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Website Context and Research

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### Acoustic Composition 19

Just Look at All the Places We Call Home – Part One

**The Rocks, Cracks and Craggs** (2002/19)

(Impromptus in Musical Pointillism)

First sketches for this relatively short single movement (impromptus) for string quartet date back to 2002. It was composed as part of an MA Portfolio. The original score was a highly chromatic, but surprisingly lyrical, 12-tone composition, realised with all the exuberant energies of youth in a 'new complexity' style of nested tuplets and rapidly changing time signatures. One had always been fond of the virtuosic textures and material within the music, but the phrases and form were extremely linear and episodic (even after minor revisions in 2004), and so (deeming the score unplayable and unreadable) *A Static Breeze* was **withdrawn for the first time** in 2006. All copies of the work were literally (and rather naively) thrown away (including hard copies) and, as the score had been completed on an old (now defunct) computer, there were no existing digital files of the original score to archive ...

... And that was that ...

... Until ...

In 2009 an ex-lecturer passed on (through a mutual friend) some old UG and MA work that included a hard copy score of *A Static Breeze* along with a floppy disc (yes, a *floppy* disc) containing the original digital files. The composer had just submitted his PhD portfolio and was in the limbo of waiting for the *viva voce* (spoken defence of research) and so spent some of this time revising, rearranging and re-digitising *A Static Breeze*. 2010 revisions were extensive and included elements of recomposition, but primarily concentrated upon reducing the amount of tempo and time changes and diluting the excessive chromatic notation (easier said than done within 12-tone composition). The score was revised again later in 2010, when the (often extreme varieties of) dynamics were adjusted to give the textures more fluidic dynamic shape and form. The rhythms of the parts were re-notated (wherever possible) for a more accessible translation into performance. However, following a difficult (but nonetheless encouraging) abridged performance of the revised *A Static Breeze* in 2011, the composer recognised that the score still needed more editing in order to make legible performance a realistic aim within a reasonable amount of rehearsal time (how did the new complexity composers of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century ever get their pieces performed?), and so *A Static Breeze* was **withdrawn for the second time** in 2012 ...

... And that was that (again) ...

... Until ...

Whilst needing a break from the intensity of orchestral composition (*Sacsayhuaman*) in late 2019, the composer digitally wandered into a folder containing a vast wasteland of incomplete sketches, undeveloped ideas, unused pre-compositional plans and withdrawn scores from the past two decades and managed to successfully rescue one of the pieces (*Ensuén*) over the remarkably short period of just a few weeks (a 'blink of an eye' in the usual timescales of composition). Enthused by this productive endeavour and armed with 17 years of experience since first conceiving *A Static Breeze*, one took on the challenge of trying (just one last time) to make the score more practical for performance. Previous revisions had failed to control this virtuosic beast, but this time the composer was determined to 'rescue the music he had always held a soft spot for' ...

... And so ...

*A Static Breeze* needed a complete overhaul and a radical 'change of luck'. It was decided to rename and reimagine the work in the hope that influential elements of external narrative could provide the essential ingredients that had perhaps been lacking in previous versions. The composer had already begun preliminary planning and sketches (some to an advanced level) for a series of works entitled *Just Look at All the Places We Call Home* (currently a 'work in progress'), and had already conceived the need for an opening movement entitled *The Rocks, Cracks and Craggs*. One immediately recognised the inherent connection the timbral soundworld of this music makes with that environment and the existing textures of the newly named score (the material one was determined to keep) seemed immediately reinvigorated by its new place at the front of this collection.

### **Revisions and Processes:**

2019 revisions first addressed the notation (again) and diluted the complexity (wherever and however possible) (again) without losing the character or integrity of the original music (sometimes things simply 'are what they is'). Some sections were deleted entirely, and additional materials composed. Repeating (self-similar replicating) rhythmic motives were added as 'through-composed' units to instil more tangible threads of musical development and melodic/motivic reminiscence (one must acknowledge the mensural motives and rhythmic canons of Anton Webern here).

The meta-formula for *A Static Breeze* was a preconceived 12-tone row, which was spelt out through resonant harmony in the opening passage of the original score but is never heard in its complete form within this version. The individual sections (the majority of the material that has survived through all the revisions) were composed from self-propagating mutations and variations of rhythmically distinctive pitch class cells derived from that row. The phrases and motifs produced, repeat throughout the individual sections of the quartet (often in rapid succession).

