



Biophilia

By Björk

Released October 2011

It's an app for iPod, iPad, and iPhone. It's free (initially). It's by Icelandic performing artist Björk. But what is it? "Welcome to *Biophilia*—the love for nature in all her manifestations," begins the narration by David Attenborough to the newly released album/app hybrid. As Mr. Attenborough's mellifluous voice invites you to explore the connections between natural, musical, and technological realms, the screen drifts and spirals through a cosmos of fanciful constellations composed of stars with esoteric labels like crystalline, hollow, mutual core, dark matter, and virus. Swiping and pinching gestures on the touch screen allow you to navigate this cosmos, and as you fly through the three-dimensional constellations, you encounter an interactive soundscape peppered with snippets of music. Touching a star transports you directly to it and its corresponding app within an app. But again, what is it?

Thirty years ago, MTV made its debut and changed the way popular music was produced. For the last three decades, it has been unthinkable to release a hit single without following up with a video. With *Biophilia*, Björk has taken what is perhaps a similarly pioneering step. As she releases songs from the album, she is simultaneously releasing its corresponding app that fits into the existing *Biophilia* program. While the initial download of *Biophilia* is free, and includes the introductory song "Cosmogony," each subsequent app is priced at \$1.99, and includes the music, a short essay about the subject matter, a musical score of the piece, an animated score, and an interactive game or instrument. Befitting of Björk's career as a performance artist, the visual interactivity adds an intriguing element to the music.

To be clear, this music is created and performed by Björk. It is not music you will easily find over the airwaves or on the charts. Her vocals vacillate between liltingly lyrical and jarringly stilted. Her accompaniments, however, are strikingly Orff-like. Using instruments both real and imagined ranging from harp, pan drums, and xylophone to the electronic "gameleste" (a mix of gamelan and celeste timbres), she weaves ostinato-based harmonies that subtly evolve throughout the piece. While viewing the score as it scrolls with the music gives the exact notation, the animated score offers a combination of sequencer-like bar notation and non-standard graphic notation that is both artful and mesmerizing. Orff teachers and students will likely find inspiration to rediscover the similar non-standard and child-created notation that has been part of the Orff process for years.

Perhaps the most intriguing and mystifying element of each app is the interactive game. Those looking for a traditional arcade-style "game" with points and levels to be "won" will not find it here. In fact, the app does not label them specifically as games, but rather simply uses the word "play." "Playing" involves manipulating elements of the "game" to subtly change aspects of the song that plays and loops in the background. As of the writing of this review, only three songs/apps have been released: "Moon," "Crystalline," and "Virus." Playing with "Moon" allows you to rearrange the seventeen-note harp ostinato by rotating "pearls" that resemble the phases of the moon. "Crystalline" utilizes the device's accelerometer, allowing the player to tip and tilt the screen to guide a crystal down a series of tunnels, bumping into and collecting other crystals that

activate subtle elements of the song. Of the three releases, this one comes the closest to a traditional "game" in that crystals may be collected in specific sequences to "unlock" new tunnels. However, there is no winning or losing—altering the music itself within these claustrophobic tunnels is its own reward. "Virus" offers a strange metaphor of the virus/host relationship as a romantic infatuation. To play the game, one flicks, drags, and jiggles microscopic viruses away from the host cell they are attacking. Doing so successfully delays the verses of the song. Because the task is not terribly difficult, and the play unending, the inevitable outcome is that out of boredom and curiosity, the player allows the host cell to succumb to the virus. The infection of the host and life cycle of the virus beautifully unfolds, and the player's losing effort is rewarded by a free-play instrument where different cells can be played like pan drums. One will never look at the common cold the same.

While direct classroom applications of *Biophilia* may yet be unrealized, the potential for inspiration and exploration exists. *Biophilia* is a fascinating exploration of the connection of natural elements with elements of music as conceived through technology. An art teacher of mine once said, "Art is not something that is merely beautiful or ugly; it is something that makes you view the world and reality differently." So, what is it? It is art. ■

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