

Antarctica | Musical Images from the Frozen Continent

In the winter of 2003/4 I embarked on an ambitious musical project in Antarctica, having been awarded a joint fellowship from the Arts Council England and the British Antarctic Survey's Artists and Writers Programme. What ensued was, for me, the journey of a lifetime; a profound physical, artistic and emotional experience that had a deeper, more resonant, effect on my life than I could ever have imagined.

I journeyed to far and desolate lands, recorded colonies of penguins and seals, flew to isolated huts deep in the Antarctic Peninsula and smashed through pack ice aboard an ice strengthened ship. I experienced the euphoric highs and the mind-crushing lows of solitude, the overwhelming presence of all who had come and gone together with and the realisation that I was, as a human and an artist, a mere speck on this planet.

The main artistic product of my three-month journey is **Antarctica**, an impressionistic, large-scale electro-acoustic composition, created from an original sound library compiled during my residency. This library comprises field recordings of the many audible aspects of human life, animal life and the environment in Antarctica. Selected sounds were then layered, stacked, collaged and combined to form a rich and complex theatre of sound. **Antarctica**, realised in cinema surround sound, enables the audience to be absorbed into a three-dimensional soundscape portraying both my own responsive emotions and experiences and those of the communities in Antarctica.

My recent compositional output has been concerned with the manipulation and organisation of the intrinsic musical gestures within recordings of found environmental sound and the human voice; extrapolating the musical components within these sound-worlds and presenting them as highly original compositions; considering these elements as complex and rich as any instrument based or computer generated music.

The focus of my many field recordings was to capture and reflect the relationship between the British Antarctic Survey and the continent it embraces, and the life and populations of the area surrounding the Weddell Sea. Under these headings, the natural sounds (wind, sea, weather and wildlife), the human sounds (scientists living and working, boat captains, whalers, 'talking heads' interviews and conversation), the mechanical sounds (machinery, generators, boats, scientific experiments, travel and television), and the phenomenological sounds (whistling rigging, clanking objects, crunching ice floes, musical accidents) were of equal significance.

I awarded these 'samples' the same regard and respect as certain other composers do melodic lines, using the same six essential parameters that govern music: pitch, duration, dynamic, tone, texture and form. However, this simplified analysis concerned itself with moments or overviews, it failed to fully describe the complexity contained within a single sound object, or when a complex electroacoustic sound source borders the elements of pitch and texture.

During my research in Antarctica, through the musical exploration of auditioning the sounds and editing sounds, I found that each day's sound recordings were miniature compositions in themselves, containing complex musical elements, organisation and development. Furthermore, with regards to the listening experience over larger time spans, it was apparent that the temporal trajectory of the sound objects had more to do with morphology than integral

form, presenting concepts of motion, growth, spectral development; sonic densities and structuring; musical gesture.

By focusing on the obvious foreground, the background ambience or the environmental sonic landscape could be overlooked, a composite of which could be regarded as a complex musical event. This is noticeable in the accuracy of the original recording of the 15,000 strong penguin colony at Signy Island, South Orkney Islands. Revealed are multiple layers of foreground and background material, texturally and musically rich: foreground - percussive pebble movement and territorial fight gestures; midground - guttural pulsating calls; rhythmical cells, repeating, interposing, varying, moving around the surround space; background - lyrical calls, sea and wind texture.

Within *Antarctica*, I extend these musical considerations to the quartet of voices I used: Chris - Antarctic Mariner since the 60's and Master of the Royal Research Ship James Clark Ross; Rick - Experienced Antarctic/Arctic dog handler returning after first visit in the 70's; Andy - engineer, returning to Antarctica after his first visit in the 80's, and Sarah - zoologist, embarking on a two and a half year stay in Antarctica. I layered their words and memories of Antarctica (resonating with my own) on top of each other to create counterpoint and polyphony, the listener can then choose to hear the narrative proffered by the language, or the music of its phonetic rhythms and sounds.

The three month residency was a unique privilege, not only to experience the continent and be one of only few who have set foot there, but also to spend the time completely immersed and focused on creating, thinking and writing about my music.

"Antarctica is part documentary, part wildlife experience; an insight into the lives, fears, dreams and wishes of the people who live and work in Antarctica. It is also, most profoundly, one person's reaction to the extraordinary experience of a prolonged stay on the frozen continent. All this is woven into a complex musical web, sometimes like a film soundtrack, sometimes a radio play, sometimes a nature documentary - a voyage of discovery and excitement through one of the last remaining natural places on the planet, where the marks of human society are overwhelmed by the forces of nature. We hear insights into a precious moment where a man recalls sharing a Ginger Nut biscuit with an old sled dog, the extraordinary behaviour of penguins marching around stealing pebbles from each other to make their nests, the even more extraordinary sounds of air expelled from the noses of elephant seals, but above all, one man struggling against the wind, wrestling with the microphones and audio equipment and throwing his whole self into recording and sharing this experience with others." Dr. Tony Myatt. Music Research Centre, York University.

Antarctica: a surround-sound, electro-acoustic composition by Craig Vear is presented on DVD and features:

- Multi-angle visuals (black screen, colour wash, photo montage)
- Dolby 5.1 surround / stereo / Director's commentary

Plus:

- 88 page book containing unique Antarctic images, the composer's Guardian Diaries, detailed descriptions of the composition and recordings, plus transcriptions of the voices used in the composition's 'Vocal Quartets'

- *5 Antarctic Solitudes*. Five new short films created from archive Antarctic film footage
- *76° South*. The composer's video journal
- *Antarctic Sounds*. CD containing Antarctic field recordings

CONTACT antarctica@ev2.co.uk
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