

WIND-UP BIRD CHRONICLES

A HISTORY OF MECHANICAL BIRDSONG.

Words by Jonathan Feakins.

“She sits down to the harpsichord—and I spend the morning, very frequently, in emulating her voice. This I cannot do—but the attempt has considerably improved my own.”

Edward Augustus Kendall, *The Canary Bird: A Moral Fiction, Interspersed With Poetry* (1799).

In 1843, Hans Christian Andersen published “The Nightingale,” a tale of a Chinese emperor whose pet song-bird sang so beautifully that it moved him to tears. One day, however, the emperor received a gift: a jeweled automaton that always sang the same song, without fail. Feeling unappreciated, the flesh-and-blood original flew away.

Andersen did not weave this tale purely out of Orientalism and whole cloth—the society he lived in had already seized upon mechanical finches with an enraptured passion.

Humans had long been obsessed with the idea of recreating the magic of birdsong. Several centuries earlier, caliphs from Baghdad to Constantinople had adorned their fountains with “bird trees,” mechanical flocks that erupted into song, powered by hidden hydraulics sequestered underneath the perfumed water. (Ismail al-Jazari, whose 1206 treatise *The Book of Knowledge of Ingenious Mechanical Devices* inspired Leonardo da Vinci, once designed a wine goblet

topped by a small bird that would whistle when it was filled and keep whistling until it was empty.)

Europe’s industrial urbanization in the 19th century drove a growing number of monied elites to try and reclaim birdsong, a now-precious commodity. European forests were home to nightingales and larks, finches and warblers, all renowned for their lovable melodies (classical composers had long incorporated the sounds of the cuckoo). But the canary—a bird only recently introduced to the continent, after the Spanish conquest of the eponymous Canary Islands—soon became the songbird of choice. *Serinus canaria* did not earn this position entirely out of love for its voice. Rather, two other qualities made it ideal: its ability to quickly adapt to surrounding sounds and a capacity for enduring captivity. Caged canaries in parlor rooms, however, found themselves in desperate need of the very thing that their captors couldn’t possess: the music of their wild brethren. They needed tutors.

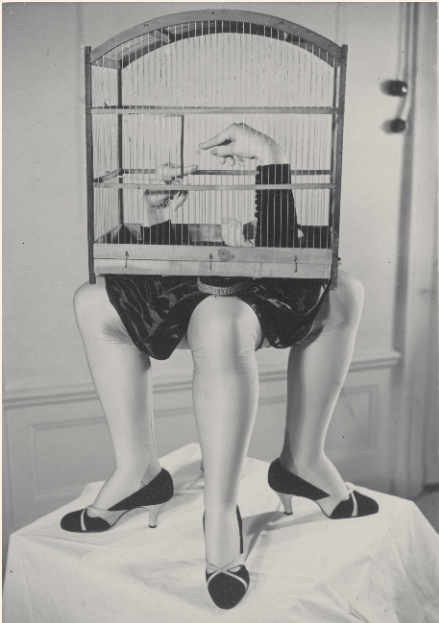
In nature, birds learn their serenades from their community (or, more specifically, thirsty males seeking courtship). Efforts to recreate this process in captivity, however, might start with keeping weeks-old birds in a dark room and training them for hours a day using an older “master canary” or a dedicated human

whistler (a predecessor to the tin whistle, the flageolet, often served as a makeshift canary-song facsimile).

But soon, a cottage industry established itself as German, French, and Swiss tinkers, often hailing from the obsessively fine-tuned world of watchmaking, worked to instruct captive canary choirs. They produced a novel device: the serinette (from the French word for canary, *serin*). These “bird-organs” almost resembled a kind of player piano in miniature—a rotating, textured cylinder containing the notes of a song, triggering a small bellow, which drove a series of high-pitched whistles. (Today, the French verb *seriner* translates roughly as “to drum into one’s head,” alluding to the dismal regime of a canary-in-training.) A 1751 painting by French artist Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin depicts a fashionable woman turning the bird-organ’s crank as she sits alone in her salon, gazing appraisingly at her pet canary out of the corner of her eye.

Serinettes came with several pre-programmed “airs” typically handwritten in practiced script and glued underneath the organ’s lid. These tunes included the bangers of the era—songs like “La Sabotière” (“The Clog Maker”) or “La Valse” (“The Waltz”). Birdsong—an inhuman ode of not just nature but freedom—pruned into fashionable shape.

Some, though, were too impatient



Biologists found that birds sing to their eggs and that, later, the hatchlings’ begging calls match their mother’s vocal signatures, suggesting that birds may learn to sing while still in the egg.



Sing back to the birds with *Quelle est Belle* bird-calls, wooden whistles crafted by François Morel in France since 1980; each one mimics a specific bird call from cuckoo to swallow (qbc.fr).

Opposite: Kurt Seligmann, *L’ultra-meuble*, 1938. Above: Hum Images / Alamy Stock Photo. Left: Joseph Bartholomew Kidd, *Rose-Breasted Grosbeak*.

PLAYLIST:

Tracks about the beauty of invention and coming back and reinterpreting nature, selected by Sharita Rush (DJ cPND; @itscpnda).

The Cinematic Orchestra, “Postlude,” *Man With a Movie Camera* (2003).

Flawed Mangoes, “Birdsong,” *Killswitch Melodies* (2023).

Four Tet, “Parallel 9,” *Parallel* (2020).

Haunted Mansion, “Ghostly Music Box,” *The Haunted Mansion* (2009).

with the challenges of teaching actual birds to sing. Enter the *boîtes à oiseau chanteur*, or “songbird boxes.” These mechanical marvels not only replicated the songs but the birds themselves—astonishing facsimiles that waved their metallic tails and beat their hand-feathered wings. They were often fused to other luxury goods. In 1820, a trio of brothers in Geneva, the Rochats, even produced a series of dueling pistols adorned in agate, pearls, and gold that produced a minuscule songbird from the barrel. More commonly, they were attached to snuff boxes. Aristocrats often traded the musically endowed boxes as gifts, like quaaludes at a 1960s listening party.

In the decades since, the sonorous industry of robotic canary understudies has, not unlike their transient performances, faded into memory. But even today, the birds still find themselves singing their hearts out for a human audience: The canary brain has become a popular model for the study of neural plasticity, memory, and language. There remain, however, glimmers of their legacy. Sequestered away in a quiet Swiss hamlet, Reuge, a music box manufacturer founded by a watchmaker, still handcrafts glittering avian wares for the modern elite who have tired of the digital age. “Auteurs d’Émotions Depuis 1865,” their brochure reads—authors of emotions since 1865. ☺