

The Owl (Long Form)

Review by Steve Bennett / Playwright / Screenwriter / Two Time
BAFTA Award Winner

Those of us who long ago charted – and survived - the Topographic Oceans of long-form Prog tend to approach any new, unbroken seventeen-minute offering with a considerable degree of trepidation. We sense the looming inevitability of those teeth-on-edge, 'atonal bits' and excruciating 'experimental sections' seemingly designed to link the actual tunes. Fortunately, *The Owl* flies way above all that. Without ever sacrificing the compositional sophistication that marks the best of the genre, Head Gardener, Martin Springett, in tandem with long-time associate and guitar wizard, Norm McPherson, has crafted a tightly structured, mini-epic that manages to sustain a spirit of invention and adventure throughout yet is always geared towards engaging the listener in the unfolding musical narrative. No alienating, spiky self-indulgence to worry about, here, folks.

We enter via a softly beckoning acoustic overture, reminiscent of Foxtrot-era Genesis, before the lovely pastoral melody of "A Voice in the Evening Woods" blossoms into a gently time-shifting orchestral passage of interwoven strings and woodwind evocative of an idyllic, almost Tolkein-esque, English countryside. The reverie shifts into darker territory as the lyrics to "The Boy and the Bird" emerge to conjure both the tension and apprehension of this fragile human/avian encounter before the ominous, minor-key mood softens and McPherson's yearning slide guitar brings the promise of a wary truce.

As the suite develops, unexpected influences begin to assert themselves. We start to suspect that the Gardening Club denizens have been listening to both Stravinsky and Bach during their quieter moments down in the Potting Shed. There are subtle hints of the Firebird's edgy, octatonic scale at play here, alongside echoes of the Prelude in C minor's high-wire melodic suspension that makes any resolution that much more satisfying.

While the vocal passages conjure a wistful air of minor-key melancholia, even regret, there's always a wave of optimism close behind, embodied in thrilling, often full-on Floyd fashion, in McPherson's majestic slide work. It's almost a recurring theme throughout the piece that, in these gloriously expansive moments, the owl takes flight and the boy's heart soars with it. As does the listener's.

Half-way through the piece, perhaps with the owl disappearing over the horizon, the mood, along with the implied geography, shifts again. With "Memory's Arrow" we're instantly transported to a new pastoral landscape, a Japanese water garden, perhaps, as an enchanting seven-note motif, resonant of wooden windchimes, slowly gives ground to that familiar, searching slide - all edgy melodic-minor - looking for a place to land. This, too, makes way for a fluttering, multi-layered 12-string guitar that hovers over the reassuring emergence of "These Are the Days", an elegant nod to those graceful King Crimson mellotron ballads of old.

It's already richly textured stuff but Drew Birston's slithering fretless bass manages to add an extra, lush layer to the extended finale of "The Siren". Just as we start to feel the earlier dark clouds threatening a comeback, our trusty slide-guide returns to ratchet the emotional notch further up with each magnificently swelling chorus and propel us onto the sunlit, major-key uplands with a calming, quiet reprise of the opening acoustic theme. And with that, we're home again and the world is back where it should be – firmly established on its classic prog-rock axis. Maybe even a little better for it.

It's worth reiterating that what's to be celebrated here, in particular, is the capacity of sophisticated, complex music like this to avoid intimidating its audience with those unfathomably ubiquitous 'difficult passages' that plague so many similar efforts. *The Owl's* seventeen minutes wash over us, effortlessly, because it never runs out of ideas. It just sticks to the good ones.