

ZEITGEIST 2025-2026 SEASON

ZEITGEIST UNDERWATER COUSINS



Oct 31 - The Anderson Center, Red Wing
Nov 1 - Gustavus Adolphus College, St Peter
Nov 2 - The Anderson Center, Red Wing

INTERVIEW WITH JC SANFORD

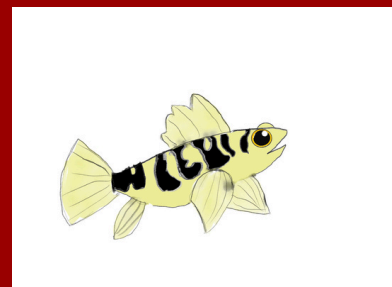
Heather: Underwater Cousins draws inspiration from our human relationship to the fishes of the world, with each movement centering a particular fish or fish behavior. How did this piece come to be? When did you first conceive of creating a piece of music about fishes?



JC: Several years ago I discovered a book by Jonathan Balcombe called *What a Fish Knows: The Inner Lives of Our Underwater Cousins*. Even though I had already long been aware of fishes being much more complicated beings than they are often depicted (a big reason why I became totally vegan around 15 years ago), I was totally blown away about the myriad ways fishes are uniquely skilled, as well as the complexity of their relationships, with other fishes and non-fish species. This inspired me to write a very programmatic piece that depicted the special character of many of these stories. The next step was to figure out a suitable ensemble to present this. After a few false starts, I was thankful that Zeitgeist expressed an interest in bringing these stories to life.

Heather: How did you select which fish were in each movement? What were your criteria?

For the first phase of this work, I chose some of my favorite stories from the book that represented various fish abilities and experiences, although it was very hard to narrow it down! I did further research and watched videos of the phenomenon when possible and started to think of how I might capture some of that behavior through music. This process was informed by the fact that I was not only going to be performing with Zeitgeist myself, but that I would also be utilizing my newish set of effects pedals, as well. For material, I broke down important phrases and words from the text into pitch collections, which created a whole set of leitmotifs for me to draw upon throughout. For the most recent stage, the additional SEMAC funding included me creating new movements that related specifically to fishes that reside in the state of Minnesota. This required another round of research, but I found a couple of interesting stories that evoked some more ideas to work with



Heather: The music in each movement is closely tied to fish behavior. Would you give an example of how this manifests in one of the movements?

JC: One of the most poignant examples is the African tigerfish, who developed a surprising predation behavior: they regularly leap out of the water to snatch barn swallows out of the air. There are many examples of birds that dive into the water to hunt for fishes, but this reversal of roles is stunning. It is particularly fascinating since not only do they have to track the movements of the swallows on a separate plane of existence, but they also need to calculate light refraction through the water to make sure they arrive at the right place at the right time to have success. And their success rate is shockingly high, partly due to the fact that they have multiple methods in which they breach the surface.



Heather: How did your ideas about content, musical forces, technology, and presentation change from your first thoughts about what the piece might be?



JC: A big part that evolved conceptually, partly out of necessity, was how I might utilize the text from the book. After many back-and-forth conversations with the publisher over a couple years, it became clear that it was going to be too restrictive to use direct quotes from the book for my purposes. Doing additional research about each topic helped to show that there is now quite a lot of information about all of these stories out there, even though there was likely less public info about them back when the book was initially published (2016). So it was much more feasible for me to jot down the basic info in my own words rather than using specific quotations from the book. And often restrictions provide interesting artistic parameters, so as a result, we will feature both drawings and narration by my daughter Mia.

Heather: Is there anything else you would like our audience to know about Underwater Cousins?

JC: Though much of my motivation and passion about this subject stems from me being vegan, I'm really not looking to convert anybody based on this piece. I would hope to create some more awareness and interest, though, about how much more there is to a fish's life, and maybe some folks might reflect about an industry and pastime that tends not to consider these characteristics of these amazing creatures who are themselves individual entities and not a bulk commodity.



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[Tickets and More Info](#)

UNDERWATER COUSINS is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts & cultural heritage fund.

