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# Sharp, Loud, Fast, Fierce: Encounters with a Gannetry

Emily Doolittle, Royal Conservatoire of Scotland<sup>1</sup> (essay and music) and Dawn Wood (poetry)

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*Gannetry* is a collaborative music-and-text piece by poet Dawn Wood and me, composer Emily Doolittle, written for and with clarinettist Joanna Nicholson as part of the *Modern Chants* project in 2021. *Modern Chants*, a large-scale multi-disciplinary collaboration conceived and organized by composer Rūta Vitkauskaitė and funded by Creative Scotland and the PRS Foundation, explores contemporary, historical, mythological, and linguistic connections between people and nature in Scotland through an interweaving collection of musical works, poems, stories, artwork, and soundwalks. It has been performed in an ever-evolving series of formats including online, in person, and through participatory workshops, and also includes composers Gemma McGregor and Ellie Cherry, violist Katherine Wren, and sound designer Chris Adams. All participants have longstanding interests in connecting with the natural world through the arts: this project thus provided the opportunity for us to develop our pieces in dialogue with one another.

I came to Scotland as an adult, first as a short-term resident in 2007, 2010, and 2014, then permanently, beginning in 2015. As such I have particularly strong memories of some of my first encounters with Scottish nature: indeed, it is these encounters that kept drawing me back here, and eventually led me to make it my home. One such memory is of singing to the grey seals at Scalpsie bay on the Isle of Bute and hearing them respond with their soulful, wolf-like howls; another is of wandering the windswept beaches of the Isle of Barra, the sole human, but surrounded by a glorious cacophony of kittiwakes, gulls, oystercatchers, guillemots, and seals, all snuffling and breathing and splashing and calling. Never have I felt so alone, yet simultaneously so deeply enmeshed in the wondrous web of life. *Gannetry* explores my memory of my first encounter with the nesting colony of gannets at Hermaness in Unst, at the north of the Shetland Islands.

The (human) approach to Hermaness gannetry is from inland, a 2-hour walk over well-maintained gravelled and boardwalked paths, all fairly level: nothing prepares one for the sudden appearance of the sea cliffs, which descend 170 metres to the rocky sea below. Thousands of pairs of crying seabirds cover the cliffs, while the air teems with swirling skuas, fulmars, shags, puffins, and, above all, gannets – up to 60,000 of them. The largest seabird in the UK, gannets are also one of the fastest, dropping from the air at 100 kilometres per hour to hunt. They can spot a fish from 40 metres up, and can dive to 20 metres below the ocean's surface to get it.<sup>2</sup> The gannetry resounds with their guttural calls and the visceral clacking sound of beak against beak. People sometimes say 'birdlike' to mean small, delicate, and fragile, but in this context the descriptors that come to mind are sharp, loud, fast, fierce. The feeling of being greatly outnumbered by a powerfully Other kind of life stayed with me.

Our initial planning meetings for *Modern Chants* included some free-form sharing of ideas about our varied relationships with the natural world. I mentioned my fascination with both the sound and presence of gannet colonies, as well as with the word 'gannetry' itself. Simply describing my experience with the

<sup>1</sup> Author's e-mail address: [e.doolittle@rcs.ac.uk](mailto:e.doolittle@rcs.ac.uk). Thanks to Dawn Wood and Joanna Nicholson for their contributions to and feedback on this essay, and to Rūta Vitkauskaitė and the entire *Modern Chants* team for creating the environment which allowed *Gannetry* to come into being.

<sup>2</sup> GARTH et al. 2014; BRIERLEY and FERNANDES 2001.



Hermaness gannetry to the other members of *Modern Chants* – the swirling, the diving, the clacking, the sense of being a tiny speck amongst such an alien form of life – brought me back there, and the germ of a piece to come into being. My experience resonated with the experiences of Joanna, who can see the gannets from her home in Aberdeenshire, and Dawn, who watches gannets diving from Kinshaldy Beach in Fife. While encounters with gannets are rare and special for me and Dawn, they make up part of the fabric of Joanna's life. She writes,

