

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Progressing the nature of interpretation:  
Absence, Blankness, Hope?  
How does our changing understanding  
of the natural world and technology  
influence the musical interpretation of the continent?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this review I will consider the effect of scientific and technological developments on the composer's process interpreting Antarctica. This will involve establishing the context in which this process takes place, suggesting a relationship between the artist and the Information Technology environment and examining some elements of nine composers and their responses.

*Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;*

*Ulysses; Alfred Lord Tennyson*

### **The British Empire Technology and the Heroic Age of Exploration**

For Ranulph Fiennes, author and Polar Explorer, the Englishman of the new twentieth century was convinced the South Pole was his and that he shouldn't have it didn't occur to him for a moment (2003 p.4). It was not the revolutionary vision of Darwin, Nietzsche, Einstein, or Freud, that shaped the perceptions of the heroic age, but the legacy of the industrial revolution, the Victorian era, and The British Empire. Technological developments in powered flight, and photography particularly had a profound influence on the Terra Nova expedition of 1910-1913 and subsequent Antarctic expeditions.

### **Music and Antarctica: A symbolic disjuncture.**

In describing culture as 'the way we represent ourselves to ourselves' Regenia Gagnier (1991) outlines a useful template for considering questions of influence and interpretation. As the most abstract continent, one in which we can barely live, an alterity occurs. Music and Antarctica form an interesting symbolic disjuncture. They are two things we can't really process as human beings.

### **Vaughn Williams, Peter Maxwell Davies and DJ Spooky: How do we evaluate musical responses?**

In his review of 'Notes from a Cold Climate: Antarctic Symphony No.8', Anders Karlqvist, then Director General of the Swedish Polar Research Secretariat, declares 'Music is a basic expression of human experience but subtler and more difficult to relate to geography or nature in the way an author or painter would be able to express such relations.'(2001) Karlqvist argues while there is added value in non scientists travelling to Antarctica there may be less necessity for composers to visit the continent: 'his diaries expresses [sic] sentiments and discoveries which are almost universal ... One may wonder if the fact that a composer gets the chance to actually travel to the ice makes an imprint on the music ... Vaughan Williams wrote his Sinfonia Antarctica with only second hand ideas of what

Antarctica is all about. Does it make a difference? Maybe not. Sounds of breaking ice, snowstorm or silence are in a sense archetypal and would come to mind for any composer writing polar music (ibid, 469).'

Certainly Vaughn Williams did not travel to Antarctica but whether or not one considers his ideas on what Antarctica is all about to be 'second hand' depends very much on definition. Grimley's article on Vaughn Williams's *Sinfonia Antartica* provides an excellent frame for the consideration of polar music based on an assessment of the historical and cultural heritage. Of course it has the benefit of 60 years hindsight (which Karlqvist's does not) and the content of acknowledged genius to consider, but this invites an aspiration to a quality of scholarship and indeed artistic response.

In setting the cultural scene for the composer's work Grimley outlines the narratives of nationalism and good character, tying them in with Vaughan Williams's own preoccupations: 'For Vaughan Williams, the association of the Scott myth with the First World War became one of the most powerful formative influences on the eventual design of the *Sinfonia Antartica* ... For example, the opening theme on the first page in the sketchbook, which was conceived from the start as music for the main titles, is labelled "Heroism," elevating the idea from a simple character portrayal of Scott himself to a wider ideal type' (2008). Citing Huntford (1983), Solomon (2001), Spufford (1996), and Wylie (2002), Grimley notes that '... attention has shifted from arguments concerning the relative strengths and weaknesses of Scott's party, as opposed to those of his Norwegian "rival" Amundsen, toward a more cultural geographically informed view, which sees the expedition as a performative act, the linear playing-out or re-mapping of a vision of Empire upon a notionally blank-and-white canvas. Scott's voyage, in effect, becomes a form of writing with its own syntax and grammar, or a means of inhabiting, dwelling, and moving through the landscape.' One hundred years later are the grammar and the movement significantly different?

