may be simply to consolidate our own deprivation. So we need to sense how technology may appear to grow out of the Tree of life.

I left the factory in the Spring of 1960 imbued with a sensation of profound necessity in the life of the imagination to visualize links between technology and living landscapes in continuously new ways that took nothing for granted in an increasingly violent and materialistic world.

Lazarus emerges in my imagination as an embodiment of inner ear and inner eye are his resurrected anatomy is attuned to the music of painted silence in pulse and heart and mind arisen from the grave of the world.

Are you thinking of the biblical Lazarus in the sense that, Lazarus is associated with the resurrection? But it isn't an absolute resurrection.

He travels one winter day from his workplace on a bus that stops to pick up passengers close to a fence at Kensington Gardens.

In the winter light that seemed to echo with intimate yet faraway vistas... Lazarus felt the imprint of black fire, black tone, numerous wonderful shadow... Yes, mind, heart, shadow...was the mind of Lazarus in atonement to ivories of sensation, russets, and other alphabets of the elements within every hollow epitaph of memory, every hollow grave.

Winter lapsed into the carpet of autumn leaves under the bole of a tree that the bus was passing The trampled leaves appeared to smoke with an arousal of spirit, trampled greenness, trampled yellow paint, in the hollow depression of time and place from which one arises to discourse with silent music within the roar of a great city.

The Carnival Trilogy (1993)

It isn't an absolute resurrection. Lazarus comes out of the grave, but then, presumably he dies again. And he may arise again, and he may die and arise again. So Lazarus can be encompassed by human cultures, in the sense, that human cultures are aware of a process of dying and a process of rebirth.

Lazarus may have arisen ... but alas the grave of history continues to yawn wide even as I speak now in the year of Our Lord 1996.

The savage exploitation of rainforests continues in South America. Trees are felled like dumb creatures. River catchments are impoverished. The muse of nature within the consciousness of peoples is threatened. A deadly cyanide overspill seeped into the great Essequibo River of Guyana in 1995. The grave is deep despite every carpet of leaves that Lazarus paints with music.

Lazarus appears again and Lazarus identifies the crushed leaves and flower with a painting, but this painting possesses a kind of music or rhythm, and this is something that used to happen to me, in the rainforest again, when one could suddenly discover an orchid or a flower of some sort that had fallen from the upper layers of the rainforest on the ground. Then it seemed eloquent, it seemed to have an eloquence in it, a mysterious eloquence, so that one would look at it, and be transformed inwardly by it as if someone would be looking at something that had been painted on the ground. But for some reason which one could not define there was a voice, there was a sound, there was a rhythm. Know this happened in silence. For a moment

there was this silence. And that is what I think presses in on me.

When I speak of silent music—in the short passage that I read from Carnival—I am intent on repudiating dumbness or passivity with which we subconsciously or unconsciously robe the living world. Living landscapes have their own pulse and arterial topography and sinew.

I am intent on implying that the vibrancy or pathos in the veined tapestry of a broken leaf addresses arisen consciousness through linked eye and ear in a shared anatomy that has its roots in all creatures and in everything. Consciousness of self in others, consciousness of diversity that breaks the mould of prejudice, remains a mystery to science.

One awakens at times to one's frailty in the cradle of the mind in particles that settle on one's brow or hand or skin, sailing particles from distant mountains and valleys that seek their mysterious parentage in all substance or in the alchemy of sound in a rainbow.

When I come upon a felled tree in a park in England it sometimes shapes itself in my inner eye as the epitaph of a murdered forest in Brazil, or Guyana, or Venezuela. I seek—as if imbued by Lazarus's mind in my mind, Lazarus's dream of cosmic love—to re-clothe that tree with the music of consciousness, with rustling, whispering branches in the foliage it has lost. I picture the tools that felled the tree as new sprung branches within a parable of creation, which gives breath to iron or wood or rock. Adam was moulded, it is said, from clay. Thus the technology that killed the tree arrives or returns as living branches in the risen tree itself.

Each newsprung branch—whether wood, or iron or stone—sees itself now as susceptible to a more deadly invention or tool than it had been when it felled the kinship, resurrected tree, parent or child, to which it has returned. The risen tree, in my consciousness, veils flesh-and blood into itself within a revisionary dynamic of creation and re-creation. Even as the technology of clay was moulded in genesis into Adam's pulse, Adam's breathe.