Every day, I look out on gannets from my kitchen window. Their nesting site is a couple of miles away at Troup Head, and domestically, they are quite disgusting. Those cliffs stink, they are overcrowded during residential season, and the noise is perpetual and ugly to human ears. But in flight, what machines. Clinically beautiful in dazzling white, precision killers as they drop into the ocean at theoretically possible speeds of up to 288 kilometres per hour. Interior nostrils, cushioning air sacs under the skin, and skull bones that flex apart are some of the adaptations that preserve their bodies from obliteration as they torpedo into the concrete-like surface of the water. Meanwhile, humans fall over, crash their cars, and then get into arguments about it all.<sup>3</sup>

From the first discussion of gannets and gannetries, the creative process began to take on a life of its own, and it is a bit hard to retroactively deconstruct which ideas came from where. As I recall it, I described a musical idea related to gannetries, Dawn came back with words that resonated perfectly, and Joanna experimented with the sounds she could make to illustrate these on the clarinet. I chatted with a gannet researcher, Jana Jeglinski, for further insight into gannet vocalizations, and the contexts in which they make them. Empirical observations suggested musical ideas, musical ideas suggested poetry, poetry suggested clarinet sounds, clarinet sounds suggested musical structures and timbres, which in turn suggested poetic content. Records of my correspondence with Dawn during *Gannetry*'s creation tell a slightly different story, however: I had already completed the musical score when Ruta asked Dawn if she might write a poem to go with it. Thinking back on this time, I realize I must have been feeling quite uncertain about my composition, as I was experimenting with some musical and notational ideas that were then new to me. The musical score may have already existed, but it was only when Dawn wrote her words that it started to seem real to me.

As a composer, I most often write traditionally-notated (stave-based) music for acoustic instruments. Stave-based notation has the advantages of accurately communicating to the instrumentalist which notes I want them to play and when, but for me wouldn't have expressed the sense of wild energy, the sense of predictability-within-chance and chance-within-predictability of a gannet colony. Indeed, I did not want to structure this piece around notes at all – I wanted to give noisy, unpitched sounds precedence in this piece, with any appearance of pitched sounds being optional and surface-level rather than structural. I realized that a more pictorial approach, 'graphic notation', would in this case best convey the sounds, textures, and structures that I was imagining. Though I'm not a trained visual artist, I had a clear idea of the strokes and patterns that would best represent these ideas, and practised until I was able to execute them. Using the graphics software Inkscape, rather than drawing directly on paper, meant that I could draw and redraw a line or gesture hundreds of times if I needed to get it exactly right, without affecting any past or future gestures on the page. Text supplements the visuals, offering suggestions of how to realize the sounds – layered breaths make waves and wind, keyclicks evoke rain, the clarinet mouthpiece alone suggests seabirds overhead. But the score is not prescriptive: *Gannetry* can be, and has been, interpreted in any number of ways, and by any instrument or group of instruments. For the premiere, composer/performer Ellie Cherry helped us realize the piece by creating a MaxMSP patch to layer Joanna's clarinet playing.<sup>4</sup> Ellie made a pre-recorded soundbank of Joanna's clarinet sounds, which she drew on during the performance, as well as live-processing some of Joanna's sounds. Subsequent performances have included Eileen Walsh performing solo on

3 NICHOLSON 2023.

4 *Gannetry* (premiere), performed by Joanna Nicholson (clarinet), Dawn Wood (spoken word) and Ellie Cherry (live electronics).



bass clarinet with a live looping machine,<sup>5</sup> and the Alkali Ensemble performing as a mixed-instrument acoustic quartet.<sup>6</sup> These three realizations of the piece are all very different from each other, but they all hark back to the densely textured, animalian sounds and the spaciousness and rawness of the cliffs, water, and wind of the gannetry.

For me, the piece is about gannets themselves, and about the sense of awe their community inspires. For Joanna it is about the multi-faceted viscerality of living with them daily. For Dawn, it is about these things too, but also has another hidden layer of meaning. Dawn wrote her poem, which is called *Gannet Rock* when read on its own, short days after surgery for breast cancer, when she was experiencing intense nerve pain. She writes:

The poem *Gannet Rock*, on the surface of things is about seabirds and gannets in particular, because that was your focus, but for me it is about pain. I wrote it during a day of severe pain after my mastectomy, so for me the poem is the unexpectedness of bolts of nerve pain. I had never had a day like it before, nor, I am glad to say, since. From my perspective it was really quite uncanny how the writing of the poem coincided with that particular day and gave it that sort of "energy" for me.<sup>7</sup>

