

Nightingales in Berlin: Searching for the Perfect Sound, David Rothenberg. University of Chicago Press, Chicago (2019). 179pp. \$26.00 hardback, ISBN: 978-0-226-46718-4.

Reviewed by Helen Wadham, Department of Strategy, Enterprise and Sustainability, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6BS, UK

“Are you surprised there are nightingales in Berlin?” David Rothenberg asks us conversationally. I can’t say that I have ever given the matter any thought until now, but this is the joy of Rothenberg’s remarkable book. Part autobiography, part philosophical treatise, he takes us on an unexpected, sometimes winding but always satisfying journey to discover the secret of the nightingale’s song and what makes it so extraordinary. On the way, he introduces us to jazz musicians, sound recordists and a former curator from the Royal Swedish Library who is an expert on crickets. Professor of philosophy and music at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rothenberg treats all the birds and people he meets with the same respect and curiosity.

Nightingales, Rothenberg tells us, have a powerful hold over our collective imagination. So we are as surprised as him when we discover that their legendary song is anything but melodic:

“A mix of rhythmic chirps, spread-out whistles, and funky contrasting noises..This song was *weird.*”

From the start, then, Rothenberg wants us to take nightingales at face value, as both species and as individuals. They coexist with us and we honour their sound by calling it a song. But it is not enough just to listen passively. So one spring night in Berlin’s Treptower Park, Rothenberg sits beneath a tree, takes out his clarinet, and he plays.

And the bird responds. Not only do nightingales continue to sing when joined by humans, but they will actively make music with us. Some birds will do so in a way that attempts to vocally overpower us, while more confident birds will trade stanzas back and forth in friendly recognition of a fellow musician. For human and bird alike, then, playing along is a form of respect and appreciation. Thus Rothenberg urges us not to listen, or to stare, but to join in. This is one easy way to make nature matter. “Love it enough to want to play along,” he implores. “It’s got room for you.”

The book moves easily back and forth between these kinds of individual encounters – with birds, people and a host of other animals – and the bigger picture. Chapter 5, for example, explores the whole ecology of sounds. Rothenberg introduces us to pioneering acoustic ecologist Almo Farina, whose acoustic complexity index allows us to measure and map the soundscapes that occur across the natural world. In just one of many fascinating asides, Rothenberg notes that a healthy ecosystem full of singing birds offers up constantly changing living sounds, whereas the human sounds that encroach upon the soundscape are generally singular. Thus, Farina’s maps illustrate the peaks and troughs of a songbird chorus plotted above the monotone rumble of a passing aeroplane. As more and more human sounds enter a soundscape, so the higher frequency bird and insect sounds are literally drowned out.

Later, Rothenberg introduces us to field recordist Gordon Hempton, whose lifelong obsession with silence has led him to the conclusion that there are only a dozen places left in the United States where the sounds of humans do not routinely encroach upon those of nature.

Yet this is a profoundly uplifting story. As far back as 1932, in his classic book on the species, Oliver Pike noted that nightingales not only survive but thrive in the face of aural chaos. “If you want to get the best efforts out of a nightingale,” he advises, “you *must* provide an opposition entertainment that will almost drown its song.” By way of example, Rothenberg describes one city-centre nightingale who has something of a cult following. Regularly perched above a traffic light at a busy junction adjoining Treptower Park, the bird sings on oblivious to – or rather encouraged by – the racket going on around him.

From a methodological point of view, the book raises a number of interesting questions. In particular, scholars in emotion – whether or not we have an interest in the more-than-human – can learn from the humility with which Rothenberg approaches his research subjects. In playing alongside them, Rothenberg is essentially recognising and valuing the birds on their own terms. He shows a similar diffidence with regard to the work of fellow researchers. The book is peppered with studies that attempt to quantify musicality in a way that is very different to – but supplements – Rothenberg’s relational approach. He thus provides a model of how natural and social scientists alike can (and should) collaborate and span disciplinary boundaries, in order to understand and tackle the global challenges that underscore the book.

The nightingale’s tenacity is a source of comfort in the face of manmade climate change and our wanton destruction of biodiversity. Rothenberg notes how even as we destroy the vast richness of natural soundscapes, we create new interspecies variations. Birds don’t give up but adapt, he reminds us. But what of those individual creatures or species who, for whatever reason, cannot reconfigure themselves to fit within the confines of this shrinking natural world? Remember that nightingales fascinate us precisely because they are so special: As vocal learners, only songbirds, whales, dolphins and humans have the ability to learn through sound, modifying acoustic and syntactic sounds and producing vocalisations, rather than these being hardwired into them through evolution.

These new interspecies soundscapes are a pale and potentially troubling replacement for what went before. And here Rothenberg points us to an unsettlingly prescient example, as he describes musician and professor of audio culture David Toop’s recording of a Chinese market:

“Only one thing is clear: that this sound world through which he walks is relentlessly alive with a mess of species doing their best to be heard.”

Nonetheless, it is impossible to read this extraordinary book and not feel just a bit more optimistic about, well, everything. Even if we have to search online to know what we are listening out for. We are living in a world where nightingales sing on and, better yet, David Rothenberg is playing along with them.