Dr Ian Percy
Website Context and Research

Electroacoustic Composition 5

When a Snake Eats its Own Tail (2007/08) (Score revised 2013) 14'00"
Single Movement for amplified B♭ clarinet, live digital effects and 8-channel tape

When a Snake Eats its Own Tail is a single source, single movement, electroacoustic composition realised from (and composed for) the sounds of the clarinet (including key-clicks, vocalisations and breathing) during 2007. Notation of the live part was edited early in 2008 following the premiere performance. The layout of the score was revised during 2013 when the concrete audio was also remixed and remastered.

Choosing the sonic source as a guide, research led to the savannahs of east Africa where Grenadilla Blackwood (Mpingo) grows, providing the raw material for many of the world's clarinets. Inspired by African orature (ancient tradition where spoken literature is committed to memory) and their cyclic tales of nature and influenced by the soundworld of traditional east African music, this piece was inspired and informed by multiple elements of extra-musical narrative:

Acknowledged as the birthplace of modern man (Homo genus – Homo sapiens), Africa boasts the stunning Mount Kilimanjaro; referred to as the 'House of God' in east African orature. The geometry of the mountain was used to preconceive a topographical formal sketch for this work.

A common African theme is that man was born of reed (or from the reed bed) and the clarinet is a reed instrument: this established a thematic connection between sonic subject matter (clarinet) and compositional method (pitch organisation) along with providing a 'philosophy of form' for the piece and its internal proportions:

All things must begin …
… And man was born of reed …

The journey …
… And man laments the reed …

All things must end …
Perhaps all things return?

Many African languages are referred to as 'tonal' languages (where the pitch of the word denotes its meaning) and this is clearly relative to the timbral variety heard within the distinct registers of the clarinet: Chalumeau, throat, clarino, high and extreme. See Equidistant Scales and Quarter-tones PDF.

East African Bagandan music has no harmonic progression and uses asymmetric internal divisions (units) of repetition within overarching equidistant (and often symmetrical) rhythmic cycles. Asymmetrical division of symmetrical form proved to be an ideal technique for shaping internal proportions and the distribution of micro units and meso forms in this piece.

Traditional African music often uses forms of just intonation, and so it was determined that there should be an intrinsic microtonal element in this work. The pitch organisation for the live part focuses primarily upon equidistant pentatonic scales (the octave split into five equal steps of 2.4 semi-tones):

C – D (plus ⅖) – F (minus ⅕) – G (plus ⅕) – B♭ (minus ⅖) – C

Micro-tonalities and multiphonics conceived with reference to equidistant theory are distributed through virtuosic gestures and melodic statement to evoke reminiscences of the visceral and organic soundworld of traditional east African music wrapped within the composer's individual voice.

When a Snake Eats its Own Tail is a loose combination and translation of a common African theme referring to the cyclic existence of both man and nature. If a snake eats its own tail it forms a circle: All things begin – All things end, but perhaps all things return?

Sound Source and Acknowledgement:

Thanks go to Nicholas Cox (principal clarinettist with the RLPO at that time), who recorded the primary sound material (including excerpts from the live part, passages of spoken text, vocalised articulations and breath sounds) during 2007 in Liverpool Hope University recording studios.

The concrete parts were realised in the composer's home studio and premixed to eight-channel surround sound. The speakers (plus sub-bass LFE and central auxiliary) should be placed in an equidistant circle around the audience (see score preface for further details).

The complete work was premiered during The Cornerstone Festival, at The Great Hall Liverpool Hope University 26th November 2007 (Nicholas Cox: clarinet).

The Snake (Acousmatic) Remixed and Remastered (2025) 14'06"
Three movements composed from the sounds of clarinet for multiple loudspeaker analogue diffusion.

Whilst conducting an extensive portfolio stock-check during 2024/25, the composer revisited this project and was unashamedly delighted to find he still very much valued this music! 2025 ears found that the acoustic and acousmatic sources combined symbiotically and the subtle micro-tonalities felt contemporary, yet refreshingly timeless. It was a pleasure to hear the piece again.

However …

The composer was surprised to find that he had never released an acousmatic version of this work (without the live/acoustic parts). The sonic events are prepared to the highest quality and this is an electroacoustic piece that actually sounds just as good with, or without, the live parts. The composer simply could not choose a favourite, the music seems to remain of equal value in either format.

Pondering further one recalled composing an acousmatic companion piece to this work using some of the same pool of sounds: *Circular Rhythms and Natural Patterns* (2007). Perhaps that had distracted thoughts away from an acousmatic realisation? Although it used some of the same sounds, that piece was an entirely different composition! Anyhow, it simply was a no-brainer …

The nine source files that comprised the concrete parts for the 8-channel version (including the additional LFE low frequency bass track) were remixed into a single stereo file and remastered with all the clarity one can find in 2025 (should one be looking for it). The spoken dialogue and breath sounds from early in the electroacoustic score (this version uses the composer's own vocalisations) was subsumed within the first movement of this concrete mix. Its dramatic influence on the work could not be lost.

Whilst arranging the acousmatic format, the original electroacoustic structure practically dissected itself into three and, very satisfyingly (without manipulated manufacture), one can see the presence of the Golden Ratio in the diminishing lengths of the three movements: Part One is 32 seconds longer than Part Two, which is 32 seconds longer than Part Three (a is to b, what b is to c). How cool!

The three-movement acousmatic version has been evocatively retitled under the banner of *The Snake* (2025), and the composer hopes you enjoy this version as much as he does. Sometimes things are neither better, nor worse. They are simply different!

Contact:

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