

## THE HILLS ARE ALIVE...

By Ian Crofton

HERE I AM AGAIN, perched on a snow step at the foot of some iced-up buttress, shivering and shaking and shifting from foot to foot. You'd think at my age I'd know better. I try, and fail, to exercise patience, flicking kinks out of the ropes draped down the slope below. So many times, over so many years, I've found myself here, or places like it. So many times over so many years – I've found that time, and the years, compress, fold over on each other, the patterns repeating with subtle variations. It is like a pibroch, with neither beginning nor end. And all the city days, weeks, months, in between, vanish, as if they had never happened.

The first pre-echo came the year I started climbing. For most people of a certain age, 1968 is remembered for other things: the Tet Offensive, the Paris *événements*, Soviet tanks on the streets of Prague, Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy assassinated. As for me – awkwardly poised at the end of that year on the edge of adolescence – I found myself perched on a bucket cut into the slope at the start of NC Gully, dreaming of a girl I'd just partnered at a Christmas dance. A girl I'd never see again, but whose name I still, strangely, remember.

What was more concrete, as I shivered and shook and shifted from foot to frozen foot, was the all-too-present chill in my bowels. Somewhere above me, Mr Stewart – who taught me violin at the school and climbing in the holidays – was cutting steps. He was, as I remember it, tucked away from view, somewhere up round a corner. But I could hear the reports of his progress. Chop. Tinkle. Chop. Tinkle. Tinkle tinkle. Patter, patter whirrrr. Again and again, for what seemed like the full length of a December afternoon.

Then a different sound. Bong. Bong. Bang, bang, tang ting ping. The rising chimes – though I didn't know it then – of a piton being hammered into a crack. The rope ran out, as did the daylight. You'll never forget your first time at the top of a winter climb looking out west across the silver slither of Loch Linnhe in the aftermath of a sunset, towards the darkened hills of Ardgour. The long way down was lit by sparks as crampons hit rock, the night filling with the stench of sulphur.

This time, this year, we're on Milky Way in Coire an Lochain. Quite enough for us at our age, Bob says, at the start of the season. So it would seem, as the ropes slow down, stop. Stay stopped. Then the sound rings down the years. Bong. Bong. Bang, bang, tang ting ping. The rising chimes that cheer, and reassure. And then, at last, the rope starts to run.

In my ridiculous teenage years, I was all but deaf to the music of the hills. What I heard in my head, as I (in my own eyes at least) battled heroically on the heights, were thundering symphonies – Beethoven, Sibelius, and, most especially, Bruckner. Big Romantic symphonies,



*Unknown party on The Milky Way (III), Coire an Lochain.*

*Photo: I. Crofton*

music full of *Sturm und Drang* that seemed to tell the story of my own apotheosis in the crucible of peak and blizzard. Thus my imaginary love life was a film, and Ludwig and Jean and Anton provided the soundtrack. The snow blew, the wind howled, the hero struggled down the cruel mountain – until, at last – is that a light in the darkness? A candle in the window of the lonely cabin? A door that opens? And, silhouetted against the firelight, is it, could it be, the most lovely...? Yup, we are such stuff as dreams are made on. Wet dreams.

Bruckner still has his power to evoke a feeling of elemental struggle, but it was disillusioning to discover in my twenties that the landscape that Bruckner had in mind when composing his symphonies was not the rugged scenery of the Alps, but the pretty meadows and quiet woodland glades of northern Austria, far from the mountains. There may even have been milkmaids and Bambis involved. So why did I hear only rockfall and storm, avalanche and thunder?

If they'd been invented in those days I would have tramped the hills and clambered up the crags plugged into an iPod, got myself high on the intra-aural fix of pre-packaged emotion that only music can deliver. Even without an iPod, there was often music running through my head, some welcome or unwelcome ear worm wriggling in time to my breath. But as the years passed I found such distractions created a barrier between myself and the natural world. If I quietened myself, rid my mind of human music, muted that song beating through my head, I could sometimes hear other

kinds of music in the hills, music that might or might not have been in time with the beat of the human heart.