The material develops within the boundaries of the localised sections of the movement through cyclic self-propagation (derived material derives its own material etc.) and so eventually contain notes that seem to have no relationship to the cells from which they came. However, the mutations and contortions retain an inherent and recognisable aural relationship induced by the rhythmic similarities and timbral oppositions.

Revised and recomposed material reacted instinctively to the existing music informed by reflective analysis and guided by the emerging narrative introduced through its new name and place within this collection. External narrative helps the composer to connect with the music on a more emotional and philosophical level and often provides the catalyst to define the eventual micro, meso and macro forms of the piece. The music is not programmatic. The music IS, however, quite exciting ...

This (hopefully final) revision is still a highly virtuosic work with heavily chromatic notation and intricate rhythms to navigate, but the complexity has finally been diluted just enough to enable a suitable interpretation for performance. The only real complexity remaining is the written tempi, which is at the limit of what is possible for pizzicato writing and still includes some 'Quick Draw Magraw' changes from pizzicato to arco, but the piece is written at the speed it was meant to be. Besides, much of the score is written in *molto rubato* (rhythmic freedom) and one can always slow the tempo down for live performance. This is nothing unusual for a composer. One has recordings of the same piece performed by different artists that have radical variations in length and tempo. They still convey the same musical message and one still experiences the same sonic journey (regardless of tempo): Same Journey – Different Weather – Different Light – Different Time ...

Anyhow ...

At these 'dark satanic' speeds (to infer a quote from folkloric poetry), the movement lasts for seven minutes six seconds: 7' 06", which is, as one realised whilst composing this preface, six minutes sixty-six seconds: 6' 66" ...! Given the amount of attention this score has taken to reach its current guise, the length seemed suitable, perhaps even serendipitous ...? One thought (with a grin): "Give to Caesar ..."

**Summation:** Running back again ... And again ... And again ...!

The linear textures of this string quartet primarily explore self-propagating pitch organisation (evolving from specific pitch-rhythm cells), varied repetition and self-similar replication. The boundaries of each 'development' are set within the localised sections of the music. This development (or variation) takes many forms, ranging from simple transposition and retrograde, through to inverted pitch-rhythms with complex tuplets. No musical unit escapes repetition (self-similar replication), although some are mutated almost beyond recognition.

The vertical textures of the score primarily explore motivic canons and forms of canonic imitation (including mensural canons). The individual parts (linear lines) often overlap as they pass across the four instruments in a pizzicato and staccato setting one refers to as musical pointillism (image made of dots). The concept of 12-tone pointillism (or perhaps timbral pointillism) clearly requires recognition of Schoenberg's Klangfarbenmelodie<sup>1</sup>. Timbre and rhythm become as important as pitch within the vertical harmony and textures.

Withdrawn twice and actually discarded until the original digital score was rediscovered on a *floppy* disc (can you believe) during 2009. The composer was taken by the energetic gestures and textures and the excited naivety of the writing, which clearly warranted salvage, but, with its linear form and sporadic localised sections, the work lacked continuity. When viewed in context of the composer's recent portfolio of compositions, this quartet (even with all its revisions) still has some rough and aggressive edges, and pushes the musicians to their limits, but perhaps this is the very aesthetic that directly influences the musical character to which one has always been drawn? *A Static Breeze* (2002/10) was a blast from a compositional past; a style the composer may never revisit, but one that was well worth revising and recomposing ...

Again (and again) ...

*The Rocks, Cracks and Craggs* (2002/19) has retained the raw exuberance of youth present within the original music but is no longer just an abstract musical exercise in 20<sup>th</sup> century 12-tone and atonal techniques. The music has found a new sense of identity and function. 2019 revisions have reinvigorated this movement and dragged the score firmly into the twenty-first century.

From uncomfortable beginnings and through a turbulent relationship, this piece now feels like a comfortable old friend, and the score resumes its rightful place (again) within the composer's portfolio ...

For further information and resources contact the composer at: [contact@ianpercy.me.uk](mailto:contact@ianpercy.me.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> Klangfarbenmelodie: Concept introduced by Arnold Schoenberg in 1911 to describe a single line that is passed across the varying timbres of the ensemble. As defined in *Harmonielehre* (Theory of Harmony) published 1922 (trans. Carter P.421. 1978 ed.). Timbral transformation of a single pitch could be perceived as equivalent to a melodic succession (New Grove Dictionary). The term has become recognised as a common twentieth century practice in which the timbres of successive tones gain melodic importance comparable to that of pitch (Cramer, Alfred: Schoenberg's *Klangfarbenmelodie* – A Principle of Early Atonal Harmony).