

BECOMING ANIMAL

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A film by Emma Davie & Peter Mettler

Countries: Switzerland / UK

Year: 2018

Duration: 78 minutes

Format: DCP / BluRay

Language: English

Production Companies: Maximage / SDI Productions Ltd.

TAG LINES

A subversive nature film. What does it mean to inhabit our animal bodies in this technology-driven age?

"We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." – David Abram

SHORT SYNOPSIS

An inspired collaboration between filmmakers Emma Davie and Peter Mettler, *Becoming Animal* is a different kind of nature film, tracing how we sense the 'more than human' world and exploring how it also senses us. An immersive audiovisual quest, it traces a journey to the Grand Teton Park in North America with the influential American environmental philosopher David Abram (*The Spell of the Sensuous*) to explore how the written word and technology has affected how we see. We pique our senses to witness the so-called natural world – which in turn witnesses us, prompting us to reflect on the very essence of what it means to inhabit our animal bodies.

WEBSITES / LINKS

English - <http://www.becominganimalfilm.com>

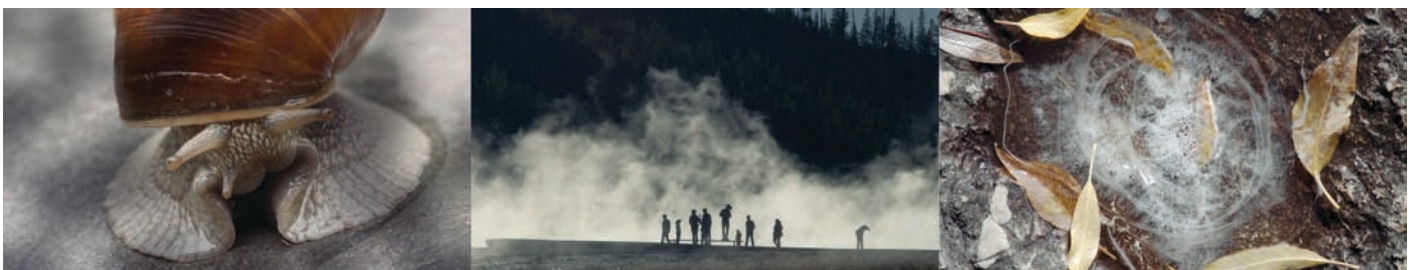
German - <http://www.becominganimalfilm.ch>

Official Trailer - <https://vimeo.com/260041304>

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/BecomingAnimalFilm/>

Twitter - <https://twitter.com/BecomeAnimal>

Production teaser - <https://vimeo.com/136851528>



ABOUT THE FILM

An inspired collaboration between Scottish filmmaker Emma Davie (*I Am Breathing*, winner of Scottish BAFTA - Best Director), Canadian/Swiss visionary filmmaker Peter Mettler (*Gambling Gods & LSD*, *The End Of Time*) and radical writer and philosopher David Abram (*The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*), *Becoming Animal* is an immersive audiovisual quest, tracing a journey through Grand Teton Park in North America.

Becoming Animal challenges audiences to ask questions about how we see, hear and sense what is around us, in the places where humans and animals meet. In recent years there has been a huge rise in the popularity of writings about nature, and this film uses the words and presence of one of the most influential environmental thinkers and writers to reflect on how we can see beyond our human-centric perspective. *Becoming Animal* embraces the audio-visual sensory tools of cinema to trace how the written word and technology has affected how we see. We pique our senses to witness the so-called natural world – which in turn witnesses us, prompting us to reflect on the very essence of what it means to inhabit our animal bodies.

Shot in and around the Grand Teton National Park, with its dizzying diversity of wildlife, trails of curious humans in RVs and billion-year-old geology, the film is a geyser of provocative ideas and heightened sensations related to the ubiquitous circuitry that connects us to our ever-shifting surroundings. A snail's body becomes an immense landscape as the soundscape immerses us in shivering leaves, rushing rivers and the weird spacey pitch of elk calls at night.

Driven by wonder, curiosity and a desire for balance between ecological and technological imperatives, *Becoming Animal* is an invitation to explore our relationship with this “more than human world” and recognize it for what it is: an exquisitely intricate system in which everything is alive and expressive; humans, animals and landscapes are inextricably interdependent, and there is no such thing as an empty space.

