

# SOME BIRDS ARE COMPOSERS; OTHERS SING POPULAR SONGS

**E**ARLY one morning in the Spring of 1893 I heard a most attractive bird song, uttered in a voice of such beautiful quality, so clear and distinct, and so true to our scale that it could be easily written down. So I made a record of it."

And that was only the beginning. For seventeen years Henry Oldys, ornithologist and musician, attached to the staff of the Biological Survey in Washington, has been making these records of bird music, until now he probably knows more about that one fascinating subject than any other man in the country. It was all quite accidental. He had been

birds of other countries, he is inclined to believe that the wood thrush is "pre-eminent in the entire avian world."

It will be noticed that he speaks of birds very much as a critic might of human concert singers. Of the cardinal gros-



Chickadee's Call.

beak, evidently a prime favorite, he says "it has powerful yet velvety tones, and sings without self-consciousness, tricks, or mannerism, a song as brilliant as his appearance." But the grosbeak's strong, full, and remarkably clear whistle is to be heard only at his home in the woods—unless one can get Mr. Oldys to reproduce it. For he can reproduce the songs of most of our birds so exactly as to deceive not only the human ear but birds themselves.

Not of all of them, however. For Mr. Oldys has heard many songs that could not be written on our musical staff or reproduced in the human throat. "Most song sparrows," he says, "utter songs that have little relation to our music—songs that cannot even be recorded owing to the non-use of our scale. And of the songs of some species I have no musical record, and, what is more, never shall have. Even among the species that have given me songs that are true to our scale, many individuals have uttered such as are incapable of exact notation."



Song Sparrow's Effort.

His description of the meadow lark's song—or perhaps of a meadow lark's song—is not quite so alluring as that of the cardinal. He is spoken of as "singing with a quavering note, and frequently wandering from the key, generally reaching his goal in apparent fear and trembling. Sometimes it sounds like a windmill thirsting for oil, or like an aged wheelbarrow." Yet when one is sure that it is neither of these, Mr. Oldys assures us, the singing is quite enjoyable. Which certainly argues a tremendous capacity for enjoyment.

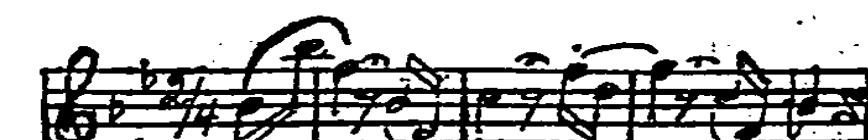
The more he studies birds the less Mr. Oldys is inclined to make sweeping statements as to the songs of a species—the more he realizes the distinctions not merely between the different species, but individual birds of the same species, so that it is possible to recognize particular



Fragment of Wood Thrush Music.

birds by their characteristic utterances. He quotes the particular song of a particular Rock Creek wood thrush which was made up of a combination of notes that he never heard any other wood thrush use.

As to whether in using notes that are not on the musical staff as known to mankind birdkind is ahead or behind us in its musical development, he does not commit himself. In spite of the frequent use of a different scale, he says the more he studies the subject the more he is impressed with the resemblance of bird music to human music, and the more he believes in his theory, at first merely tentative, that the evolution of the two has been parallel, their development along



More Wood Thrush Music.

the same lines and tending toward the same ideals.

"Bird and man, he says, are the only two creatures that use separate notes of determinate pitch in their music, and birds alone of all the animal creation are cap-

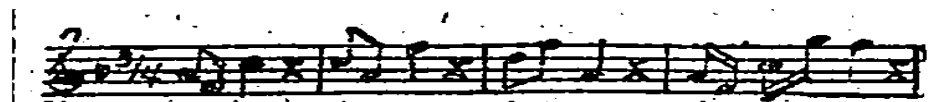
## Studies of Their Music by a Government Official—Some Birds of a Species Better Musicians Than Others—A Lark Which Plagiarized Handel.



Henry Oldys of the Biological Survey.

able of being taught to reproduce human melodies. He claims almost as wide a diversity in the musical capacity of individual birds of the same species as in that of human individuals.