The words of *Gannet Rock* fit so perfectly with my aural and emotive reimagining of the gannetry that it had not occurred to me to ask Dawn if they meant something different to her, though I certainly felt their power. Dawn states that 'this reading of the poem is not foregrounded or made overt in the piece because that wasn't part of the remit of the project, but I'd hope, and suspect, that listeners would bring their own meanings into the words'.<sup>8</sup> Imbuing a poem with multiple levels of meaning, both surface and obscure, is an approach she uses regularly in her work. She continues: 'When I'm writing poetry, sometimes it's helpful to map something that's going on (e.g. the "pain") against the overt subject that needs to be tackled ("gannets") and it's the oscillation between the two that gives creative possibilities and an extra dimension'.<sup>9</sup>

*Gannetry* grew out of a three-way collaboration between me, Dawn and Joanna, and in discussion with all the *Modern Chants* creators. We each brought our own experiences, aesthetic voices, and artistic visions to bear on the eventual form of the piece. Just as Dawn uses multiple layers of meaning to develop depth in her poetry, the multiple layers of meaning contributed by all three co-creators, as well as by our colleagues, are what gives this piece substance and meaning. Awe, mundanity, disgust, precision, pain, strength, wonder, annoyance, danger, fragility, beauty – all clamouring together like a noisy colony of gannets.

### **Gannet Rock**

*Fate whispers to the warrior, 'you cannot withstand this storm' and the warrior whispers back, 'I am the storm'*

Maybe at birth, I was a boat setting sail  
on the sea of the waves that happen to me  
or maybe I was the wave itself,  
connected with all the water there is,  
and I could aim for that rock, over there  
and see what the weather brings my way.

There used to be shamans who worked with the wind,  
they'd carefully gather it into knots  
and you could pay them for a string  
and you'd undo the knots, at sea,  
to brace yourself, to get your breath  
on the crest of a wave of the shocking nerve

5 *Gannetry*, performed by Eileen Walsh.

6 *Gannetry*, performed by The Alkali Collective.

7 Wood 2023.

8 Wood 2023.

9 Wood 2023.



that you'll withstand, you are the wave,  
you tell yourself that there's no harm  
in the unexpectedness of rain,  
though the randomness of where and when  
a drop might fall has been described  
in an equation, here and there,

since nothing ever comes from nowhere  
and there's no sound without a source –  
the circling seabirds contain the proof,  
the way that knot could store the wind,  
the puffins and the cormorants,  
the Leach's petrels, herring gulls,

the fulmars, all fulfil the energy  
invested and released in them;  
but gimlet eyes make up the rock  
where clacking, prehistoric beaks  
of gannets guard their modicum of space,  
before they plunge through you, the wave.

Dawn Wood, 2021

## Gannetry

for solo clarinet (any clarinet, or multiple clarinets) and looper or recording device  
commissioned by Ruta Vitkauskaitė/Modern Chants for Joanna Nicholson, with funding from  
Creative Scotland and the PRS Foundation