Two important questions arise. How is the musical interpretation of Antarctica to be assessed and how is the quality of the work to be judged? In the absence of a substantial body of academic work most reflection comes from three forms: press coverage, internet blogs and websites, and the composers' own writings which can, of course, take the form of the first two sources. For works by Vaughn Williams and Peter Maxwell Davies there exists, or will exist an extensive body of analysis. For many other artistic offerings Karlqvist may be right to assume that 'the music will be judged and will eventually survive on its own merits, regardless of why and where it was written' (2001). It will still have to make its own way into the canon or remain in an ever growing region of cyberspace to be trawled and codified or not. How it does this will depend on a variety of arcane (to many) processes involving algorithms and search engines: Google Antarctic Music and DJ Spooky will be there loud and clear.

'The World', a Public Radio International/BBC World Service/WBGH (Boston News and Culture Station) co-production, broadcast an interview which began: 'DJ Spooky, whose real name is Paul Miller, is well-known in hip-hop circles. Hip-hop lives on the sonic samples of music from recent years. A few years ago, Miller became fascinated with a symphony written by the 20th century British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. It was called *Sinfonia Antarctica* [sic], and Williams wrote it for a movie in 1949 about the British and Norwegian expeditions to the South Pole in the early 1900s. Paul Miller wanted to write his

own symphony to evoke Antarctica, to challenge himself artistically, and to express his concerns for climate change. And tonight at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, he'll be presenting that new work: "Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica." '

It continues:

'DJ SPOOKY: It was just a bubble of peace in an otherwise very hectic life. I DJ all over the world. I just got off a plane from Russia. I was in Brazil a couple of days before that. Then I was in Macau, then I was in Australia. I DJ literally in a different city every couple of days for the last ten years or so. But going down to Antarctica was something where I wanted to try and figure out hitting a reset button on my imagination, getting out of this idea of the global city.

WERMAN: Your own work, Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica, begins with these kind of interlacing high pitched sounds, sounds like maybe bells, chimes, joined by strings and some percussion, it sounds like. What are we hearing exactly at the beginning there?

SPOOKY: The score is based on this idea of interpretations of landscape and one of the things with hip hop, you've got to remember, hip hop's the sound of the city, the sound of the street. And I've always been fascinated with why people like such regular, structured music. It's like, boom boom bap, boom bap. Or if you hear what's going on now in South America with the cumbria or reggaeton or stuff like that, it still has that pulse, the regular structure. Going into Antarctica, I wanted to try and de-program myself out of hip hop, out of the electronic music that I usually am thinking about. As a composer, I'm intrigued with how do you build bridges between these kind of older traditions of classical and some of the newer stuff that's going on? There's two component. One is the natural sounds, and then there's two, the music inspired by the natural sounds. So say for example, this is a piece that's literally based on what I like to call the playfulness of water, and I'll play you the natural sound and then the music that was inspired by it. So say for example you get this [water running]. Water coming in, just literally, you can kind of hear this hollow like sound, and that's water lapping off of these large glaciers that our ship pulled up next to, and then I was able to go on land and I set up my microphones and tried to just capture this huge space. So I interpreted that into something like this. This is the same idea of recording and so on, but it's an interpretation. Here you go. [music plays] ...' And of course the music is online with video footage of the performance including screens on either side of the performance space, the string quartet, and the decks. Clearly the same elements preoccupy composers whatever technology they use. Chris Cree Brown engages with these issues as described by Patrick Shepherd later in this review.

### **Information Technology and the Media**

To a large extent our changing understanding of the natural world is bound to be encoded and embedded in our perceptions. Consciously or not, the function of contemporary information technology and media inevitably create underlying, widespread (if superficial) narratives that exist in our 'general knowledge'. Those who travel to Antarctica are bound to encounter current scientific practice through up-to-date technological means of transmission. Thus the influence of contemporary understanding will always be seen historically in the analysis of a work and the medium of expression will inevitably talk to

contemporary technology. To this extent the medium is the message and the interpretation inevitably expresses the influence.

