

AVEBURY SOUNDSCAPES

We can only grasp the narrative imaginatively, but it is dawning on us that the thinking behind Neolithic ritual architecture must have been engendered in a sensory aesthetic. That is, of a kind which appeals to the gut mind, rather than the intellect. Art functioned differently then: it had real power. As historian Lachlan Goudie observed, it was the first pulse of a creative instinct in our cultural history. And yes, we can still put our finger on it and feel something.

Understanding this dynamic encourages exploration of the crevices open to us in remembering Neolithic experience. On a visit to the museum in Kilmartin, Argyleshire, I found a CD of the earliest manmade sounds and music to inhabit the glen. Its tracks were listed chronologically, starting with bone pipes and percussion. Accordingly, through the ages these lone sounds came together as music, moving away from mimicry of birdsong and heartbeat towards something more sophisticated. Scholars naturally shy away from speculation, and the problem with this history is that there's no reason to assume that music and song didn't exist in the Stone Age.

Where straight-liners might take issue with Marshall's use of modern instruments and effects on this album, it seems to me more evocative of place than the Kilmartin example. Art carries a message across the millennia that separate us from those pipes, drums, bullroarers, and what-have-you, which set the rhythm of that primordial pulse. This is what Marshall taps into. Think of his *Avebury Soundscapes* as an echo, resonating back and forth with greater amplitude at a specific phenomenological frequency.

The album begins, naturally, with *First Light* and the binaural sounds of birds awakening. So many ancient ritual landscapes are suggestive of movement, procession, and track 2, *Windmill Hill*, led me along Avebury's stone avenues and upward, bisecting symbolic lands of the quick and the dead, 'seeing' memorial landforms long since flattened by the plough.

Marshall's intimacy with his subject is evident. This work is a sonic addendum to his 2016 book *Exploring Avebury: the Essential Guide*, complementing his contributions to our understanding of this place. One of the joys of both works are their fresh insights. It was Marshall who drew attention to the area's abundance of ancient streams and springs, and their integrated role in its specialness – keep this in mind as you listen to *River of Souls*. He also discovered that stone 'axes' work as bullroarers, exploiting their aerodynamic quality to make sound.

It is the gaps in empirical evidence that induce us to dream Avebury's ancient cultural history into being, recalling not just our journeys but ones we might have made, or perhaps did make in some other place or time. *Soundscapes* adds another layer of story - to each our own images - about the connections between the sites that constitute this ritual landscape, and what it meant to the people who lived through its creation and use. Artists are uniquely qualified to fill in these gaps with plausible speculation. For example, in track 8, *The Sanctuary*, a site marked by concentric rings of 6, 8, 12, and 16 post holes, musical exploration of relationships between these ratios and their underlying geometry is also relevant to constructions such as Woodhenge and Stonehenge. Another example is Marshall's use of Indo-European language, opening up the possibility that Neolithic ideas were somewhat more Vedic than previously thought. The refrain from *Bone Ceremony* - the obvious single from the album – "Dream and remember, dream and truly see", is a fitting mantra for phenomenological approaches to remembering as a way of reattaching and articulating our relationship to people who reached far beyond what they could know to become part of our imagination.

Rob Irving ★★★★★