

HARMONY

Singing like a plant

Schumacher College, 21 March 2014

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Unbroken chorus of wellwishing voices

The sun invited me outside. To greet my favourite tree that embraces home. I imagine the tree's thoughts. I imagine tree awareness.

*I greet, this tree is grand and compels attention
I approach, little flowers colourful and compel caution
carefully stepping around
instead, I step on nettle*

I imagine a lot of emotion inside this tree. I imagine a lot of emotion inside these spring flowers. They let me know, "I am here," grateful to the universe.

What would have to happen for me to imagine nettle imagination? What has to happen for me to give attention?

to all

*make a sound – ask for attention – and I will attend – try to gratify
I hear no sound – I see no colour – little nettle, speak up or disappear, in the world it has become*

This nettle its fruitful expression; sheer expressiveness of the plant's entire being, creative in its own environment. Equally creative. Music of the Plants a reminder of universal creativity. All is art. Beauty invites me to participate. All is beauty.

The unbroken chorus of plant voices, inaudible to human ears. It's all there. And what you find – depends on what you pay – attention to. Attention, let's grow. Attention grows. My focus, my reality.

*Appreciate life
Appreciation grows*

INTRODUCTION

The current dogma in mainstream science is that Nature is purposeless. Life on Earth has been possible because of an infinite amount of coincidences. If there is no purpose, and the future does not seem so bright, what encourages me to conserve, to nourish the large coincidence? In building peaceful, harmonic relationships with each other as human beings, and with all other life, it is not encouraging to think that we are purposeless. Humankind being part of Nature, part of the evolutionary process, to me it feels it may be random but never meaningless that humankind is alive, right now, in all our diversity. Mainstream scientific research seeks for more information; information says nothing about meaning. I like to think we are all wanted. I like to think that my creation is to continue all that has been created before me, and that diversity is an expression of creativity. This gives me a strong sense of belonging and inspiration to live harmoniously in creativity. In order to act peacefully, to be in harmony, a life-affirming story seems needed. A story of belonging of all beings.

**It was when I said,
"There is no such thing as the truth,"
That the grapes seemed fatter.
The fox ran out of his hole.**

*Fragment from "On the Road Home"
by Wallace Stevens*

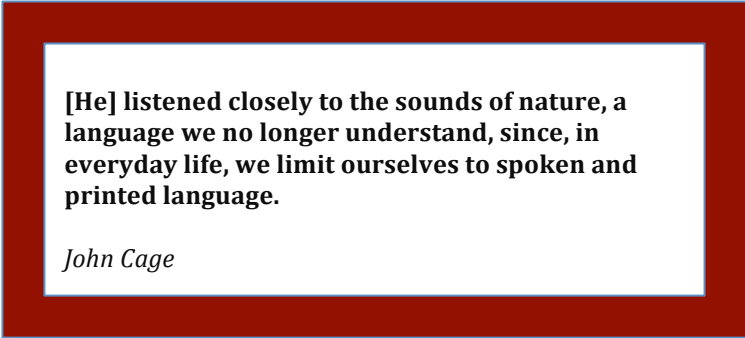
With *Thinking like a plant: a living science for life*, educator and biologist Craig Holdrege offers a guide for those seeking a better relationship with Nature. Education at The Nature Institute is based on deep ecology and Goethian Science and involves a lot of going outside and observation of plants. Plants are considered great teachers. Learning about possible similarities between flora and fauna, and experiencing those in a bodily fashion, feels constructive in the quest towards long-term sustainability. This type of embodied learning appeals to me, and I am curious for other, playful ways of strengthening a good relationship with Nature, in order to live peacefully, in harmony with all that is (which is my understanding of sustainability).

Similar to what is suggested from the central question in *Thinking like a plant* (How might the world look if we human beings were able to think the way a plant grows?), I consider plants to be great teachers. This makes me eager to

explore “How might the world look if we human beings were able to express ourselves the way a plant expresses itself?”