Nominated for Best Documentary at CPH:DOX, Edinburgh International Film Festival, Documenta Madrid, Docs Against Gravity



THE FILMMAKING TEAM

EMMA DAVIE



Emma Davie's films explore innovative approaches to narrative structure and the relation between form and ethics. She has made a wide variety of documentaries for national and international broadcasters, including *I Am Breathing* (2012), which received a Scottish BAFTA for Best Director and was screened in over 50 countries, *What Age Can You Start Being An Artist?* (2004, for BBC Channel 4, shortlisted for a Grierson Award), *Gigha, Buying Our Island* (2002), and *Flight* (2000, BBC/Canada). She teaches at Edinburgh College of Art where she runs the post-graduate course in documentary film, and also works as an independent mentor and advisor on film projects, giving regular workshops and seminars internationally. Emma has served as a documentary programmer for the Edinburgh International Film Festival, was on the board of the European Documentary Network, and has written widely on documentary-making practice. Her interest in collaboration, explored in *Becoming Animal*, stems from a background in performance theatre: for many years she ran a performance company that specialized in immersive large-scale shows incorporating performance and film, and also collaborated with directors such as Robert Lepage, working with Peter Mettler for the first time as an actress in his film adaptation of *Tectonic Plates* (1992). Emma was educated at Oxford University where she studied English literature, and then studied theatre in Paris.

Quotes about Emma Davie's *I Am Breathing*:

"Genuinely powerful filmmaking... an intimate portrait of heartbreaking courage - a haunting and inclusive encounter with time, experience and mortality." - Trevor Johnston, *Sight & Sound*

"Ranks among the year's most moving films." - *The Hollywood Reporter*

PETER METTLER



Peter Mettler creates works that elude categorization, melding intuitive processes with drama, essay, and experiment. Meditations on our world rooted in personal experience, his films reflect the visions and wonder of their characters and audiences alike. His work holds a unique and influential position not only as instances of trailblazing innovation within the realm of documentary cinema, but also in new art forms where cinema and other disciplines merge. His films include *Picture of Light* (1994), *Gambling Gods & LSD* (2002), *Petropolis: Aerial Perspectives on the Alberta Tar Sands* (2009), and *The End of Time* (2012), and his collaborators include Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Robert Lepage, Michael Ondaatje, Fred Frith, Jim O'Rourke, Edward Burtynsky, and Jennifer Baichwal. Mettler also experiments with live image mixing performances, recently touring a series of performances across Europe with anthropologist Jeremy Narby and musician Franz Treichler. Mettler's films have been the focus of multiple international retrospectives, including at the Toronto International Film Festival, BAFICI, Lincoln Centre NYC, Jeu de Paume Paris, Cinematheque Suisse, Planete + Doc Film Festival Warsaw, and Kinoatelje Tribute To A Vision. His awards include a Genie Award for Best Documentary from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television, Locarno Film Festival's La Sarraz Prize, the Grand Prix and Prix du Jeune Publique prizes at Vision Du Reel, Director of Excellence Award at Yamagata Documentary Festival, and Best Film, Best Cinematography, and Best Writing at Hot Docs Film Festival. His work has been the subject of two books, *Making The Invisible Visible* (1995), and *Of This Place and Elsewhere: The Films and Photography of Peter Mettler* (2006, ed. Jerry White). In 2017, *Picture Of Light* was selected by TIFF as one of Canada's Essential 150 Canadian Films.

Quotes about Peter Mettler:

"Peter Mettler is one of the most original artists working today. Few filmmakers are as attuned to the wonders of existence, or to the sensual and perceptual possibilities of cinema." - Dennis Lim, Lincoln Center Film Society

"Peter Mettler is an incomparable talent in Canadian cinema. The innovation and audacity of his work, his dedication to the cinematic art form, and his ability to conjure up images that remain permanently etched in one's mind, secures his place as one of this country's most distinguished contemporary filmmakers." - Piers Handling, Toronto International Film Festival

DAVID ABRAM

David Abram is a cultural ecologist and geo-philosopher who lectures and teaches widely on several continents. His award-winning book *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (Vintage, 1997), has become a classic of environmental literature, and its follow-up, *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (Vintage, 2011) was hailed as "revolutionary" by the *Los Angeles Times*, and "daring" and "truly original" by *Science*. Abram's work has helped catalyze the emergence of several new disciplines, including the burgeoning field of Ecopsychology. He engages the ecological depths of the imagination, exploring the ways in which sensory perception, poetics, and wonder inform the relation between the human body and the breathing earth. His ideas are profoundly informed by the tradition of phenomenology and by his fieldwork with indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia and North America.