### **Two more English composers: Visitor and Virtual Visitors**

Let us consider two more English composers responding to Antarctica. One who travelled there, one who did not. Craig Vear is a composer and musician who held the Arts Council England Fellowship with the British Antarctic Survey artists and writers programme for 2003-2004 (BAS 2003) and is currently engaged on a three year research project funded by the University of Salford, exploring the interrelationship between music, digital technology and contemporary theatre-based performance. The Antarctic work involved a plan to 'collect a unique library of recordings of Antarctic sounds ...[to] create a series of sound collages, [...] a large-scale impressionist piece ... [and] a series of five-minute docucollages [...] 'The project was covered by 6 Antarctic Diary articles in The Guardian in November and December 2003 and a review in October 2004' (Vear 2003). There do not appear to be any academic papers arising from the works. The works reflect the continuing development in the use of current technology and multi media presentation. Reference to the project in the form of feedback or assessment to the Arts Council and through his diaries may be available through private arrangement but are beyond the scope of this review.

While the composition of musical scores has been influenced by technological development particularly in the areas of recording and the use of computers for editing and processing, interesting crossovers have occurred where the 'audification' of data and the capture of environmental data through audio recording has given rise to some collaborations that take the soundscape, normally the preserve of the composer, and combine it with scientific method and practice.

In contrast to Vear's work 'The Antarctic sonata: music inspired by Antarctic research - Kevin Jones, 2007' is described as 'A music-science-media collaboration with Dr Stephen Bell (graphic animation) and Prof. Nick Petford (geology and concept). Music material is derived from the outline of the Antarctic coastline and ice shelves, and from the colour, shapes and textures of crystals in rock samples collected in the 'Dry Valleys' region of the Antarctic by Nick Petford. The interpretation ranges from strict mapping of polar coordinates to a more intuitive response to shapes suggested by crystal groupings. Performed by the composer, it takes the form of a prepared semi-improvisation played as the animated maps and rock imaging unfold.' (Jones 2007)(Bournemouth University 2007)(Bell 2007)

The piece was performed in the Churchill Auditorium, at the QE II Conference Centre, Westminster, London, as part of the Bicentenary Conference of the Geological Society and coinciding with the International Polar Year of which there is no mention! This was music inspired by science and not by travel to the continent. The project was documented by blog style online notes and explanations, downloadable images and sound files, and links to associated URLs at Bournemouth University and the Geological Society. As far as travel to the continent goes this was a truly virtual visit, but one that in spite of its English location sought no English inspiration (1)

## **The Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM): Artists to Antarctica**

The importance of this kind of work is widely recognised. Antarctica New Zealand's Artists to Antarctica Programme was created in 1996 following a resolution passed at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting (ATCM) that recommended the 'promotion of understanding and appreciation of the values of Antarctica, in particular its scientific, aesthetic and wilderness values, through... the contribution of writers, artists and musicians' (Antarctica New Zealand 2010)

### **Crossover: 'The soundwalkabout workshop'**

Last year Andrea Polli investigated 'how sound transmission can contribute to the public understanding of climate change within the context of the Poles. How have such transmission-based projects developed specifically in the Arctic and Antarctic, and how do these works create alternative pathways in order to help audiences better understand climate change?' The work combines soundscape recordings and 'sonifications' with audio interviews in the context of the other sound transmission science and art works (Polli 2009)

The crossover came in the form of a soundscape workshop. 'The soundwalkabout workshop sought to expand the interdisciplinary experience beyond interdisciplinary science collaboration to create focused data-gathering interaction between people from many different disciplines and background [sic]. After the soundwalkabout workshop, the group decided to share their listening experiences with the larger community of McMurdo by hosting soundscape listening party [sic] at the local coffeehouse. This concert was highly attended and was standing-room-only.' Soundscapes were regularly posted on the blog *90degreesouth.org* and later by published as an audio CD *Sonic Antarctica*. (ibid, p.6)

### **How composers process**

In his paper 'Sounds of Antarctica: How composers process the natural environment in their music and the impact these conclusions might have for the broader aspect of learning through the art of composition.' Patrick Shepherd points out that 'while science is the predominant activity in Antarctica, there is now a quickly growing body of artistic work, of which music forms a significant part.' Of particular interest is his assertion that 'this study offers a unique insight into the compositional process as it is rare to find a body of work by different composers who have undergone exactly the same experiences so the first question is how unpredictable are the outcomes from an identical stimulus? The second question surrounds the unique experience of going to a place with no indigenous culture, no foliage, little wildlife and a monochrome colour palette - how does sensory deprivation affect creativity?(2009)'

