

Program Notes

“In some remote corner of the universe,” Friedrich Nietzsche reminded us 147 years ago, “poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge.” Of course, this star—our sun—was a dancing star, and so for a few chaotic moments we humans made music for ourselves, too. But that interlude, Nietzsche continues, “was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of ‘world history’—yet only a minute.” For, “after nature had drawn a few breaths, the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.”¹

Now, though, long before our star grows cold, our planet grows hot. We need a new song for this time of dying. *Welcome to the Anthropocene.*

What is this strange age in which we find ourselves? Well, the Anthropocene, as defined by the International Union of Geological Sciences, is a term that “denotes our present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities.”² These changes include phenomena both natural and social—erosion, colonization—as well as consequences both intended and unintended—habitat loss, climate breakdown.³ Taken together, these impacts produce an epoch in which human activity has become the most powerful force on the planet. That this force is a destructive one is reflected by the fact that many scientists peg the start of the Anthropocene to humanity’s first detonation of nuclear weapons—the fallout from which etched itself for eternity into the global geologic record.

Alas, if only the damage ended there. These harmful effects, however, amount to more than the sum of their parts. For the Anthropocene is not only a geologic epoch; it also represents a mass extinction, the sixth in planetary history.⁴ So, this spectacle to which we all are bearing witness today—though rare, indeed—is not unique. And yet it is difficult even for clever animals to comprehend the magnitude, the enormity, and especially the timescale of such extinction events. The scope of the Anthropocene seems simply to exceed our shallow sense perceptions. Like fish in water, we do not, and perhaps cannot, truly see what surrounds us.

This, then, is the focus of my own work: how, if at all, can we humans learn to live through extinction? In my view, this question must be explored through conversation—and I have spoken about it often and fruitfully with Alex. That is why I am so enthralled by his piece, which seeks through music to communicate something important about the place of the Anthropocene—that brief Nietzschean “minute”—among the many humanless millennia that both preceded and will follow it.

Listen closely and I believe you will hear what it sounds like to go extinct.

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¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 42.

² International Union of Geological Sciences, Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy, Working Group on the ‘Anthropocene,’ n.d. “What is the Anthropocene?—current definition and status.” Accessed January 20, 2020. <http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>.

³ Cf. David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

⁴ Cf. Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Picador, 2014).