

Dave Maric

Shifting Baselines (2026)

For string quartet, piano, percussion and recorded voices

Duration: 15 minutes

Programme Note

Shifting Baselines takes its title from the ecological concept of “shifting baseline syndrome”: the idea that each generation inherits an altered world and gradually interprets that altered condition as “normal”.

For many years I carried in my mind an image of the Scottish landscape formed by coffee table photography books: vast, austere, treeless moorland – mythical topographies, timeless and pure. A short while later, when visiting Scotland for the first time, thick forests of Sitka spruce felt like northern exotica, surely indigenous and entirely natural. Only decades later, through living within and alongside a rewilding project, did I fully understand that all of this was itself the product of long-term depletion: woodland clearance, species eradication and land management practices that had become culturally embedded. It turned out that the Sitka “forests” were non-native, invasive monocultural wastelands – cash crops with a dark, lifeless understory beneath them. What I had originally assumed represented true wilderness was, at least in part, an inherited aftermath of destructive human intervention. Scotland has become one of the most nature-depleted nations on Earth.

The piece unfolds in three broad sections.

It opens with a brief re-enactment: an estate owner recites a seasonal list of species taken in the mid-nineteenth century. The slightly satirical tone draws on historical records from a nineteenth-century Scottish estate, listing species killed as quarry in astonishing numbers. These are administrative traces of abundance, recorded without sentiment. Birds and animals once dispatched routinely – as sport, as pest control, as assertion of dominion – now feel rare, extraordinary, or are entirely absent. The act of listing becomes a measure of distance to a baseline from nearly two centuries ago.

This inevitably touches on questions of land, ownership and power. Private sporting estates, enclosure, the management of terrain for prestige and bloodsport – these form part of the political ecology of Scotland. Yet they have also become part of the visual and cultural background. Fences, boundaries and inherited patterns of land use are rarely interrogated; they are simply there.

In the central section, a mass of voices appear. Members of the public, who I interviewed in the town of Alyth and the city of Perth, reflect on their own perceptions of the landscape and on whether they have noticed changes since childhood. Some were exuberantly inspired by the

state of nature today. Others were aware of major problems. A few offered more... unexpected responses. Some spoke not only about wildlife but about infrastructure, access, inequality, culture and belonging, while others placed their full trust in farmers as land stewards. The more political responses were not prompted. Hence ecological questions can be entangled with social structure, ownership and justice.

The final section adopts the tone of a formal report. A disembodied voice lists short phrases adapted from Scotland's *State of Nature Report (2023)*, whose conclusions are stark. Its repetition and restraint mirror the opening. If the opening suggests abundance and the middle registers ambiguity, the end portrays administrative clarity: decline measured, catalogued and normalised. The music becomes starker, more empty, and offers no resolution.

Shifting Baselines may focus on environmental change, but the pattern it explores is wider. Across history, practices that once seemed extraordinary – whether in land use, politics or public life – can become ordinary through repetition. The familiar is gradually redefined as acceptable.

But without an understanding of what ecological baselines once looked like – decades or centuries ago – it becomes impossible to fully grasp what has been lost.

Voices:

Section 1 – Paul Ramsay and William Conway

Section 2 – Residents of Alyth, Perth and Blairgowrie

Section 3 – Dave Maric