There are Patis and Carusos among the birds just as there are among humans, apparently. "Wood thrushes, song sparrows, and chewinks, especially, show every gradation from mastership to mediocrity in composition, execution, and temperament. It is a far cry from the chewink that knows only one short simple



The Wood Thrush Again.

phrase to another chewink that after an effective pause follows a melodious theme in a major key with another in its relative minor key."

There are composers among the birds, and there are mere performers. In the latter class are the canary and the mockingbird. They have beautiful voices, and use them very skillfully, but seem to have no idea of musical form. Others, like the wood thrush, the song sparrows, and the chewinks, have voices of smaller compass and far less brilliant execution, but show considerable skill as composers.

The catbird is merely a clever imitator. He is distinctly in the class of "brilliant performers." His first cousin, the mockingbird, is the Classic Loftus of the feathered tribe. He can imitate any one of

them. But he is no composer. It is the rarest thing imaginable to hear an original bit of song from the mockingbird.

The popular rendering into words or syllables of the calls of certain birds, as, for instance the "Bob White" of the quail, is largely a question of imagination. Even the whippoorwill, according to Mr. Oldys, does not really demand the corporal punishment of William. His song has five notes more frequently than three, and he is capable of repeating it 160 times without apparently stopping for breath.

As Mr. Oldys speaks of the performers and composers among the birds, he admits the cleverness of the mere imitators, so, too, he gives amusing examples of birds with "no ear for music" attempting to imitate accomplished musicians. And on the subject of bird plagiarists he is both eloquent and amusing. He claims that the chickadee borrows from both the katydid and the phebe.

John Vance Cheney, in his "Wood Notes Wild," tells of a chewink that sang



A Wood Thrush That Sang Badly—Showing Tendency to Break on High Notes.

a theme based on the familiar tune of "Rock of Ages," and of a green-throated warbler that sang a slightly altered version of a phrase of "Larboard Watch Ahoy." And Mr. Oldys not only corrob-

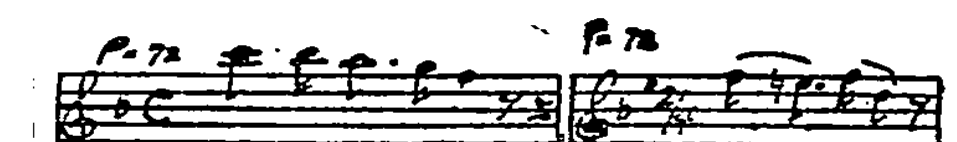
rates Cheney, but he tells of a Baltimore oriole whose song was strangely reminiscent, until he realized that the bird was disguising "Taken from the County Jail" from "The Mikado" by tacking on a few notes of ragtime at the finish.

Another oriole of his acquaintance was evidently entirely familiar with the old song "Not for Joe." And a meadow



Meadow Lark's Song.

lark sang for him a bar or two of Sousa's "Washington Post March," with a decided meadow lark accent, to be sure, but with appreciation and apparent enjoyment of its strong rhythmic swing. Nor is it only the lighter varieties of human music that the birds adopt. In spite of his uncomplimentary description of the meadow lark Mr. Oldys tells how one greeted him one morning "with a finished production, evidently borrowed with very little change in time from Handel." And he opines that a Kentucky warbler of his acquaintance may have heard Grieg's "Peer Gynt" suite before he originated a brilliant and rapid carol, which is suspiciously like a passage therein.



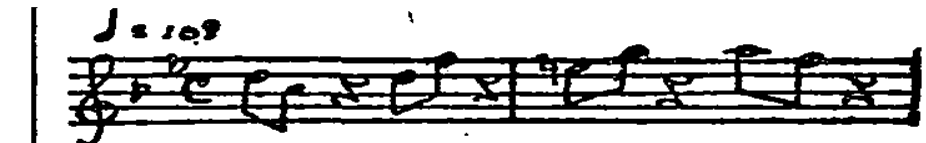
Meadow Lark Plagiarizing Handel—Another Plagiarizing Sousa.

Or Grieg may have heard the warbler—which?

