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Cover:
Plum Duff in outer space. Illustration by Ray Winder
A WORLD OF SOUND

BY

OLAF STAPLETON

The room was overcrowded and stuffy. The music seemed to have no intelligible form. It was a mere jungle of noise. Now one instrument and now another blared out half a tune, but every one of these abortive musical creatures was killed before it had found its legs. Some other and hostile beast fell upon it and devoured it, or the whole jungle suffocated it.

The strain of following this struggle for existence wearied me. I closed my eyes, and must have fallen asleep; for suddenly I woke with a start. Or seemed to wake. Something queer had happened. The music was still going on, but I was paralysed. I could not open my eyes. I could not shout for help. I could not move my body, nor feel it. I had no body.

Something had happened to the music too, and to my hearing. But what? The tissue of sounds seemed to have become incomparably more voluminous and involved. I am not musical; but suddenly I realised that this music had overflowed, so to speak, into all the intervals between the normal sensibilia, that it was using not merely quartet-tones but 'centitone' and 'millitone', with an effect that would surely have been a torture to the normal ear. To me, in my changed state, it gave a sense of richness, solidity and vitality quite lacking in ordinary music. This queer music, moreover, had another source of wealth. It reached up and down over scores of years, in a way that the range of normal hearing. Yet I could hear it.

As I listened, I grew surprisingly accusated to this new jargon. I found myself easily distinguishing all sorts of coherent musical forms in this world of sound. Against an obscure, exotic background of more or less constant chords and flattening 'leafage', so to speak, several prominent and ever-changing sound-figures were playing. Each was a persistent musical object, though fluctuating in detail of gesture and sometimes ranging bodily up or down the scale.

Suddenly I made a discovery which should have been incredible, yet it seemed to me at the time quite familiar and obvious. I found myself recognising that these active sound-figures were alive, even intelligent. In the normal world, living things are perceived as changing patterns of visible and tangible characters. In this mad world, which was coming to seem to me quite homely, patterns not of colour and shape but of sound formed the perceptible bodies of living things. When it occurred to me that I had fallen into a land of 'programme music' I was momentarily disgusted. Here was a whole world that violated the true canons of musical art! Then I reminded myself that this music was merely telling but actually living its story. In fact it was not art but life. So I gave rein to my interest.

Observing these creatures that disported themselves before me, I discovered, or rather re-discovered, that though this world had no true space, such as we perceive by sight and touch, yet it did have a sort of space. For in some sense these living things were moving in relation to me and in relation to one another. Apparently the 'space' of this world consisted of two dimensions only, and these differed completely in quality. One was the obvious dimension of tonality, or pitch, on the subtle 'keyboard' of this world. The other was perceived only indirectly. It corresponded to the heard nearness or remoteness of one and the same instrument in the normal world. Just as we see things as near and far through the signification of colour and perspective, so in this strange world, certain characters of timbre, of harmonics, of overtones, conveyed a sense of 'nearness'; others a sense of 'distance'. A peculiar blantly, often combined with loudness, meant 'near'; a certain flatness or ghostliness of timbre, generally combined with flatness, meant 'far'. An object receding in this 'level' dimension (as I called it) would gradually lose its bodily filled body, and its detail and preciseness. At the same time it would become fainter, and at last inaudible.

I should add that each sound-object had also its own characteristic timbre, almost as though each thing in this world were a theme played by one and the same instrument. But I soon discovered that in the case of living things the timbre-range of each individual was very wide; for emotional changes might be accompanied by changes of timbre even greater than those which distinguish our instruments.

In contrast with the variegated but almost changeless background or landscape, the living things were in constant movement. Always preserving their individuality, their basic identity of tonal pattern, they would withdraw or approach in the 'level' dimension, or run up or down the scale. They also indulged in a ceaseless rippling play of musical gesture. Very often one of these creatures, travelling up or down the scale, would encounter another. Then either the two would silently interpenetrate and cross one another, as transverse trains of waves on a pond; or there would be some sort of mutual re-adjustment of form, apparently so as to enable them to squeeze past one another without 'collision'. And collision in this world seemed to be much like dissonance in our music. Sometimes, to avoid collision, a creature needed merely to effect a slight alteration in its tonal form, but sometimes it had to move far aside, so to speak, in the other dimension, which I have called the 'level' dimension. Thus it became for a
while inaudible.