Unlike many manmade actions at the moment, plants contribute to the evoking fabric of life, rather than to its dissolution. They contribute to biodiversity, the health of ecosystems, providing oxygen, nutrition and natural beauty, to name a few of the qualities. In my understanding of sustainability, I find that plants embody harmony. And *harmony* is what I hope to find an embodied experience in by focusing on harmony in music. By way of this assignment, I am composing a workshop template to experience the Creative Principle in the Universe, shared by plants and people.

At the same time, by making plants heard manually (via the Music of the Plants device, created by Damanhur) participants have the opportunity to create a different attentiveness to those plants, which might influence how they relate to the plant world from then onwards. By way of this workshop, I am hoping to spark questions in the vein of: Are plants alive? Can I relate to them more than I expected? How can I live harmoniously in Nature, as part of Nature? How can I express and enjoy my inner creativity?



[He] listened closely to the sounds of nature, a language we no longer understand, since, in everyday life, we limit ourselves to spoken and printed language.

John Cage

APPRECIATION GROWS

Craig Holdrege emphasizes the opportunity for self-transformation by studying Nature, learning from “genuine presences such as plants.” It can stimulate one to “internalize the qualities of dynamism, interconnectedness and wholeness that plants so clearly embody” (Holdrege 2013b). What I find plants clearly embodying is confidence and freedom. Embedded in its local ecosystem, what a plant or tree seems to be expressing is: *This is me. I am here.* Each plant is

intelligent and creative in its own environment of stimuli and living conditions. Plants' tangible presence equals their fruitful expression. This freedom to fully express yourself, the confidence that that is good, whatever comes - How can I notice these and other qualities in the plant world more, and appreciate all flora?

Researchers on the sentience of plants measure the reactivity of the plants to their environment. Every living creature produces variations of electrical potential, depending on the emotions being experienced at the time. Electrical differences between the leafs and the roots of the plant are measured. These differences can then be translated into a variety of effects, including music. Eco-community Damanhur has created the concept Music of the Plants by using such equipment, in the endeavor of deepening the relationship between people and plants.¹

Similar to Damanhur's intentions with their creation of Music of the Plants and Plant Concerts, my intention for this piece of work is not to focus on scientific analysis of the physiology of plant translation into sound. Likewise, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) seems to be more interested in the experiential nature of this phenomenon. IUCN President Ashok Khosla presented Music of the Plants at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference COP15 in 2009 as a means to bring heart and soul into nature conservation. He shared: "Every plant has its own song; its own melody, its own rhythm, its own harmony ... I am here to say that if we are going to achieve our goals, it will come from very deep inside ourselves. From the very kind of relationship with Nature that Saint Francis had, that brooks no cruelty to the health of our planet. This is just to show that there is much more between heaven and earth, than is spoken of in our philosophies. Our philosophies are too limited" (Damanhur Community Blog 2012).

¹ As the creator of the concept Music of the Plants, Damanhur explains in more

Also Holdrege believes that science is not merely about studying Nature, but entails the transformation of human consciousness. He says, long-term sustainability (or: harmony) demands an evolving state of mind; a flexibility of human habit and belief systems. With this essay, I aim to find personal meaning in the information around sentience of plants, plant communication, and bioacoustics. I am hoping that this may contribute to inspiration for research on other, more science-focused questions related to those fields. For example, I would be very curious to find out if there are ways to hear voices of plants in a more direct way, without 'translation' of measured electric reactivity; what is the (acoustic) language of plants?

That we - and the other beings on Earth - take plant words in through our nose or our skin or our eyes or our tongue instead of our ears does not make their language less subtle, or sophisticated, or less filled with meaning. As the soul of a human being can never be understood from its chemistry or grammar, so cannot plant purpose, intelligence, or soul. Plants are much more than the sum of their parts.