Quotes about David Abram's *Becoming Animal*:

"A wild book in every sense of the word, full of stories that will leave you trembling, but even fuller of ideas that will send you out into the world with new eyes." – Bill McKibben, author of *Eaarth*, and *The End of Nature*

"This book is like a prehistoric cave. If you have the nerve to enter it and you get used to the dark, you'll discover things about storytelling which are startling, urgent and deeply true. Things each of us once knew, but forgot when we were born into the 19th and 20th centuries. Extraordinary rediscoveries!" – John Berger, author of *Ways of Seeing* and *Why Look at Animals*

"I cannot imagine another book that so gently and so persuasively alters how we look at ourselves." – Richard Louv, author of *The Nature Principle*

"One of the most compelling and important ecology books in decades." – Rex Weyler, co-founder of Greenpeace International

"A truly alchemical book... Those of us who still hope for a revolutionary change in our thinking toward animals, the living land and the climate will welcome this book. Abram is an audacious thinker, a true visionary, and, really, just a damn good nature writer." – *San Francisco Book Review*

"An intricately textured, deep breath of a book that blurs the boundaries between human and animal, mind and earth. Prose as lush as a moss-draped rain forest and as luminous as a high desert night... *Becoming Animal* illuminates a way forward in restoring relationship with the earth, led by our vibrant animal bodies to re-inhabit the glittering world." – *Orion*

FESTIVAL SCREENINGS

CPH:DOX (Denmark) – Nominated for Best Feature, World Premiere
Documenta Madrid (Spain) – Nominated for Fugas Feature Film Competition
Docs Against Gravity (Poland) – Nominated for Grand Prix
Bildrausch Filmfest, Basel (Switzerland) – Nominated for Best Feature
Edinburgh International Film Festival (Scotland, UK) – Nominated for Best Feature Documentary
FilmFest Munchen (Germany)
International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam (Netherlands) – Masters Section
Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (Czech Republic)
Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (Canada)
Porto Post Doc (Portugal)
Imagine Science Festival (USA)
Planet In Focus (Canada)
Open City Documentary Festival (London, UK)
Duisburger Filmwoche (Germany)
DocMontevideo (Uruguay)
Dokufest (Kosovo)
Hebrides International Film Festival (Scotland, UK)
Kinoateljje Tribute to a Vision (Italy/Slovenia)
Festival del Popoli (Italy)
More festival announcements TBA soon!

Swiss theatrical run begins October 2018

UK theatrical run begins November 2018





PRESS REVIEWS

"A magnificent documentary about the natural origins of what we consider to be man-made and the connection between man and nature... A thought-provoking, peculiar exploration of nature." – Ellen Lande, *Modern Times Review*

"Genuinely eye opening... a fascinating, thought-provoking and pleasingly free-wheeling film." – Barry Didock, *The Herald*

"Something actually new and full of life came in the form of freewheeling audiovisual essay *Becoming Animal*... A big-screen viewing recommended." – Josh Slater-Williams, *Sight and Sound*

"In the moment where a human being contemplates *Becoming Animal* on the screen, the possibilities become infinite, like in a hall of mirrors." – Dominic Schmid, *Film Explorer*

"A sensitive cinematic translation of Abram's thoughts on embodied sense perception and, in particular, that our seemingly-sterile technologies model and mimic our bodies within nature... Mettler's sensitive cinematography reveals the lens's animal origins and 'animal seeing'... Meditative, even transcendent, propelling the experience into the ecstatic." – Jill Glessing, *Point of View Magazine*

"An intriguing and uniquely constructed exploration of the world we live in. Hypnotic and visceral – highly recommended." – Steven Neish, *HeyUGuys*

"An intoxicatingly coherent reflection about the relationship between Human, Animal, Technology and Nature." – Marcel Elsener, *Saiten*

"*Becoming Animal* is a film that makes you see everything with slightly different eyes." – CPH:DOX

"A phenomenological travelogue, a precisely composed polyphonic essay on perception, a re-evaluation of animism, and a vital appeal to relinquish our collective anthropocentric viewpoint before it's too late – all with glittering intelligence and beauty." – *Imagine Science Film Festival*

Q&A WITH EMMA DAVIE & PETER METTLER

How did you develop the idea for *Becoming Animal*?

