

## Shades of Blankness in a Pale Palette

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In January 2004 I journeyed to Antarctica as part of Antarctica New Zealand's education programme and as an Honorary Antarctic Artists Fellow. My proposed study (entitled *Sounds of Antarctica*) involved producing a series of original compositions and related educational resources, many of which have now been completed. With specific reference to excerpts from four of these scores I want to share the holistic experience of how they were inspired, conceived and constructed and how the landscape and history shaped their composition. It is also interesting for a creative artist to trace the development of his or her style and language during the time of creating, and I notice a definite shift moving from complex textures to more simple ones, mirroring, perhaps, the rather minimalist style of both my written responses and paintings.

Music and the visual arts have always been intrinsically linked. Terms such as colour, shade, texture, harmony, and tone, for example, illustrate how commonly the two describe their attributes. Paul Gauguin was very aware of the connections between art and music when he stated in a letter of 1899 "*Think of the musical role which colour will henceforth play in modern painting. Colour, which vibrates just like music, is able to attain what is most general and yet most elusive in nature namely its inner force.*" There are many instances where composers have given keys colours to try to explain their expressive qualities (Beethoven once described B minor as being black) through to extreme cases in which instruments have been invented based on the relationship between colour and sound, such as the Rimington Colour Organ and the clavilux. Rimsky-Korsakov and Scriabin drew up a table of colours as they perceived them relating to specific keys and tonality (Scholes (1984) p. 204), perhaps obviated in the atonalism of contemporary music except for the fact that many works, mine included, tend to be written without a key signature, therefore visually, at least, suggesting "white" as prescribed by Rimsky-Korsakov. Scriabin also promulgated a synesthetic approach to art and music, most notably in his symphony *Prometheus*, and it is this "joined sensation" that has become such a central part of my creative work.

The idea that the association between colour and sound could be proven by the mathematical statement of physical fact was raised by Sir Isaac Newton in his treatise *Opticks* (1704). Newton stated that white light is a blending of all the colours, and, analyzing it spectroscopically, identified the seven colours of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Newton proceeded to draw comparisons with the seven different notes of the diatonic scale. These analogies were "based on the breadth of the seven colour-bands in the spectrum and the seven string lengths required to produce the scale" (Scholes, 1984). Maurice de Sausmarez (1964) states that "colour sensation is differentiated into three essential characteristics: hue, tone and chroma. That white is the absorption and sum of all coloured light" (p.80). In my Antarctic work I have always been very conscious that white has the dual property of reflecting and absorbing and this is echoed in my poem *white* (January 2004) within the lines:

*a blank canvas  
in blanched opaque hues  
drained of colour  
of life*

Heading off to The Ice on a USAAF Starlifter I expected to be filled with inspiration on my return and my artistic juices to be flowing. This sense of purpose is reminiscent of when Rainer Maria Rilke asked Auguste Rodin how he would “describe the creative process from its inception, Rodin replied ‘First I experience an intense feeling, which gradually becomes more concrete and urges me to give it plastic shape. Then I proceed to plan and design. At last, when it comes to execution, I once more abandon myself to feeling, which may prompt me to modify my plan’” (Itten, 1970, p. 28). I ended up writing little of any significance musically related to my trip for the rest of 2004. Looking back, it was not what is usually referred to as “writer’s block” although it felt like it at the time. If anything, it was the complete opposite – absolute saturation. At that time, words and visual expression took over. Sometimes words were the best way of saying what I felt and had experienced, while at others it was the freedom of the sweeping brushstroke. “A change is as good as a rest” is an aphorism very apposite to my work following my trip to Antarctica.

How does one create the sense of awe and space that one is confronted with on The Ice without being either obvious or trite? What are the challenges the creative artist faces in a place where humans are unwelcome and there is very little stimulation for the senses? How many musical tone-colours are there for white? It hits you in the face the second you step out of the plane – an endless vista where spatial relationships mean little and much of the natural colouration of our world is absent. There are no buildings or trees from which to gain accurate perspective (and, hence, distance) and often it can be difficult (in a relatively small downfall of snow, impossible) to distinguish terra firma from sky. It is an immediate reality for the artist how s/he is to draw inspiration from a place where sensory deprivation is the norm and life appears in monochrome. That was something I was not prepared for and which became a significant factor in my work on my return. I fully expected Antarctica to fill me artistically, but in a land devoid of vegetation, perspective, colour and even access to the outside world that process took a long time. Living in a monochrome world of essentially black and white with a tinge of blue certainly pares down your options in the visual field. On many levels the continent takes, it rarely gives.

