



A World of Sound
Stapledon, William Olaf

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About Stapledon:

He was born in Seacombe, Wallasey, on the Wirral peninsula near Liverpool, the only son of William Clibbert Stapledon and Emmeline Miller. The first six years of his life were spent with his parents at Port Said. He was educated at Abbotsholme School and Balliol College, Oxford, where he acquired a BA in Modern History in 1909 and a Master's degree in 1913[citation needed]. After a brief stint as a teacher at Manchester Grammar School, he worked in shipping offices in Liverpool and Port Said from 1910 to 1913. During World War I he served with the Friends' Ambulance Unit in France and Belgium from July 1915 to January 1919. On 16 July 1919 he married Agnes Zena Miller (1894-1984), an Australian cousin whom he had first met in 1903, and who maintained a correspondence with him throughout the war from her home in Sydney. They had a daughter, Mary Sydney Stapledon (1920-), and a son, John David Stapledon (1923-). In 1920 they moved to West Kirby, and in 1925 Stapledon was awarded a PhD in philosophy from the University of Liverpool. He wrote *A Modern Theory of Ethics*, which was published in 1929. However he soon turned to fiction to present his ideas to a wider public. *Last and First Men* was very successful and prompted him to become a full-time writer. He wrote a sequel, and followed it up with many more books on subjects associated with what is now called Transhumanism. In 1940 the family built and moved into Simon's Field, in Caldy. After 1945 Stapledon travelled widely on lecture tours, visiting the Netherlands, Sweden and France, and in 1948 he spoke at the Congress of Intellectuals for Peace in Wrocław, Poland. He attended the Conference for World Peace held in New York in 1949, the only Briton to be granted a visa to do so. In 1950 he became involved with the anti-apartheid movement; after a week of lectures in Paris, he cancelled a projected trip to Yugoslavia and returned to his home in Caldy, where he died very suddenly of a heart attack. Olaf Stapledon was cremated at Landican Crematorium; his widow Agnes and their children Mary and John scattered his ashes on the sandy cliffs overlooking the Dee Estuary, a favourite spot of Olaf's, and a location that features in more than one of his books. Source: Wikipedia

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THE ROOM WAS OVERCROWDED AND STUFFY. THE music seemed to have no intelligible form. It was a mere jungle of noise. Now one instrument and now another blared out half a tune, but every one of these abortive musical creatures was killed before it had found its legs. Some other and hostile beast fell upon it and devoured it, or the whole jungle suffocated it.

The strain of following this struggle for existence wearied me. I closed my eyes, and must have fallen asleep; for suddenly I woke with a start. Or seemed to wake. Something queer had happened. The music was still going on, but I was paralysed. I could not open my eyes. I could not shout for help. I could not move my body, nor feel it. I had no body.

Something had happened to the music, too, and to my hearing. But what? The tissue of sounds seemed to have become incomparably more voluminous and involved. I am not musical; but suddenly I realized that this music had overflowed, so to speak, into all the intervals between the normal semitones, that it was using not merely quarter-tones but "centitones" and "millitones," with an effect that would surely have been a torture to the normal ear. To me, in my changed state, it gave a sense of richness, solidity, and vitality quite lacking in ordinary music. This queer music, moreover, had another source of wealth. It reached up and down over scores of octaves beyond the range of normal hearing. Yet I could hear it.

As I listened, I grew surprisingly accustomed to this new jargon. I found myself easily distinguishing all sorts of coherent musical forms in this world of sound. Against an obscure, exotic background of more or less constant chords and fluttering "leafage," so to speak, several prominent and ever-changing sound-figures were playing. Each was a persistent musical object, though fluctuating in detail of gesture and sometimes ranging bodily up or down the scale.

Suddenly I made a discovery which should have been incredible, yet it seemed to me at the time quite familiar and obvious. I found myself recognizing that these active sound-figures were alive, even intelligent. In the normal world, living things are perceived as changing patterns of visible and tangible characters. In this mad world, which was coming to seem to me quite homely, patterns not of colour and shape but of sound formed the perceptible bodies of living things. When it occurred to me that I had fallen into a land of "program music" I was momentarily disgusted. Here was a whole world that violated the true canons of musical art! Then I reminded myself that this music was not merely telling but

actually living its story. In fact it was not art but life. So I gave rein to my interest.