Emma had read David Abram's books when they first came out, and was deeply affected by them. We had discussed the ideas, but at the time had never thought of making a film directly related to them. However, after Emma attended a workshop with David four years ago, she saw the transformative effects his words and ideas had on those who were present, and this led her to ask him if he would consider embarking on a film project as an experiment. Peter was a natural choice for a collaborator, as his work possesses a similar transformative quality. We had discussed extensively over the years of our friendship how the current ecological crisis was a crisis of perception as much as anything – this film was a way of examining some important aspects of the meaning and implications of that crisis.

How did you get David Abram to participate in the film?

When Emma attended David's workshop and asked him if he would be interested in participating on a film project, he was initially unsure about the process. He had been asked many times before to get involved in projects based on his ideas, but recognized that translating the complex ideas in his books to the medium of cinema could be challenging. Perhaps it was the fact that we made it clear from the outset we were trying to create something new – not simply illustrating his work, but improvising around the ideas and manifesting an interaction between them and the filmmaking process itself – that intrigued him. However, it was challenging for us all to bring the very distinct and disparate worlds of philosophy and filmmaking together. David's writing is very poetic and descriptive, but in the cinema it is the images and sounds that do most of the work. It was tricky for him to let go of his usual way of speaking and be economical with language. In the end, he was happy with the result, but it was a demanding process.

What is the film about?

The overall question that motivated us was how we could articulate our changing relationship with the "natural" world, and whether cinema and technology could become a vehicle for waking us up to what is around us. When we are truly in touch with our senses, how different is our relationship to the world? What is contained within this notion of "reciprocity" that David describes as existing between our senses and what we encounter? If this interconnection is so integral to our sense of being, why do we continue to separate ourselves so much from nature? What has made us lose this connection?

Of course, within this question there is already an important separation: we describe "nature" as something fundamentally apart from ourselves. This is a central paradox that we were always aware of and engaged with throughout the process of making *Becoming Animal*. Although the film is about our urge to exist beyond our limited notion of self and other – to claim a more expanded sense of being that connects us to everything – there is also an additional aspect that even to think this realization is to already be one step removed from the immediacy of experience. So the perennial question of how the mind both liberates and limits is also present, and film, with its endless hall of mirrors, can reflect this. We hope the film exists in a space in which the cumulative effect of David's ideas, woven into a cinematic journey, will start to create new links in the minds of the audience, resonating with their own deep questions about these themes.

What does nature mean to you?

Near the beginning of the film, Emma states: "Nature is a tricky word – one that separates us from it." We both wrestle with this relationship while making films, as everyone does in their own respective ways. The fact that we have created this word to indicate an environment that is conceptualized as somehow separate from ourselves seems inherently problematic. It's likely that this notion of separation is one of the reasons we are not more protective of the places and ecosystems we belong to. If we consider ourselves as part of nature, and nature part of us, then we might take much better care of the worlds we inhabit.

How can filmmaking be part of this idea that human beings have lost their connection to nature?

Using image and sound recording technologies in this day and age is, of course, a fascinatingly poignant proposition. So much of our experience and knowledge now comes to us exclusively through media. It seems appropriate then to consider an approach that accepts this media as part of our evolution as well – as part of "nature." For better or worse, this is where we are at; we watch the world through

our personal and cultural recordings and transmissions. We engage our devices even as we walk through forests, committing recordings to a bank of memory and displaced time. It is a paradox to make a film about our senses and the connection to our surroundings, while also addressing how these technologies have changed our relationships to our surroundings. But that is exactly what we wanted to embrace, so that as one watches the film there is an awareness of the mediated nature of the experience of cinema itself. This is why at times you will hear the rustling, breathing animal (Peter) that holds the camera as he makes his way through the brush, and why you see the crew, cameras, and David – our “guide” – intermittently throughout. This layer provides a way to better understand what we are all going through, whether as filmmakers, tourists, or as a cultural audience.

What do you want the spectator to experience?

One of the audience members said that, at the end of the film, they felt their relationship with the chair they were sitting on had changed – they felt they were more in connection with it. Others have talked of how the film made them see the colours on a fly differently, or that they had to stop in order to look at a tree and sense the movement it made. Any response which shifts perception and wakes us up to an awareness of being part of the natural world, as opposed to separate from it is welcome!

How did you two work together during the shooting and the editing process?