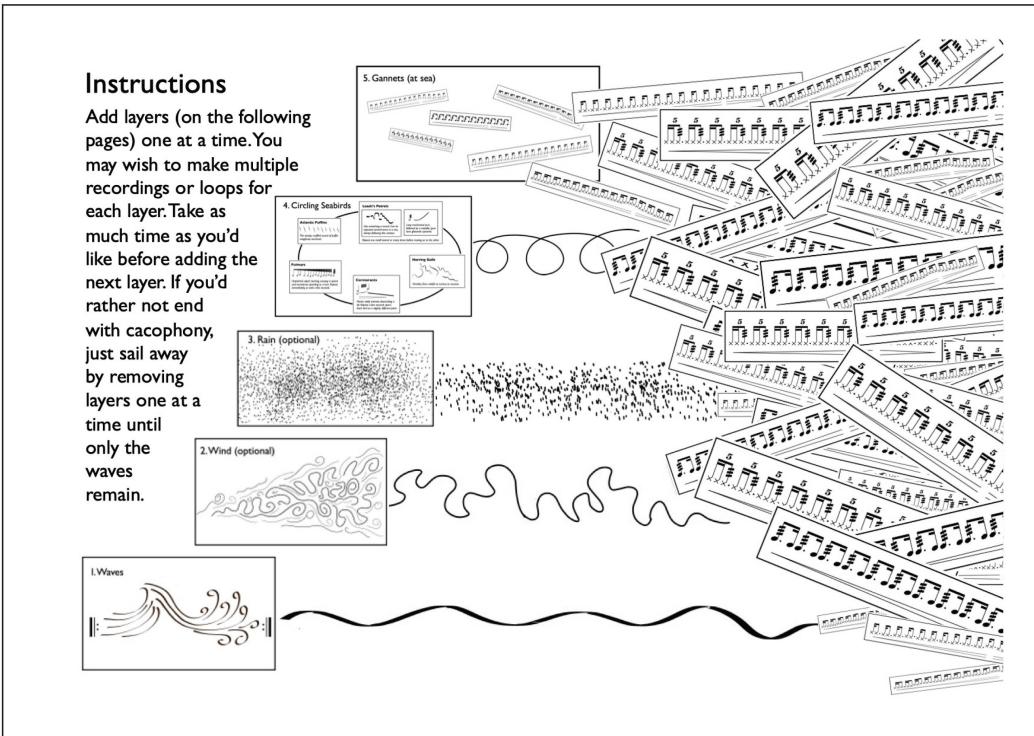
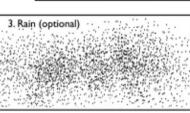
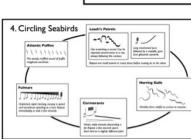
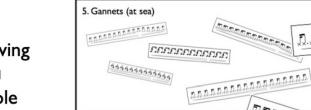
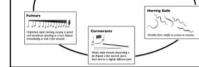
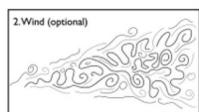
duration: variable

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### Instructions

Add layers (on the following pages) one at a time. You may wish to make multiple recordings or loops for each layer. Take as much time as you'd like before adding the next layer. If you'd rather not end with cacophony, just sail away by removing layers one at a time until only the waves remain.



### I. Waves

Repeat as many times as you can. Loop to create a continuous background of wave sounds.



unpitched breath in (through clarinet): slow, airy

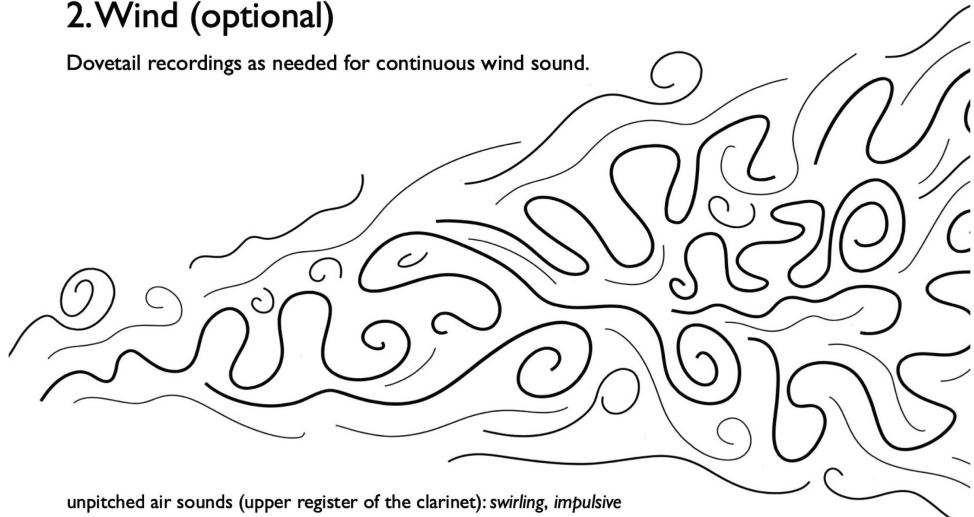
unpitched breath out (through clarinet): turbulent, then diffusing

Layer multiple wave tracks for a richer sound. Align in and out breaths (by recording subsequent wave tracks while listening to the first) for the cyclical sound of waves on the shore. Or don't align tracks, for the less predictable sound of waves at sea.



