

By **Stephanie King**

[Colouring of Pigeons](#) takes its name from Charles Darwin's pivotal ornithological studies following his return from his voyage on the *Beagle*. It's the stand-out track on *Tomorrow in a Year*, The Knife's collaborative [electro-opera](#) based on Darwin's life. The album is an admirable failure but *Colouring of Pigeons* is one of the most extraordinary, curious and ambitious tracks you'll hear this year.

Crashing into life, a sensuous drumbeat shakes the song awake. Plaintive cellos build the tension backed with a rattlesnake pulse, and then the opera starts. Sort of. A robotic soprano leads a collage of voices in arrangements of tight, controlled vowels – “a-e-o-u-ah-ah-oh-ah-ih” – like a 21st century

[Laurie Anderson](#)

. The song unfolds gradually and painfully, evolving like an organism, echoing a child's struggle to speak. The effect is somewhere between fearful and fearsome.

Next, sparkling percussion splashes through the song, all the while menaced by that persistent cello. When Karin Dreijer Andersson bursts in, her sharp voice cajoles the listener through lyrics that embark on an ethereal journey of otherworldly landscapes: *A strange scene it is/Under over through* . This is counterbalanced by Karin's brother Olof's husky, spectral vocal, recounting details of Darwin's family life, such as his daughter Henrietta's first smile, watched by his wife (and cousin) Emma.

This marriage of the cosmic and the domestic warms an intense, mechanical opening. Set against the glittering percussion, the song transforms from an icy, cerebral construction of sounds to something altogether more human and welcoming.



When the soprano returns, it soars into a languid, expansive solo, riffing off Darwin's discoveries of genetic traits inherited by generations of birds. Against the soprano's glorious, maternal voice, The Knife's smaller voices become endearingly childlike in their expression of The delight of once again being home, shrinking the song back to the human and personal against its epic backdrop. Ending with a series of rumbles, pings, squeals, growls and snores, the song settles back into a contemplative heartbeat, before bleeding out with a grumbling, snoring bass.

Conveying the very real mix of terror and wonder that the theory of evolution inspired, *Colouring of Pigeons*

boldly tries to capture the intensity of one individual making a breakthrough after years of pioneering exploration and dedicated labour which changed our fundamental beliefs.

Amazingly, it succeeds. A deeper, tougher

[Hoppipolla](#)

, its careful construction stirs both the primal and the intellectual.

Colouring of Pigeons

is a terrific achievement.