Four composers have travelled to Antarctica on New Zealand Artists-to-Antarctica Fellowships. In exploring individual creative process Shepherd notes the first responses of Cree Brown, Dadson and himself: 'vastly different', 'Nothing prepared me ...', 'What I didn't expect ...' Absence: of sound, Blankness: of imagined experience, Hope: to return; the narratives conform. Farr focused on culture: 'I returned to New Zealand having not only

experienced that, but also a foreign culture, in exactly the same way as I have in the US, in Indonesia, in Australia. There is Scott Base, which is obviously profoundly kiwi, and there is McMurdo Station - five minutes away by road - which is just like being in the US; currency, accents, everything ... there is an overriding Antarctic culture there - an understanding of things they all have in common that are utterly peculiar to Antarctica - such as safety and survival issues, scientific issues, general things you just have to know to exist in a space station-like environment' (ibid, p.263).

The issues around interpretation are fascinating:

'Farr ... hates the idea of expressing landscape in music "in fact I've never been that keen on expressing anything visual in music because I don't think that music exists for that purpose ... I realised that it was the people who have been to Antarctica in the last hundred years that is what I could reflect in my music."

Cree Brown also found that trying to capture the sounds of Antarctic in music was not an easy task, stating "One of the striking aspects of the Antarctic sound world is the apparent incongruity of many sounds when compared to the environment. The massive, majestic icescapes and graceful, sweeping glaciers evoke a music that embodies grand, slow moving, dense and interweaving textures. These characteristics seem to be the antithesis of the sounds that are heard on the continent ... The Weddell seals make sounds that could be confused with sounds from the thirty-year old AKS synthesizer, and even the differing types of winds are often too unsettling to be closely associated with the land and ice forms they embrace ... I had hoped to find sounds whose morphology and spectra I could digitally transform to create abstract sounds that would reflect some of the magnificence of the continent. This would create an expressive link between a real, unaltered and recognisable sound source and more abstract textures. After several attempts, all of which sounded rather contrived, I resorted to using non-Antarctic sound sources for the abstract material, and into this material I reticulated the (mostly) unaltered Antarctic recordings (ibid, p.266)."

Of his own process Shepherd says: 'I also encountered Significant challenges assimilating his experiences, expecting to come away from the ice so filled of inspiration that the Antarctic juices would flow freely. Instead I faced a mental block lasting for around six months during which time I wrote very little music. (ibid, p.266)'

## Conclusion

I have just sent a facebook friend request to Marc-André Bourbonnais, a French composer whom I found online, *one that has responded to the experience of being in Antarctica*. The wilderness brings people together; fragmented, fractured, de-constructed (these are also the adjectives of a continent represented as in melt-down), the early twenty first century is to some extent a time of drifting apart in social space and re-converging in a virtual world of Antarctica is a very real mirror.

**1. SITES CONSULTED DURING THE ANTARCTIC SONATA PROJECT;**

**DR. STEPHEN BELL**

McMurdo Dry Valleys Region, Transantarctic Mountains; NASA Quest

Antarctic Guide to Martian Weathering; Planetary Science Research Discoveries

USGS Locations of streamgages in the Wright Valley, Antarctica; Wyoming Water Science Center

Lake Vanda, Wright Valley, Antarctica; American Society of Limnology and Oceanography

The Dry Valleys of Antarctica; Guillaume & Jennifer Dargaud's Website

Public Domain; Wikipedia entry

Antarctic Photo Library; United States Antarctic Program

The Dry Valleys; Antarctic Connection

Crystallization and Degassing in the Basement Sill, McMurdo Dry Valleys, Antarctica;

Journal of Petrology

Dry Valleys of the Antarctic; Research TV

Bill Philips; Teachers Experiencing Antarctica and the Arctic

Magma Chambers, Dynamics and Differentiation Toward a Grand Unification, Bruce D.

Marsh, John Hopkins University; American Geophysical Union

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Shepherd, P 2009

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