We talked a lot in advance and shared bits of David’s work that interested us, and divided this material into themes. Rather comically, at one point during the production we tried to synchronize our notebooks. Finding strategies for being on the same page was important, but this collaboration had already started before the film began, through discussions and shared enthusiasms that developed between us over the years. Peter was the cinematographer, although both of us decided on the visual language of the film. Emma collaborated with David, and helped him edit his words. Both of us were equally involved in editing and shaping the material into its current form, which involved a long process of editorial propositions including the writing of our own bits of voiceover. Both of us, along with David, have been circling the ideas presented in the film for many years, and this chemistry of collaboration was able to bring together three varied perspectives on themes that are very important to each of us.

Sound plays an essential role in the film – how did you design the soundtrack?

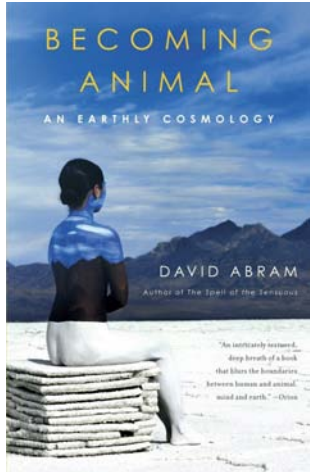
The sound is comprised of sometimes subtle, realist, natural environmental soundscapes, in combination with human creations of choral and electronic compositions, all applied separately to specific scenes. Near the beginning of the film we hear elk mating calls at night, which David describes as something that “seems to really set the context, for even all of our human music making.” On one hand, we encounter the quiet of animals munching and the ambience of wilderness or rushing water, and on the other hand, the sounds of our technologies and our culture – our modern expressions of being. It was a tricky balance to find in the mix. It’s surprisingly challenging to record and reproduce the subtlety of wilderness without imposing one’s own creative influences. We were also considerate of David’s idea that our language has evolved from the sounds of the natural world, like the “russsshhhhh” of water.

Why do you think *Becoming Animal* is an important film for the present day?

We hope that the film addresses in some way what we have been calling a crisis of perception, exemplified by the fact that while our culture possesses more tools and knowledge than ever before, our understanding and awareness of the world remains quite limited. It seems that, in looking into the root of our problems, it’s also important to address how we actually see.

While it is important to show calamity, destruction, or injustice, it is not enough to only see these types of representations. How did we let these things happen? What has conditioned us to see the way we see, to relate to the life around us in the way we do? It is essential to engage in opposition and find corrective measures for major problems like our relationship to the environment, but this also demands a deeper associative perception into the states of our being – especially in relation to the wider non-human world. Empathy, awareness and reciprocity are qualities we hope *Becoming Animal* may evoke, to better understand our position as living beings in a living world.

QUOTES FROM DAVID ABRAM'S *BECOMING ANIMAL: AN EARTHLY COSMOLOGY*



"Reciprocity is the very structure of perception. We experience the sensuous world only by rendering ourselves vulnerable to that world. Sensory perception is this ongoing interweavement: the terrain enters into us only to the extent that we allow ourselves to be taken up within that terrain."

"To our indigenous ancestors, and to the many aboriginal peoples who still hold fast to their oral traditions, language is less a human possession than it is a property of the animate earth itself, an expressive, telluric power in which we, along with the coyotes and the crickets, all participate... Nor is this power restricted solely to animals. The whispered hush of the uncut grasses at dawn, the plaintive moan of trunks rubbing against one another in the deep woods, or the laughter of birch leaves as the wind gusts through their branches all bear a thicket of many-layered meanings for those who listen carefully."

"All things have the capacity for speech – all beings have the ability to communicate something of themselves to other beings. Indeed, what is *perception* if not the experience of this gregarious, communicative power of things, wherein even ostensibly 'inert' objects radiate out of themselves, conveying their shapes, hues, and rhythms to other beings and to us, influencing and informing our breathing bodies though we stand far apart from those things? Not just animals and plants, then, but tumbling waterfalls and dry riverbeds, gusts of wind, compost piles and cumulus clouds, freshly painted houses (as well as houses abandoned and sometimes haunted), rusting automobiles, feathers, granite cliffs and grains of sand, tax forms, dormant volcanoes, bays and bayous made wretched by pollutants, snowdrifts, shed antlers, diamonds, and daikon radishes, all are expressive, sometimes eloquent and hence participant in the mystery of language. Our own chatter erupts in response to the abundant articulations of the world: human speech is simply our part of a much broader conversation. It follows that the myriad things are also listening, or attending, to various signs and gestures around them. Indeed, when we are at ease in our animal flesh, we will sometimes feel we are being listened to, or sensed, by the earthly surroundings. And so we take deeper care with our speaking, mindful that our sounds may carry more than a merely human meaning and resonance."