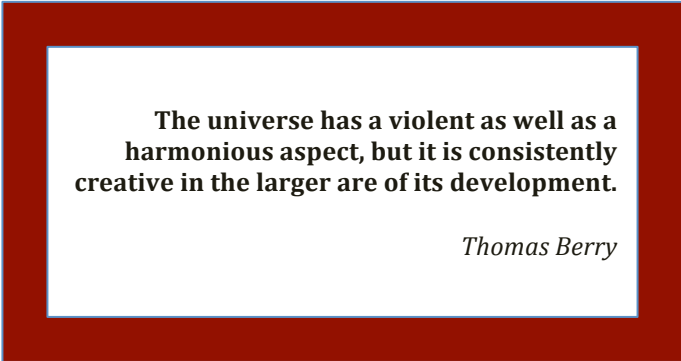
Stephen Harrod Buhner

Until more is known about the actual communications and consciousness within plant life, I see value in listening to plants translated via the Music of the Plants device, for the purpose of giving attention to each plant's uniqueness. Listening to plants is an off-the-map phenomenon within Western culture, and granting attentive listening to a plant during a Plant Concert or the like can arouse a new sense of admiration. Certainly I myself was in awe when I first heard a plant 'sing', and in this process of research my attentiveness for plants has grown. In turn, this attentiveness is nurturing my appreciation for the whole of the plant world. And vice-versa, appreciating the plants around me, I will naturally give more attention. Attention and appreciation in a positive feedback.

Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist makes a very passionate statement in his work *The master and his emissary*: "Ultimately music is the communication of emotion" (2009, 96). According to him, emotional communication is the most fundamental form of communication. Given that McGilchrist clearly refers to the mammalian brain to transmit and receive basic emotion sounds, I would not go

so far as to extending this to plants using music to express emotion. It does open up to the possibility that plant music can give rise to a more emotional relationship of people with the sender of the musical sounds.

Music of the Plants can be an inspiration in modern times for bonding with Nature, of the kind that author, poet and herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner describes in his article *The lost language of plants* (2003): “In earlier times, when nature was perceived as alive, with intelligence and soul, a natural process took place. People bonded with nature much as people bond with their pets or family now. This bonding process - which has decreased in frequency the more the mechanistic worldview has pervaded society - engendered a certain kind of attitude toward nature. It is an aspect of biophilia - the genetically encoded or innate emotional affinity towards all other life forms on Earth” (Buhner 2003).



**The universe has a violent as well as a
harmonious aspect, but it is consistently
creative in the larger are of its development.**

Thomas Berry

PRINCIPALLY CREATIVE

What withholds people from experiencing harmony, from expressing themselves freely and creatively? What could be an embodied experience of harmony for people? As I decided to stimulate embodiment of harmony through music, I found pioneering composer and music theorist John Cage (1912-1992) making remarkable statements about thresholds of creativity within the musical world.

In *A year from Monday* (1969, 96), Cage says: “While studying music, things get a little confused. Sounds are no longer sounds, but are letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G. Sharps and flats. Two of them, four or even five octaves apart are called by the same letter. If a sound is unfortunate enough to not have a letter or if it

seems to be too complex, it is tossed out of the system on the grounds: it's a noise or unmusical."

This resembles to what Craig Holdrege calls *object thinking*. Thinking in abstractions, partition, and generalizations allows for a mechanistic worldview in which there is less and less room for enjoying a richly sensuous world of living Nature, which he calls *living thinking*. Reviewing Holdrege's guide *Thinking like a plant*, Schumacher College professor Stephan Harding describes the effect of object thinking: "[It] gives us a high degree of control, but causes us to lose our immediate, lived experience of the palpable world" (Harding 2013). In turn, John Cage also uses the word *immediate*, which only amplifies the immediacy of their mutual concern: "[O]ne has to stop all the thinking that separates music from living. There is all the time in the world for studying music, but for living there is scarcely any time at all. For living takes place each instant and that instant is always changing. The wisest thing to do is to open one's ears immediately and hear a sound suddenly before one's thinking has a chance to turn it into something logical, abstract, or symbolical" (Cage 1969, 96).

In creating harmony, it can be helpful to know which notes, which chords and octaves are assumed to sound better together than others according to many generations of musicians in history. The idea behind the distinction of *object thinking* and *living thinking*, and likewise between 'object music' and 'living music' (a more intuitive approach) is not to reject the occasional value of systematic analysis. Like Harding says: "Living thinking does not reject object thinking, but places it within the much wider frame of a rigorously cultivated bodily experience of the world that does not theorise or explain but instead seeks to transcend the *dichotomies of man–Nature, subject–object, or mind–matter that are so ingrained in the Western mind*" (Harding 2013).