Emotions are involved and passions are involved, because these take us into areas which have a greater objectivity than the intellect. So that on lounge that butterfly which seems to just move gently in the air could be whispering to us of a storm on the other side of the globe. Now that seems to be a scientific theorem but on another level it seems to me to be an ingredient of passion. Because the storm exhibits passion. The frailty of the butterfly wings has tenderness. How can we divorce ourselves from these things we are involved at all levels of ourselves. No we may seek to block out many levels in torn a purely intellectual detachment, or intellectual scrutiny of things, and all we are doing there is consolidating a blockage. We are at the crossroad. Either we will make theses connections, which will be very demanding, or we will simply set land for a world where we build fortresses. I doubt whether any American president now, could drive out except in an

armoured car. We will have to continue to build these fortresses, which mean that polarization will occur, and even though we may have prosperity, there are other who will be desperately poor and rotten upon. And these people we do not know when they will torn against us, and seek to invade what will appear to them to be prosperous territories, unless some profound, far reaching change occurs on the way we visualise everything. And strangely enough, I think the living landscape is a book, an open book, which possesses clues, memories, and fabric that assists us in dealing with this crisis. But when we look at the American Indians, Arawaks, Macusis, you see that they were aware of this and they left fragmented texts, in which they claimed that the rocks sang, the rocks danced, and when one picks up those legends, one senses therefore that they had an acute awareness of the living landscape. They populated the living landscape with various gods.

I hear the sleeping yet singing rocks of ancient Amerindians legend as I stand in the open parkland in Kensington Gardens half-a-mile or more from the orchestra of the traffic arriving at, or coming from, Marble Arch...

Where is Marble Arch? In this instant I am uncertain for I am drawn back in memory across decades to the Tumatumari falls in the Potaro River of Guyana not far from the place called Omai where the cyanide spill from industrial workings entered the great Essequibo River in 1995.

Tumatumari is an Anglicized word drawn from an Amerindian root text and it has been translated in different ways to mean 'womb of song' or 'sleep of song' or 'sleeping yet singing rocks' in a Dream time, Dream space. I visited Tumatumari in the mid-1940s to investigate hydro-electric potential in the vicinity of the falls.

I lay in my hammock at nights listening to the falls: hoofs of horses were running in the night as the rapids drove upon, slid over, pounded on rock: the high heels of invisible women clicked on a pavement and approached from the chasm of the river: there was the sudden grind of gears, there motorized traffic: there was the back-firing of a car at Marble Arch...

The wind changes over Tumatumari as it changes over Bayswater Road and in the orchestra of memory and place which tunes into distant rain in a forest. So far away it sounds like the stealthy, drizzling approach of fire or a flute-playing ghost in the elements, a violin fashioned from sudden, scarcely visible lightning or metallic storm.

The rocks perform a tidal function in the scaffolding of the traffic of rivers. A fantastic balance between conservation and discharge of resources is achieved in the sculpture and placement of the rocks.

In my years of surveying rivers I was drawn into the sensation that sleeping and singing rocks are also dancers (stationary as they seem) even as trees and plants are known to walk under the close scrutiny of science.

The phenomenon of apparently immobile rocks, which play a tidal role in

non-tidal rivers, is a miracle of evolution. Non-tidal rivers run ceaselessly downward from their headwaters or sources in a distant watershed. They lie above the reach of the ocean tides, which cannot therefore exercise a check upon their volumetric decline and discharge. They would become a huge empty ditch or trench were it not for the sculpture and placement of living rocks— their shape, wave-sculpture, escalation, placement in the fury of the rapids—within great river systems.

They dance an inner, staggered, relay dance subsisting on the volumetric ball of the river that they bounce from hand to foot in their guardianship of resources, in their cultivation of the mystery of freedom and passage through diverse channel.

They run and dance without appearing to do so even as the tree of life carpets the ground yet rises and walks in the limbs of Lazarus.

The body of the dancer in a living landscape is the technology of music. The body of labour in living vocation resides in the technology of the resurrection.

Consciousness attunes itself to living landscapes within the dance of a seed in the soil...

From such a seed great cities grow and their echoing tracery is in the fall of a feather from the wing of a bird.

In that feather is the technology of space fused with the murmur of threatened species that still arise and address us...