Another discovery now flashed upon me, again with curious familiarity. I myself had a ‘body’ in this world. This was the ‘nearest’ of all the sound-objects. It was so ‘near’ and so ‘obvious’ that I never noticed it till it was brought into action. This happened un

expectedly. One of the moving creatures in

adventurously came into collision with a minor part of my muscular body. The slight violation of my substance stubbed me with a little sharp pain. Immediately, by reflex action and then purposefully, I readjusted my muscular shape, so as to avoid further conflict. Thus it was that I discovered or re-disc

covered the power of voluntary action in this world.

I also emitted a loud coruscation of musical gesture, which I at once knew to be signif

icant speech. In fact I said in the language of that world, ‘Darn you, that’s my toe, that was.’ There came from the other an an

ouncing and apologetic murmur.

A newcomer now approached from the

sonance, which I could generally avoid by altering my shape I discovered that a certain degree of dissonance between my

self and another offered only very slight resistance and no pain. Indeed, such con

facts might be pleasurable. But harsh dis

cords were a torture and could not be

maintained.

I soon found that there was a limit to my possible movement up and down the scale. At a point many octaves below my normal situation I began to feel oppressed and jug

ish. As I toiled downwards my discomfort increased, until, in a sort of swoon, I floated up again to my native musical plane. Ascen

ding far above this plane, I felt at first ex

hilaration; but after many octaves a sort of light-headedness overtook me, and presently I sank reeling to the few octaves of my normal habitat.

In the higher positions I seemed to be no limit to my power of locomotion, and it was in this dimension chiefly that I sought the vanished nymph. I pressed forward

through ever-changing tonal landscapes. Sometimes they opened out into ‘level’ vistas of remote, dim, musical objects, or into ‘toral’ vistas, deep and lofty, revealing hundreds of octaves above and below me. Sometimes the view narrowed, by reason of the dense musical ‘vegetation’, to a mere
tunnel, no more than a couple of octaves in height. Only with difficulty could I work my

way along such a passage. Sometimes, in order to avoid impenetrable objects I had
to clamber-descent far into the treble or the bass. Sometimes, in empty regions, I had to leap from perch to perch.

At last, I grew too weary. Movement be

came repugnant, perception uncertain. Moreover the very form of my body lost something of its sentience. Instead of feeling the

world, I was now impelled to an act which surprised my intellect though I performed it without hesitation. Approaching certain luscious little musical objects, certain very simple but

vigorous little enduring patterns of timbre and harmony, I devoured them. That is, I broke down the sound-pattern of each one into simpler patterns; and these I incorpor

ated into my own harmonious form. Then I

passed on, refreshed.

Presently I was confronted by a crowd of the intelligent beings trembling hysterically towards me, and jostling one another in their

haste. Their emotional timbre expressed such fear and horror that my own musical

form was infected with it. Hastily moving

myself several octaves toward the bass to avoid their frantic course, which was mostly in the treble, I shouted to them to tell me

what was the matter. As they fled past I distinguished only a cry which might be translated, ‘The Big Bad Wolf’.

My fear left me, for now I recognised that this was a flock of very young creatures. So I

laughed reassuringly, and asked if they had

and came pounding toward me with the roar and scream of a train, or an approaching

shell. I fled. But soon realizing that I was los

ing ground, I plunged into a thicket of chaotic sound, which I heard ahead of me and well up in the treble. Adapting my

musical form and colour as best I could to the surrounding wilderness, I continued to climb. Thus I hoped both to conceal myself and escape from the reach of the creature’s
tentacles. Almost fainting from the altitude, I chose a perch, interlaced my muscular limbs with the pattern of the fixed objects in that locality. Thus anchored, I waited, motionless.

The brute was now moving more slowly, nosing in search of me as it approached. Pricking my ears, I leapt immediately in the air, far down in the bass. Its body was now all too clearly heard as a grim cacophony of grow

ling and belching, its notes moving beneath me like the waving tops of trees beneath a man clinging to a cliff-face. Still searching, it passed on beneath me. Such was my relief that I lost consciousness for a moment and slipped several octaves down before I could recover myself. The movement revealed my position. The beast of prey returned, and began clamoring awfully shrill and yet muffled. Altitude soon check

ed its progress, but it reached me on the

tentacle, one shrieking arpeggio. Desperate

ly I tried to draw myself farther into the

treble, but the monster’s limb knelt itself into the sound-pattern of my flesh. Frantically struggling, I was dropped down, down into the stiffluting bass. There, fangs and talons of sound tore me agonizingly limb from limb.

Then suddenly I woke in the concert hall to a great confusion of scratching chairs. The audience was making ready to leave.