Writing out music (comparable to how human language has evolved into grammar systems) is something relatively modern. Indeed, many musicians prefer improvisation to rehearsal and repetition.² Naturally, the one (more organized) approach can serve the other. Pivotal is that object thinking remains

² For my song-writing teacher Susie Prater, such a phase seems to have been natural to her development process as a performer. For several years she rejected any kind of preparation for her performances, tuning into the moment to inspire new creations on the spot.

in service of life. Analysis may serve wellbeing - harmony is only possible when the lived experience is the base for analysis, never the other way round.

John Cage: "We are still at the point where most musicians are clinging to the complicated, torn-up, competitive remnants of tradition" (1969, 107). Cage is referring to the many musicians who do not follow intuition or flow, and who presume that creating beauty is a product of hard work. According to Baruch Spinoza (17th century philosopher on ethics, pantheism, and non-dualism), in Nature *every* action is an expression of beauty. He viewed all of Nature as fitting into a beautiful whole (Garrett 2013, 34). In the process of forgetting that we as humans are part of Nature as well, we have started to emphasize utility and efficiency over the universality of beauty. Even more fundamental, in human discourse, it has become the norm to deem one action, one expression, less beautiful (even less valid) than the other. Rating and critical assessment has become part of everyday life.

In music terminology, *harmony* can be defined as the combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce a pleasing effect. What is actually *pleasing* is up to ourselves to decide. Given that in Nature there is no inherent distinction between beauty and ugliness, anything can be pleasing. However, due to the widely expressed distinction between ugly and beautiful within contemporary human discourse, not every sound and combination of sounds is perceived as pleasing. Our inner critic, and fear of judgment by others, is refraining ourselves from feeling the freedom for sheer expression of our being. Our voice is one instrument of such expression, and currently we are using it much more for talk than for song. The threshold of criticism seems to lessen our confidence to use the voice in creative ways, to use singing as a freeing way of expression.

To go one step further, I believe this threshold is causing self-reinforcement. The higher the bar for beauty, the higher the fear of judgement, the more boundaries are felt for free creative expression, the fewer people act creatively, the more exclusive creativity becomes, the higher the bar for beauty. Sometimes, it is our same intuitive nature that lets us know that something is not as beautiful as it could have been. The Creative Principle assures there is beauty in every being, in every voice - however; the less practice is allowed for, the

harder it is to reach this potential of singing beautifully. How can this threshold be removed, so that everyone, without discrimination, experiences the creativity innate to all beings?

The power of creativity is vast and great, it is the source of all things. Clouds form, rain falls, and everything develops in their proper forms.

*from the I Ching and the first hexagram Qian,
the creative principle*

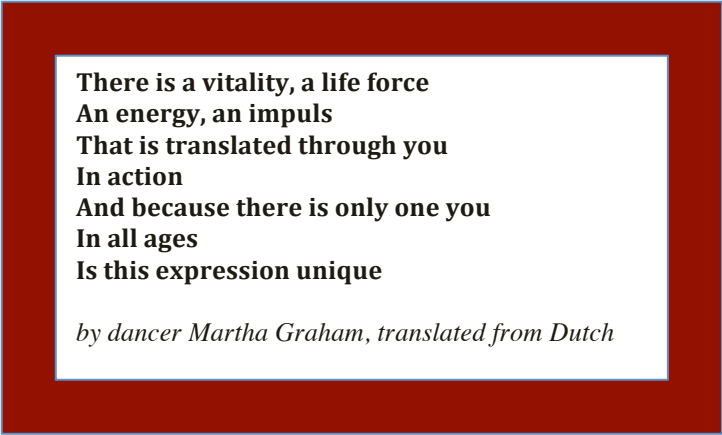
PLANT SOME MUSIC

What can we learn from plants to lower this threshold? How do plants express themselves? What would be the human version of such fruitful expression? Creative expression can be understood as the process of bringing something new into being in finding its authentic form. For a plant it is its coming into being. All which grows in Nature is unique by its authenticity, creating something that was not there before.