Certainly the bird might claim the phrase as an inheritance from a long line of ancestors, reaching back to a time when Grieg and his musical philosophy were undreamed of. Indeed, Mr. Oldys says that he has heard from his bird composers many a theme that a human musician might use effectively, and certainly in his collection of bird mel-

odies many a musician might well find inspiration.

Not liking to admit that humanity steals from the birds, Mr. Oldys whimsically points out, "if we consider that 'Anne Rooney' is based upon the Slumber Song motif of 'Die Walkure,' and that the melody of 'Where Did You Get That Hat?' is taken from 'Parsifal' and 'Die Meistersinger,' in each of which



Baltimore Oriole.

it occurs as a cornet phrase; that the first two lines of Abt's, 'When the Swallows Homeward Fly' and Paves's 'An die Entfernte' are twins; that Grieg and Sullivan make common use of a phrase two bars in length, the one in his 'Arabischer Tanz,' the other in 'Princess Ida,' it is hardly fair for humans to accuse birds." So he politely calls it unconscious cerebration.

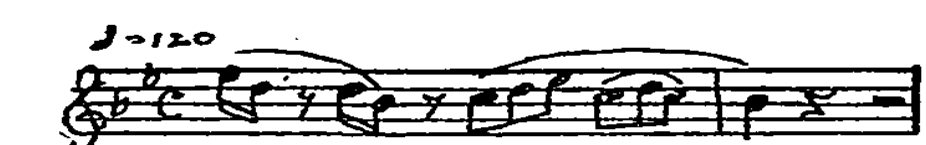
From all of this it is evident that Mr. Oldys has been listening to the birds for years with the soul of a poet and the ear of a musician as well as the notebook of a scientist. He has, of course, in jotting down such melodies as he could catch been obliged to express them in the notation of the musical staff. He confesses



Fox Sparrow.

that he owes the birds an apology for this. It is rather like the proverbial futility of setting a trap to catch a sunbeam, this business of trying to reduce a bird's song to cold type. For while the notation is accurate the songs lose so much that he wishes his transcriptions to be regarded as merely suggestive.

For he can, after all, offer merely the notes. The peculiar tone qualities that are the charm of the woodland concert cannot be reproduced in black and white. Nor can the human voice reproduce them at all



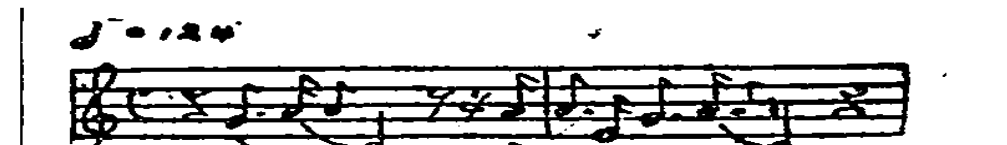
Carolina Wren Singing "Cheer-I-Iy!"

accurately. The flute and the violin come nearest to doing them justice, and the man who loves them and will patiently

learn of his feathered friends may in time whistle a pretty close imitation of some of their songs.

Naturally to such a one—to Mr. Oldys, for instance—a bird's song means a whole lot more than to the untutored listener. To him the two beautifully clear but rather plaintive notes of the chickadee's love song, or the breezy bravuras of the Carolina wren, or the mournful tones of the wood pewee inevitably suggest all sorts of intimate details of the birds' habit, and appearance, incidents of their courtship, their rivalries, their homebuilding, their parental cares.

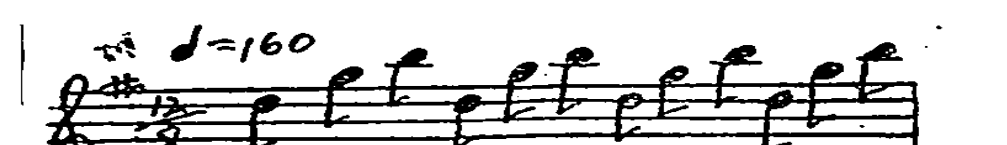
In one of his writings he says: "Very often we are wont to ascribe to a bird a character in keeping with the quality of its voice. The sonorous tones of the grosbeak suggest strength and power; the quiet meditative notes of the wood thrush seem to indicate a philosophical sober-minded nature; the rich tender contralto of the blue bird is suggestive of a peaceful disposition; the plaintive melody of the wood pewee seems to be the sad sig-



Grief-worn Soul.

of a grief-worn soul. Some birds—the song sparrow, the bobolink, and the house wren, for instance—appear to be bubbling over with happiness. Others, such as the meadow lark and the field sparrow, are apparently oppressed with this life's woes, while the poor little screech owl utters a wail that might come from the depths of a most profound despondency. 'O-o-o-o-o-o-o!' that I had never been bo-o-o-o-o-orn!' is what he seemed to Thoreau to say, and no words better characterize the gloom that pervades his plaint."

