

## ***Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha***

by Nina Katchadourian

Birdsong must be among the most captivating and complex sounds a human ear encounters. It is also among the most elusive to describe. Trying to do so stretches both our linguistic and visual descriptive systems, and poses a very unique translation problem.

Among the many interpretive systems devised by ornithologists and bird watchers, these four are particularly fascinating:

—**Mnemonics**, where the sound of the bird is linked to a phrase that makes it easier to remember (“Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha,” for example, is one of many mnemonics for the Chestnut-sided Warbler).

—**Phonetics**, where the sound of the bird is “spelled out” (“Wit wit wit wit ta weeche” for the Chestnut-sided Warbler).

—The idiosyncratic **diagrams** of Aretas Saunders, an ornithologist whose 1935 book *A Guide to Bird Songs* contains visual renderings of bird sounds.

—The highly expressive and opinionated **written descriptions** by F. Schuyler Mathews, author of *Field Book of Wild Birds and Their Music* (1904).

*Please, Please, Pleased to Meet'cha* consists of sound systems, installed into six trees on the Wave Hill grounds, where you can hear human voices vocalizing birdsong using the methods above. Although more objective descriptive systems exist (such as sonograms or transcriptions into musical notation), I chose to work with these four because of their subjectivity and their personal, interpretive character, which can paradoxically convey the overall impression of the birdsong quite accurately. It is a very memorable and expressive sense of birdsong that emerges, one that also expresses a very human sense of listening.

In choosing the human voices, two things became important. I wanted to work with people who knew nothing about birds. I also wanted them to have a deep engagement with translation, so I put out a “Call for Participants” to the translators and interpreters at the United Nations. For many, the UN embodies a kind of utopian faith in the possibility of communication across national boundaries. In the context of this project, perhaps these voices will seem infused with well-intentioned but clumsy good will toward the birds, or even prompt fantasies of communication across the species divide.

None of the “voices” I worked with had previously heard the particular birds they were vocalizing. Their performances were interpretive, generative acts—spot translations that were performed without previous familiarity with the materials. Each tree features one native bird, and when you listen to the sounds you will be able to compare the various human interpretations. From these recording sessions I created the soundtracks that are installed in six trees on the Wave Hill grounds.

I am particularly grateful to all those who came to my studio to be my birds:

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