There's birdsong, of course. In the higher hills the most you're likely to hear is the quiet *tseep* of a meadow pipit, the belch of a ptarmigan, the rasping deep *caw* of a raven. On the lower slopes in May, among the scattered birches and oaks, you may hear a distant, insistent cuckoo, and, closer by, the falling liquid cadences of willow warblers. On the summer moors, there is the sweet melancholy cry of the curlew, the ringing *crwee* or *coor-li* that gives it its name, followed by the bubbling trill of its lovely drawn-out song. The first time I became aware of the beauty of this song was as a young man, climbing at the Whangie after too many weeks trapped in the city. All through the long May afternoon, as we grappled with the gnarly unreliabilities of the rock, the curlews drew their cries across Stockie Muir and Thief's Hill, lost souls looking for lost lovers.

In such places too you may hear the *pee-wee* of the lapwing, a sound that haunted Robert Louis Stevenson while in exile in faraway Samoa:

*Be it granted me to behold you again in dying,  
Hills of home! and to hear again the call;  
Hear about the graves of the martyrs the peewees crying,  
And hear no more at all.*



***West Kip, East Kip and Scald Law in the Pentland Hills***

*Robert Louis Stevenson's 'hills of home', where, from his exile in the South Seas, he remembered above all else the call of the peewits. Photo: I.Crofton*

Also on the moors, and even up on the ridges, wheatears sometimes take a break from their curt *chack chack* to make brief attempts to imitate the skylark. But no bird can live up to the latter in terms of the endless joyful energy of its song, belted out at full tilt while it hovers high above the grass.

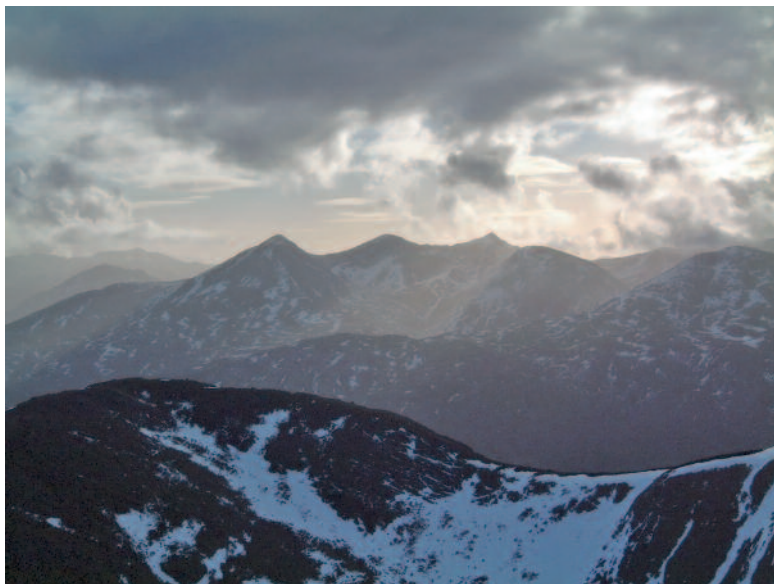
There are other less distinct musics in the hills: the hum of bees in the heather, wind sighing through the tops of the pines, the patter of rain on a flysheet, the roar of stags on an October hillside, the howl of a winter storm buffeting around the high corries. Then there is the extraordinary metallic whine of a stone skimmed across a frozen lochan – a sound so satisfying that one February in Snowdonia, having traversed the small but perfectly formed Cnicht with my daughter Claire, we paused at the northeast end of the ridge by the ice-covered Llyn yr Adai and span stone after stone, listening for the descending scale of tonks as the pebbles scampered across the white surface.

All these are comforting sounds, but there are some noises to be heard among the hills that are less certain, more sinister. One June long ago I was camping alone on the shore of Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin in Glen Affric. Sleep was long deferred by the lingering midsummer light and by the plaintive *twee-see-see* alarm call of a sandpiper. Eventually the light dimmed and the sandpiper settled on her nest. Just as sleep seemed at last a possibility, the silence of the woods above me was broken by a heart-stopping cry. It was something like a high-pitched bark – but not quite. The hair on the back of my neck stood to attention, every nerve and sinew tensed. Then the cry came again. My blood turned to ice, my spine to jelly.