"If we speak of things as inert or inanimate objects, we deny their ability to actively engage and interact with us – we foreclose their capacity to reciprocate our attentions, to draw us into silent dialogue, to inform and instruct us."

"For too long we've closed ourselves to the participatory life of our senses, inured ourselves to the felt intelligence of our muscled flesh and its manifold solidarities. We've taken our primary truths from technologies that hold the world at a distance. Such tools can be mighty useful, and beneficial as well, as long as the insights that they yield are carried carefully back to the lived world, and placed in service to the more-than-human matrix of corporeal encounter and experience."

"Magic doesn't sweep you away; it gathers you up into the body of the present moment so thoroughly that all your explanations fall away: the ordinary, in all its plain and simple outrageousness, begins to shine – to become luminously, impossibly so. Every facet of the world is awake, and you within it."

QUOTES FROM DAVID ABRAM'S *THE SPELL OF THE SENSUOUS: PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD*

"At the heart of any language is the poetic productivity of expressive speech. A living language is continually being made and remade, woven out of the silence by those who speak... And this silence is that of our wordless participations, of our perceptual immersion in the depths of an animate, expressive world."

"We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human."

CREDITS

Directed by

Emma Davie & Peter Mettler

With the words and presence of

David Abram

A maximage and SDI Productions film

in association with Creative Scotland

in co-production with Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen SRF

Produced by

Cornelia Seitler Rebecca Day
Brigitte Hofer Sonja Henrici

Editing

Peter Mettler with Emma Davie

Cinematography

Peter Mettler

Sound Recording and Design

Jacques Kieffer and Peter Mettler

Sound Mix

Jacques Kieffer, Magnetix

Picture Design

Patrick Lindenmaier, Andromeda

Additional foley and sound creation

Peter Bräker

Camera Assistant and 2nd Camera

Jordan Kawai

With financial support of

Bundesamt für Kultur (BAK), The National Lottery through Creative Scotland, Zürcher Filmstiftung, Kulturfonds SUISSIMAGE, Volkart Stiftung, UBS Kulturstiftung, Succès Passage Antenne, Pulse / Doc Society, University of Edinburgh, Kulturförderung Appenzell Ausserrhoden

MUSIC

"Gauß'sche Landaufnahme Teil I "

Performed by Atom™
Composed by Uwe Schmidt
Published by Rückbank Musikverlag Mark Chung
Courtesy of raster-noton

"Magnificat"

Composed by Arvo Pärt
Performed by Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir
Tnu Kaljuste, conductor
Used by arrangements with ECM Records
Licensed courtesy of UNIVERSAL EDITION AG, Wien
www.universaledition.com

"Streuung Teil III "

Performed by Atom™
Composed by Uwe Schmidt
Published by Rückbank Musikverlag Mark Chung
Courtesy of raster-noton

"Misere Mei Deum"

Composed by Gregorio Allegri
Sung by Trinity College Choir, Cambridge

"Winterreise"

Performed by Atom™
Composed by Uwe Schmidt
Published by Rückbank Musikverlag Mark Chung
Courtesy of raster-noton

"Spem in Alium"

Performed by The Tallis Scholars directed by Peter Phillips
From the album The Tallis Scholars sing Thomas Tallis
(CDGIM 203)
Composed by Thomas Tallis, arranged by Peter Phillips
Produced by Steve C Smith and Peter Phillips for Gimell
Records (www.gimell.com)
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"Drei Schneewalzer Prolog"

Performed by Atom™
Composed by Uwe Schmidt
Published by Rückbank Musikverlag Mark Chung
Courtesy of raster-noton

"Drei Schneewalzer Teil 1"

Performed by Atom™
Composed by Uwe Schmidt
Published by Rückbank Musikverlag Mark Chung
Courtesy of raster-noton

"A Soft Throbbing Of Time"

Composed and performed by Frank Bretschneider
Arranged by Peter Mettler
Published by Edition Raster Noton
Courtesy of raster-noton

"Wilderness"

Performed by Gabriel Scotti & Vincent Hänni
Arranged by Peter Mettler

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maximage

SDI
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Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra
Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI
Bundesamt für Kultur BAK

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FILMSTIFTUNG

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SRF Schweizer Radio
und Fernsehen

VOLKART
FOUNDATION

PULSE  doc
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OUTSIDE
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SWISS FILMS



BECOMING
ANIMAL