## 2. Wind (optional)

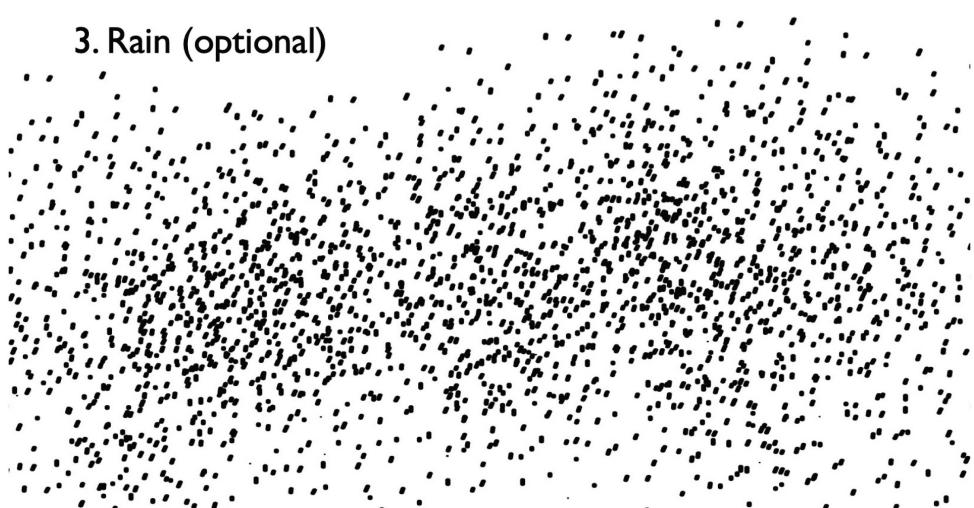
Dovetail recordings as needed for continuous wind sound.



unpitched air sounds (upper register of the clarinet): *swirling, impulsive*

This can be a light breeze, a dangerous storm, or anything in between.

## 3. Rain (optional)



unpitched key clicks (perhaps the upper notes on the bass clarinet), with a stochastic distribution

Rain can be continuous or sporadic.



#### 4. Circling Seabirds

##### Atlantic Puffins

The steady, muffled sound of puffin wingbeats overhead.

##### Leach's Petrels



Like scratching a record. Can be repeated several times in a row, always following this contour.



Long mechanical purr, followed by a metallic, pure tone glissando upwards.

Repeat one motif several or many times before moving on to the other.

##### Fulmars

Unpitched, rapid clucking, varying in speed and sometimes speeding to a burr. Repeat immediately, or wait a few seconds.

##### Cormorants

Harsh, ratty tremolo, descending a bit. Repeat a few seconds apart. Each bird on a slightly different pitch.

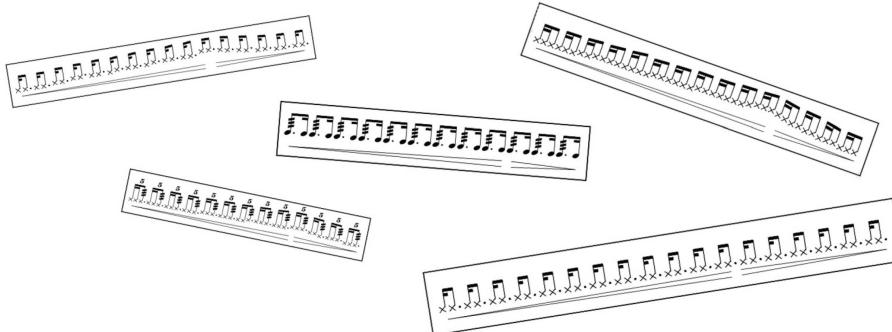
##### Herring Gulls

Variable, from wistful to curious to raucous.

Some or all of these birds may appear, singly or in groups. Play ad lib., or loop each species separately.

#### 5. Gannets (at sea)

Each figure  $\text{♩} = 80-144$  (stay the same tempo within each phrase, but vary the tempo between phrases). All phrases are made of repeated guttural, rhythmic, semi-pitched clacking figures. Each phrase can stay on a steady semi-pitch, or rise and fall slightly. You can vary the rhythmic figures between phrases, but keep them (mostly) regular within a phrase. Number of figures in a phrase can vary.



Introduce the gannets one at a time at first, then with increasing frequency as you approach the gannetry.



### 6. Gannetry

Add gannets to create a cacophonous wall of sound, letting individual gannets weave in and out of the texture.

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