It might have been a roe deer, I told myself. It might have been a fox. But there is no such thing, as Napoleon once observed, as one o'clock-in-the-morning courage – especially when you are on your own in the dark in the wilds. So my imagination got the better of my rational self, conjuring up all kinds of shapeless, ungraspable horrors lurking in the wildwood beyond the road.

But the wild can also smile. Ten years or more ago, on a February trip to Torridon, I found myself on Slioch, the day after a strenuous traverse of the snowy crest of Liathach. There was a premonition of spring in the air, a warmth in the sun, although patches of hard snow still clung to the upper slopes. At one point I became, I think intentionally, separated from my companions. Contentedly I found my own way in the mild sunshine, clambering from rock to rock up the steep slope below Coire na Sleaghaich, while numerous trickles of water tinkled all around me. As I climbed I found myself feeling lighter and lighter, gently caught up by the water music, and by an indefinable happiness.

I thought then, and often do to this day, of a story told by Showell Styles. One summer long ago, he was climbing with two companions in Arctic Norway, looking for a new route up the east side of Stortind, a



*The view towards Beinn Eighe from Slioch, 10 February 2003, the day of the water music.  
Photo: Ian Crofton.*

seriously jagged peak in an area that was not then fully mapped. Faced with overhanging buttresses of rotten rock and insurmountable bergschrunds, they failed to find a way to the summit. There then followed a long retreat across a difficult glacier, and then down snow-covered ledges and unstable, steep moraine, until they reached the birch-filled, boulder-crowded valley bottom. Styles was some way ahead of his friends. Exhausted after fourteen hours of continuous effort, much of it made through the sunlit midsummer night of the far north, he rested for a while with his back against a rock. The valley, he says, was still, and yet there were voices – the river below him, waterfalls somewhere high above, a breeze occasionally sighing round the mountainside. He found himself lulled into a half-sleep, and then became conscious of the sound of music. He held his breath as wind and water merged into a harmony, as if, he is certain, an orchestra was playing.

Styles says he was sure he was not dreaming. He even hit his fist against the rock to make doubly sure. And then, on a sudden waft of the breeze, he heard what he described as ‘a noble melody’. It seemed to him, he said, that he was hearing the horns of Elfland.



Styles wrote down the theme, a four-note phrase: F (quaver), B flat (crotchet), D (quaver), C (breve). Strangely, he later learnt that that very same melody was used as a theme by Wagner – who scored it for the horns. The tune is simple enough, possibly simple enough for some strange combination of natural sounds to come together to produce – or at least to evoke in the passive, receptive mind of an exhausted body – a sensation of melody. Of course, humans are great projectors of patterns onto nature, from seeing faces in the shapes of rocks to hearing the sound of the waves in a seashell held up to the ear.

I have never forgotten this story of the horns of Elfland, and have, from time to time when out in the hills, lain down tired on a grassy sward by a rushing mountain stream and closed my eyes against the sunshine, and let what comes, come. And it is more likely to come, I've found, if you've succeeded up some tricky, perhaps even scary, climb. The day will have been long, and the tiredness you feel involves all your muscles, and also your brain, purged of thought after the concentration and the nervous uncertainty and the fear.

If there are no other distractions (a blister, a chatty companion, a pressing need to consume a Mars Bar), it is sometimes possible to experience an overwhelming sensation of wellbeing. The music of the babbling water is crucial – the bass notes, the middle tenor, the gurgling, ever-changing descant. Perhaps, after hard exercise, the endorphins – the body's natural opiates – also play their part, kicking in with a dose of quiet euphoria, reinforced by the regular, directionless, trance-inducing rhythm of a mountain stream going calmly, purposelessly about its business, to become part of the sea, and then the clouds, and then the rain, and then itself again, flowing once more down the mountain to the sea. Just as the water surrenders itself to an endless cycle, with no sense of time or intention, so I too (I persuade myself) can become part of the universe I'm in, rather than a spectator looking at the world through a TV screen, chewing popcorn, scratching that itch, locked out from the inside.

But then the sun goes behind a cloud, the midges rouse themselves, and I'm off down the hill as fast as my tired legs will carry me. The bubble bursts, and my mind is filled instead with the thought of the froth on top of that first pint.