In the act of singing in harmony, new sound is being created. In the process in which every participant is finding his or her authentic singing voice in that particular moment, creativity is expressed. Singing together simultaneously, whereby no-one is put on the spot, is a step to overcome the shame of sheer expression or the habit of non-expression. Hearing the sound of singing or humming voices together, no matter people's musical experience, is a very pleasant experience. It is an opportunity to sense the creativity of the Universe that is in all of us, to be reminded of our creative nature that makes us all artists. We are all artists, with the capacity to create harmony. When we sing in harmony together, we are reminded of this.

To give us the confidence to do this, we can take example in the plant world. As both plants and people are part of Nature, all are fruitful expressions of the Creative Principle. And plants have not lost their freedom for creative

expression on judgment and criticism. To get a flavour of how I envision taking example in the plant world, I can refer to the appendix *Harmony: singing like a plant workshop template*, in which I suggest a way of facilitating an embodied experience of harmony, utilizing Music of the Plants. Inspired by the singing plant, as participants of this workshop we will be actively sensing, rooting, energizing, voicing, expressing, listening, breathing, and finally harmonizing. The first run of this workshop is set for 19 April 2014 as part of an inner peace retreat.³



**There is a vitality, a life force
An energy, an impuls
That is translated through you
In action
And because there is only one you
In all ages
Is this expression unique**

by dancer Martha Graham, translated from Dutch

³ www.world-house.eu/en/events.html#event1

HARMONY

Singing like a plant

Workshop Template for Saturday 19 April 2014 11:00-11:45h

World House Wetten, Germany

INTRODUCING

Hello everybody,

Thank you for your invitation. I am very glad to be here, ready to make some music with all of you, and with this plant here.

One reason why I am sharing with you what I am about to share is because daily I meet people who do not feel confident or free enough to express their creativity. Often enough, this also happens in myself. Disclaimers are quickly made: "I'm not a singer"; "I've never been really good at art class."; "I'm simply not creative." Or something like: "Not just here. Not right now." In this session we have together, I hope we can give each other an experiential taste of the Creative Principle in all of us. I truly believe creativity is within all of us, and if we let go of whatever is holding us back, we can find an infinite amount of joy in each other's and our own creations.

Another wish I have for this session is to experience harmony. I understand sustainability as harmony. Peace. Making musical harmony might not be so different from finding harmony in and amongst the realms of politics, economics, and ecology. Today, to discover that music is within all of us, we will take example in the plant world. We will hear how beautiful we sound when we sing in harmony, when we are tuned into each other.

The idea for this session with all of you has come about from my time at Schumacher College in England. There I am studying the Masters program Economics for Transition. In addition to new economics, I learn a whole lot about the flaws of current paradigms and belief systems. Something transformational I have come to understand is that natural science as it is being taught to us in all schools, is simply one of many possible stories to explain our world. At the same time, science does not provide us with a very life-enhancing, encouraging story. How can we find our own truths that do serve all life? I think that learning how to express ourselves freely and with confidence, following our intuition and core values, is an important step towards a life-affirming story of harmony.

Any questions before we start? Feel free to ask questions any time you want.

ROUND I Feeling like a plant

Let's imagine: we are plants.

How would we feel?

What would we think?

What sound would we make?

Sensing

What do plants do? They don't have one pair of eyes from which they can direct their vision. They see (or sense) around them. How often does it happen, when we are in a rush or in a bit of a grumpy mood, that we don't look up the street when we are walking, even on a beautiful day, passing by other people, plants, birds, the sun and the clouds. Although many plants are smaller than we are, they don't make their world small. They sense around.