Observing these creatures that disported themselves before me, I discovered, or rather rediscovered, that though this world had no true space, such as we perceive by sight and touch, yet it did have a sort of space. For in some sense these living things were moving in relation to me and in relation to one another. Apparently the "space" of this world consisted of two dimensions only, and these differed completely in quality. One was the obvious dimension of tonality, or pitch, on the subtle "keyboard" of this world. The other was perceived only indirectly. It corresponded to the heard nearness or remoteness of one and the same instrument in the normal world. Just as we see things as near and far through the signification of colour and perspective, so in this strange world, certain characters of timbre, of harmonics, of overtones, conveyed a sense of "nearness"; others a sense of "distance." A peculiar blatancy, often combined with loudness, meant "near"; a certain flatness, or ghostliness of timbre, generally combined with faintness, meant "far." An object receding in this "level" dimension (as I called it) would gradually lose its full-bodied timbre, and its detail and preciseness. At the same time it would become fainter, and at last inaudible.

I should add that each sound-object had also its own characteristic timbre, almost as though each thing in this world were a theme played by one and the same instrument. But I soon discovered that in the case of living things the timbre-range of each individual was very wide; for emotional changes might be accompanied by changes of timbre even greater than those which distinguish our instruments.

In contrast with the variegated but almost changeless background or landscape, the living things were in constant movement. Always preserving their individuality, their basic identity of tonal pattern, they would withdraw or approach in the "level" dimension or run up and down the scale. They also indulged in a ceaseless rippling play of musical gesture. Very often one of these creatures, travelling up or down the scale, would encounter another. Then either the two would simply interpenetrate and cross one another, as transverse trains of waves on a pond; or there would be some sort of mutual readjustment of form, apparently so as to enable them to squeeze past one another without "collision." And collision in this world seemed to be much like dissonance in our music. Sometimes, to avoid collision, a creature needed merely to effect a slight alteration in its tonal form, but sometimes it had to move far aside, so to

speak, in the other dimension, which I have called the "level" dimension. Thus it became for a while inaudible.

Another discovery now flashed upon me, again with curious familiarity. I myself had a "body" in this world. This was the "nearest" of all the sound-objects. It was so "near" and so obvious that I never noticed it till it was brought into action. This happened unexpectedly. One of the moving creatures inadvertently came into collision with a minor part of my musical body. The slight violation of my substance stabbed me with a little sharp pain. Immediately, by reflex action and then purposefully, I readjusted my musical shape, so as to avoid further conflict. Thus it was that I discovered or rediscovered the power of voluntary action in this world.

I also emitted a loud coruscation of musical gesture, which I at once knew to be significant speech. In fact I said in the language of that world, "Damn you, that's my toe, that was." There came from the other an answering and apologetic murmur.

A newcomer now approached from the silent distance to join my frolicking companions. This being was extremely attractive to me, and poignantly familiar. Her lithe figure, her lyrical yet faintly satirical movement, turned the jungle into Arcadia. To my delight I found that I was not unknown to her, and not wholly unpleasing. With a gay gesture she beckoned me into the game.

For the first time I not only changed the posture of my musical limbs but moved bodily, both in the dimension of pitch and the "level" dimension. As soon as I approached, she slipped with laughter away from me. I followed her; but very soon she vanished into the jungle and into the remoteness of silence. Naturally I determined to pursue her. I could no longer live without her. And in the exquisite harmony of our two natures I imagined wonderful creative potentialities.

Let me explain briefly the method and experience of locomotion in this world. I found that, by reaching out a musical limb and knitting its extremity into the sound-pattern of some fixed object at a distance, in either dimension or both, I obtained a purchase on the object, and could draw my whole body toward it. I could then reach out another limb to a still farther point. Thus I was able to climb about the forest of sound with the speed and accuracy of a gibbon. Whenever I moved, in either dimension, I experienced my movement merely as a contrary movement of the world around me. Near objects became nearer, or less near; remote objects became less remote, or slipped further into the distance and

vanished. Similarly my movement up or down the musical scale appeared to me as a deepening or heightening of the pitch of all other objects.

In locomotion I experienced no resistance from other objects save in the collision of dissonance, which I could generally avoid by altering my shape. I discovered that a certain degree of dissonance between myself and another offered only very slight resistance and no pain. Indeed, such contacts might be pleasurable. But harsh discords were a torture and could not be maintained.

