

Ness

Robert Macfarlane & Stanley Donwood

Listening notes by Hugh Brunt

My intention for the score was to tap the 'five forms' for their sonic character and attempt to peel the music from the air of this extraordinary place. It was therefore essential that the raw material should come from Orford Ness itself.

On my visits to Ness, I was accompanied by the experienced sound recordist Peter Eason to capture the rich palette of local sounds: shimmering dawn choruses; an array of birdsong; the wind rushing through the Bomb Ballistics building; humming shingle; and the 'drone of man' encroaching on the spit from the mainland. We also recorded a bank of shorter articulations, such as clinking hagstones, struck metalwork and the flipping of heavy maintenance switches. This collective group of recordings formed the spine of the score. Additionally, I wove in sampled sounds of machinery and some instrumental material I orchestrated for a Spitfire Audio sample library, *LCO Textures*, recorded at nearby RAF Bentwaters in an aircraft hangar boasting a 10-second reverb.

During the initial recce, I was struck by what Robert referred to as the 'rhyming' of the natural and the artificial – a group of low-flying widgeon mimicking the sound of light aircraft, or bramble thorns disguised as barbed wire. This informed choices around, for example, the emulation of birdsong through electronics and human voices (with thanks to soprano Josephine Stephenson's deft contributions).

Robert also spoke about the ties between Orford Ness and EMI, who were developing radar technology at the same time they were building their entertainment empire. This led me to spend a few days at Abbey Road Studios (formerly EMI Recording Studios), where co-producer Jake Miller and I subjected the raw recordings to various analogue processes and re-amping techniques, utilising the Studer A80 tape machine (for pitch and tempo shifting), EMI RM1B ribbon microphones (two of only 35 made, at the EMI Hayes factory in the late 1940s) and the famous EMI REDD console. As a result, almost all the audio featured in the score has been affected in some way: pitched/slowed down; reversed; manipulated; mutated; disintegrated. To complete the process, the score was mastered at Abbey Road Studios by Alex Wharton, using the vintage EMI TG12410 Transfer Console.

Throughout the writing phase, I spent a good deal of time absorbed in both Stanley's illustrations and Robert's words. Aside from being led by the atmosphere, density and texture of each drawing, I considered the 2:1 horizon ratio and let that guide choices around the structure and make-up of each musical cue: which frequency bands to explore, for example, and how to temper/tune certain scales. Ness doesn't feel like a place that knows equal temperament or functional harmony – or, if it does, those elements have been weathered. Consequently, almost all spaces between equal-stepped intervals have been constricted or stretched, with the aim of heightening the sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity.

Wrapping the score around Stephen Dillane's beautiful and terrifying reading was a privilege. Sincere thanks to Robert, Stanley, and Tom McWhirter at Penguin for trusting me with this task.