*Exercise: Let's wake up our eyes, and ears, and faces, and all our muscles, shaking all the tensions and blockages out that refrain us from breathing freely, and from being open to new stimuli. Shake out all thoughts of hesitation and judgment. Let everything go, including your voice *I start resonating my voice to the shaking, inviting others to do the same* Now, look up and around, taking in the room and each other with all your senses.*

Rooting

Plants don't move. They can communicate (for example via fungi in the soil, connecting vegetation), but they are not able to impose themselves or their will, since it is up to those in the surroundings whether or not to respond to the plant's signals. The plant communicates out of its own necessity. It expresses itself without the intention to control. Being steady and firm in one place gives confidence, and a sense of surrender to the environment.

Exercise: To feel confident, and to trust we are in the right place, we can root ourselves, ground our feet. Find a balanced and relaxed position, with your feet at the same distance more or less as your knees and shoulders. The knees slightly bent, to unlock them, and the tailbone slightly tucked in.

Energizing

Exercise: With our heads and upper bodies, we can turn to the sun for a moment. Being aware of the sun, and grateful.

Voicing

Have you ever thought of a plant being able to think, feel emotion, or even sing? Why would fauna be more privileged to express themselves with meaning over all flora?

I cannot prove to you that this plant is conscious.

I cannot prove it is not conscious either!

Shall we leave the taboo for a moment, and simply live the poetic. I would like to imagine what a plant would like to say to the world, if we could understand each other by words. If I were a plant, what would I say to the world? If you were a plant, what would you say to the world?

Exercise: Embodying plant life, please think of what you would like to say to the world. Then, let's all make our statement all at once. As loud or soft as you like. Ready?

Sheer expression

As we are now plants ~ rooted, free, and energized ~ we can start making sounds from the core of our beings. From the core, we are allowed to make any sound. You can use your voice, words, body, breath. And part of the desire to make a sound is expressing our acceptance towards everything around us; to communicate, not to influence. To let us know we are here, together. What sound would you make?

Exercise: We will go round, sunwise (from east to west), and each of us adds a sound to the space in between us. We continue to make our sounds, singing your rhythm or melody, until we have come full circle. Once we have all added our contribution, we can smoothly let go of our pattern, and improvise, while listening. Is that clear enough for everyone? Shall I start?

ROUND II Singing like a plant

Let's come into a circle.

Why we haven't been listening to the plant first, is because it needs an invitation. A safe space, an understanding why it would make itself heard to the human ear and the human hear-t. I assume that this will probably be the very first time this plant experiences its own concert. I suggest we sing a harmony by way of invitation, and it can then join in.

Listening

For a large part, singing is about listening. Listening to yourself, and as important, listening to the quality and volume of the sounds around you, and sung by others. We can alert our ears by massaging them, and stretching them out a bit.

*Exercise: Let's massage our ears firmly first. Plants don't have hearing organs like the ones we have; they feel vibrations. From their whole being. So, let's massage our entire bodies. And we open the heart, as an important hearing organ. *I make the movement that invites the heart to open up**

Breathing

For a large part, singing is about breathing. We are breathing together, the oxygen provided by the plant world.

Exercise (several times): Make sure all your muscles are relaxed. No tension in your body. We bend down, collect a deep breath from below. While we stand up we breathe in, and then reach out our arms while we heave a deep sigh as outbreath.

Harmonizing

We can sing to the plant, and see how it responds. For this harmony, there are four voices. All of us singing in harmony, we can resonate with each other, and all life, and experience our collective creativity, collective beauty.

*Exercise: *I give out the different parts; we practise, until we sound harmonically. Then the plant joins in.**

In Lak'ech

I am another you

I am here, I am here

Let me grow, I let you

A child of the Universe

Reflecting *whilst listening to the plant music*

CLOSING

Artists create beauty.

Scientists discover beauty.

This is what my professor who is also a musician said in class.

We are all artists.

We are all scientists.

Grateful for your attention.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

This list is not giving justice to all the inspiration I have received during sessions and study with Mind in Nature. I am not directly citing from our visitors David Rothenberg, Rupert Sheldrake and Shantena Sabbadini. Together with Holistic Science professors Stephan Harding and Philip Franses and fellow students, they have been the greatest resources for this piece of work. What I am presenting here is the outcome after the integration of their teachings in my personal understanding of life.

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