### *katabatic*



[Right-click this link to download the MP3 Audio, 800KB](#), is a brief musical interpretation of this experience. *katabatic* is a 30 second microscore written for the Auckland-based ensemble 175East and, in a sense, it got my artistic juices running, requiring little structural consideration beyond depicting a quick blast of icy air, easily with wind instruments, rapid trills, flutter tongues and key rattles. It is, because of its length (which was a stipulation by the ensemble for a programme featuring a number of such microscores) extremely concise and somewhat underdeveloped, but captures the rawness and “feel” of a katabatic wind. It was written in a short period of time and originally used graphic notation with pencil and paper though was *immediately transferred across to computer* [\[Download the PDF Score\]](#). It is a catalogue of effects and, as such, is not easily written in the “building block” way I usually write when

using the computer. I needed to write freehand to achieve what I really wanted and it was at this point I began to realize the limitations that composing at a computer presents. Consequently, I have reverted more and more to sketching ideas on paper first, and then transferring them across to the computer when the ideas are virtually fully formed.

In my Antarctic music, I can see a simplicity of language emerging that I would like to think is neither naïve nor eclectic. I have undertaken much extra-musical research, material that contributes to the work but is not present in the music itself. In some of the “still” sections of music I am reminded of the swan, graceful on the surface but with much activity beneath the surface. This “less-notes-per-square-inch” phase may well be likened to a haiku, encapsulating deep thought in fewer and perhaps more enigmatic words. In terms of musical development it may well be closer akin to a neurological disorder where the nerve cells break down and the ever-increasing tremors ultimately result in paralysis. Only time will tell whether I move further into this Zen-like approach.

### *meditation ii*



[Right-click this link to download the MP3 Audio, 5.3MB\]](#) (2005) is a through-composed response to my sitting on a rock gazing out across the Ross Sea ice shelf for hours on end. It truly captures that sense of spaciousness with wide register gaps and improvisatory notation. Paul Cézanne said of himself: “Je vais au développement logique de ce que je vois dans la nature” (I proceed to a logical development of what I see in nature) (de Sausmarez, 1964, p.65), and it is this very nature that I attempted to capture in the cold, harmonic colours, the harmony either jarringly tight in the upper register or reliant on the translucent quality of fourths and fifths.

Another dimension of the study of Antarctica is the historical context, which pervades much of the literature on Antarctica, particularly the “Heroic Age” of Antarctic exploration. Early last century the efforts of explorers like Robert Scott, Ernest Shackleton and Douglas Mawson ensured Antarctica’s place in the history books. For New Zealanders that historical link took another tragic turn when Air New Zealand Flight 901 crashed into Mount Erebus on 28 November 1979, killing all 257 people aboard. While I was visiting Antarctica, a door from the plane was found and the emotional ripple went right through Scott and McMurdo Bases.

The huts of Scott and Shackleton have huge historical significance and both have found their way into my work, both figuratively and in the abstract. It was the explorer Shackleton who summed it up succinctly when he talked of Polar exploration as being not an outward journey but one within oneself. This was key to my experience. This internal/external dialogue was behind my painting *Anthrax Alley, Terra Nova Hut* (2005), a bright blue light dominating a dark, dingy corner of Scott’s hut which, incidentally, contains anthrax thought to have been brought down to Antarctica by one of the ponies. The intense colour/light throws the interior into starker relief and one’s eye is immediately drawn to the intense blue. Nothing is discernable through the window, and you are merely aware of its intensity and that it places you in the interior while a bright exterior awaits outside. The blue that pervades the light and landscape of Antarctica is echoed by Itten (1970) when he states that “blue is a power like that of nature in winter, when all germination and growth is hidden in darkness and silence.

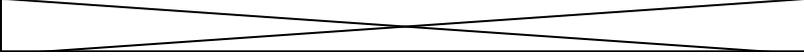
Blue is always shadowy, and tends in its greatest glory to darkness. It is an intangible nothing, and yet present as the transparent atmosphere” (p.88).