These are, of course, mere fancies. No man admits it quicker than Mr. Oldys,



Who Says Frankly.

who says frankly that the melancholy little owl probably enjoys life quite as much as the irresponsible chickadee, or the cheery Carolina wren, one of whose favorite songs is a veritable chortle in which he repeats indefinitely three notes that say as plainly as a bird can say it, "Cheerily! Cheerily! Cheerily!"

## WHERE MUSKRATS ARE EATEN

It is prejudice and nothing else," said the elderly globetrotter in an uptown café, "that prevents people eating many delicious dishes.

"Just think of a man turning up his nose at a nice tender slice of roasted horseflesh and then sitting down to a dish of pigs' feet, tripe, or lambs' fries! I have eaten all kinds of dishes that were strange to me in various parts of the world—sharks' fins, elephants' feet, and even snakes—and why are they not as desirable as eels?—and thought I was wise to about every kind of an old dish that many people are in ignorance of; but I was undecieved last Winter, and within a couple of hundred miles of New York City at that.

"It was down on the famous Eastern Shore of Maryland, and as the train was running through Delaware I was preparing myself for some kind of a gastronomical surprise, for, no matter what section of the country one visits for the first time, or what country, he is pretty sure to run across at least one or two dishes that are new and acceptable, even if he is not stuck on the local cookery as an entirety. But I was not prepared for the kind of a surprise I received. It was not a new way of preparing a dish I had already tasted, but an animal that, in all my travels, I had not learned was eaten anywhere.

"When I seated myself at the table the colored waiter asked me if I would have a rat. I fancied the waiter had a jag on, or was fresh; but he explained that he referred to a muskrat, and I ordered

one, for I am not so pig-headed as to shy at a new dish just because I had never eaten of it or heard of it.

"It was great. It was served as a stew, like a rabbit stew, with a thick and rich brown gravy, but was much more tasty than a rabbit and had a fine flavor. I ate nothing but muskrat at that meal, and got away with three portions, much to the delight of the darky waiter, who rejoiced at my sudden change of form, for I hesitated a moment before giving my first order. The town was the county seat, it was Saturday market day, and the streets were filled with country people who had come to town to sell their farm products and take back goods from the town. At almost every corner negroes were selling 'rats,' the carcasses alone, for the price of three for a quarter—and they were going off like the proverbial hot cakes.

"I learned that trapping muskrats was one of the industries of the locality, especially among negro men, and boys of both colors. They were caught principally for their skins, although the meat found a ready sale. They were always referred to as 'rats,' and the aristocracy had their rat suppers, washed down with champagne, so rats were not at all a plebeian dish.

"Every time I ate a rat down there I regretfully thought of the number of muskrats I had killed in the New England meadows when a boy and the good meals I had unwittingly lost.

"It was explained to me that the rats were really about the cleanest, as well as the best-flavored wild animal in those parts; and I suppose the muskrat is about the same, no matter where he is found. He lives on shoots, buds, and succulent roots, and down there was very fond of sassafras roots, which grew abundantly. The trappers said a rat would dig up a root and carry it down in the stream or pond and swish it back and forth in the water while holding it in his mouth, of course, and wash it thoroughly before eating it.

"It seems to me that people who eat pig's feet and pigs' knuckles, especially those that are served before having a shave or a hair cut, as most of them are I have seen, have nothing on the muskrat. Since then I have eaten them once or twice up this way, and that they were about the same, although they did not seem to be as tasty. There is one important thing to observe in cleaning them, and this is to remove the musk sack entirely.