Birdsong finds rhythm between science and art

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Possibly western Gerygone, Gregories George, Fortesque River, spring 2012. Credit: Wikimedia commons/Jim Bendon from Karratha, Australia

Native Western Australian birds are the composers and stars of an engaging new music project at Edith Cowan University.

Western Australian Performing Arts (WAAPA) Ph.D. candidate Jean-Michel Maujean's research is focused on birdsong, celebrating some of the rich repertoire naturally occurring in WA. The birds are the composers of the music, complemented by an array of self-made instruments.

"I'm writing a suite of works and in each one the bird will play and act like a melody with DIY instruments complementing what the bird is doing," Mr Maujean said.

"I hope that my research will help people to engage with the environment. By appreciating and seeing how rich and beautiful it is, we might be encouraged to care more about nature," he said.

Mr Maujean's recordings so far have focused on four native Western Australian birds: the Western Gerygone, the Pied Butcherbird, the Australian Magpie and the endangered Noisy Scrub-bird—which is only found near Albany.

Australian birds are noisy, aggressive and intelligent

Mr Maujean said songbirds evolved in Australia some 33 million years ago before spreading throughout the world around 10 million years later.

"The relative isolation of Australia along with an abundance of nectar has contributed to great diversity in Australian songbirds," he said.

"Australian birds are so distinctive—they're more likely to be noisy, aggressive and are more intelligent than birds anywhere else in the world."

DIY instruments complement birdsong

Self-made instruments including a PVC cello, 3-D printed flutes and a simple-to-use scoring technique (similar to "Guitar Hero') accompany the birdsong and make it easy for audiences to follow along and play at the same time.

"The main goal is for the community to understand, and potentially be inspired in their own individual creative or scientific adventure, or even just simply go for a bushwalk," he said.

Mr Maujean said community input to the research project is welcome.

"I would love to hear from anyone who would like to share their own insights on birdsong, species and locations or perhaps collaborate on compositions and performance," Mr Maujean said.

Provided by Edith Cowan University

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