I soon found that there was a limit to my possible movement up and down the scale. At a point many octaves below my normal situation I began to feel oppressed and sluggish. As I toiled downwards my discomfort increased, until, in a sort of swoon, I floated up again to my native musical plane. Ascending far above this plane, I felt at first exhilaration; but after many octaves a sort of light-headedness and vertigo overtook me, and presently I sank reeling to the few octaves of my normal habitat.

In the "level" dimension there seemed to be no limit to my power of locomotion, and it was in this dimension chiefly that I sought the vanished nymph. I pressed forward through ever-changing tonal landscapes. Sometimes they opened out into "level" vistas of remote, dim, musical objects, or into "tonal" vistas, deep and lofty, revealing hundreds of octaves above and below me. Sometimes the view narrowed, by reason of the dense musical "vegetation," to a mere tunnel, no more than a couple of octaves in height. Only with difficulty could I work my way along such a passage. Sometimes, in order to avoid impenetrable objects, I had to clamber far into the treble or the bass. Sometimes, in empty regions, I had to leap from perch to perch.

At last I began to weary. Movement became repugnant, perception uncertain. Moreover the very form of my body lost something of its pleasant fullness. Instinct now impelled me to an act which surprised my intellect though I performed it without hesitation. Approaching certain luscious little musical objects, certain very simple but vigorous little enduring patterns of timbre and harmony, I devoured them. That is, I broke down the sound-pattern of each one into simpler patterns; and these I incorporated into my own harmonious form. Then I passed on, refreshed.

Presently I was confronted by a crowd of the intelligent beings tumbling helter-skelter toward me and jostling one another in their

haste. Their emotional timbre expressed such fear and horror that my own musical form was infected with it. Hastily moving myself several octaves toward the bass to avoid their frantic course, which was mostly in the treble, I shouted to them to tell me what was the matter. As they fled past I distinguished only a cry which might be translated, "The Big Bad Wolf."

My fear left me, for now I recognized that this was a flock of very young creatures. So I laughed reassuringly and asked if they had encountered the lovely being whom I was seeking. And I laughed to myself at the ease and sweetness with which her musical name came to me when I needed it. They answered only with an augmented scream of infantile grief, as they faded into the distance.

Disturbed, I pursued my journey. Presently I came into a great empty region where I could hear a very remote but ominous growl. I halted, to listen to the thing more clearly. It was approaching. Its form emerged from the distance and was heard in detail. Soon I recognized it as no mere childish bogey but a huge and ferocious brute. With lumbering motion in the bass, its limbs propelled it at a surprising speed. Its harsh tentacles of sound, flickering hither and thither far up into the treble, nosed in search of prey.

Realizing at last the fate that had probably befallen my dear companion, I turned sick with horror. My whole musical body trembled and wavered with faintness.

Before I had decided what to do, the brute caught sight of me, or rather sound of me, and came pounding toward me with the roar and scream of a train, or an approaching shell. I fled. But soon realizing that I was losing ground, I plunged into a thicket of chaotic sound, which I heard ahead of me and well up in the treble. Adapting my musical form and colour as best I could to the surrounding wilderness, I continued to climb. Thus I hoped both to conceal myself and escape from the reach of the creature's tentacles. Almost fainting from the altitude, I chose a perch, integrating my musical limbs with the pattern of the fixed objects in that locality. Thus anchored, I waited, motionless.

The brute was now moving more slowly, nosing in search of me as it approached. Presently it lay immediately below me, far down in the bass. Its body was now all too clearly heard as a grim cacophony of growling and belching. Its strident tentacles moved beneath me like the waving tops of trees beneath a man clinging to a cliff face. Still searching, it passed on beneath me. Such was my relief that I lost consciousness for

a moment and slipped several octaves down before I could recover myself. The movement revealed my position. The beast of prey returned, and began clambering awkwardly toward me. Altitude soon checked its progress, but it reached me with one tentacle, one shrieking arpeggio. Desperately I tried to withdraw myself farther into the treble, but the monster's limb knit itself into the sound-pattern of my flesh. Frantically struggling, I was dragged down, down into the suffocating bass. There, fangs and talons of sound tore me agonizingly limb from limb.

Then suddenly I woke in the concert hall to a great confusion of scraping chairs. The audience was making ready to leave.

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