My poem *away across the ice, the boys come home* (2004) echoes what many visitors to the historic huts have experienced, that at any moment the young men will reappear from the white vastness to reclaim the socks hanging from the empty beds and break open the cans of unopened food. The final stanza encapsulates this in a rather throwaway, unresolved statement:

*the boys laugh  
their heads thrown back  
forever coming home*

I used this text as the basis for the second of *three antarctic sketches*

 [Right-click this link to download the MP3 Audio, 2MB](#)] (2005) for violin and ‘cello, which shares the same title. I mirror Messiaen’s *Danse de la fureur, pour les sept trompettes* from *Quartet for the End of Time*, with both instruments playing in unison in meandering, uneven phrases. The melody is modal, the character reminiscent of quick plainsong and the effect rather creepy. Offsetting this is the raw brutality of *Skua Dance*

 [Right-click this link to download the MP3 Audio, 2.9MB](#)] [[Download the Skua Dance PDF score extract, 129KB](#)], the third movement of the work. The two instruments work against each other, struggling for supremacy. This is as much a visual piece as an aural one, with both players using vigorous bowing and pizzicato and strongly accentuated off-beats. The skuas are the nemesis of the penguin, large, coarse brown sea birds hovering over the penguin colony waiting for the chance to strike, plucking a chick away from an unsuspecting parent.

A project on Antarctica would not be complete without penguins. Any discussion about Antarctica, be it formal or informal, usually involves this most endearing of birds. I spent several days at Cape Royds where a large colony of over 30,000 birds bark their staccato calls every minute of the day, which, by 3am, becomes a lot less endearing. It is an amazing experience to be amongst these creatures, and their cumbersome appearance on land belies their grace, speed and agility in the water. They are incredibly social creatures and watching their community was a microcosm of our world – it’s all there in great abundance: the perpetual struggle involving life, sex and death. In *adeliesong*

 [Right-click this link to download the MP3 Audio, 2.8MB](#)] for two clarinets, I use the additive rhythms of the adelic penguins calling to one another as the basis of the work. I also instruct the performers to face each other, in much the same way as the birds do. The keytaps and breath noises depict the scuffling of their claws

In the acrylic *Penguin Carcass* (2006) my response was very Francis Baconish, with raw reds and umbers forming a central block, with a further harsh juxtaposition of the white cruciform

wings against the black rock. Expressionist though this might at first appear it is fairly accurate representation of how these stressed and strafed carcasses do appear – not much was added by the artist in this painting. Antarctica is littered with the remnants of seals and penguins because nothing really decays there in the traditional sense of the word. In the Dry Valleys, for instance, it hasn't rained in more than 30,000 years, making it drier than the Sahara Desert and almost impossible to carbon date the remains of the animals because they erode rather than rot.

As I have alluded to earlier, the whole experience of the trip had such a profound effect that it was difficult for me to write anything meaningful for many months. The solution came from a very unusual source. Science was a huge help, the scientific literature explaining Antarctica in terms other than feelings and colours and in ways, I admit, utterly foreign to me. Yet from that, I was able to consider form, structure and an analytical approach that was both stimulating and more true to the essence of the experience of being in Antarctica. I was able to move away from an instinctive, aesthetic reaction and focus more on scientific ideas and concepts, developing more “concrete” works based on microviews rather than majestic vistas. This is something which de Saumarez (1964) remarks on – “Cézanne in the nineteenth century said, ‘Art is a construction parallel to Nature’; some twentieth-century artists have implied that it may also be a construction parallel to science” (p.65).

It is through science and the study of a distant, frozen, inhospitable land that my creativity has, paradoxically, moved into a very fertile stage. Perhaps the adage “less is more” best describes my Antarctic experience and the ways in which it has translated into my musical language and compositional style.

## **Recordings**

*katabatic* (2004) for chamber ensemble. 175East, conductor Hamish McKeich  
*meditation ii* (2005) for piano. Patrick Shepherd, piano (live performance)  
*three antarctic sketches* (2005) for violin and cello (movements 2 & 3). Aoraki Duo (Kerry Martin, violin; Daniel Morris, violoncello)  
*adeliesong* (2005) for two clarinets. Patrick Shepherd, clarinet (live performance)

## **Paintings**

[“Anthrax Alley”, Terra Nova Hut](#) (2005). Acrylic on canvas; 30” x 40”  
[Penguin Carcass](#) (2006). Acrylic on canvas; 30” x 40”

## **Poetry**

[whitepoem](#) (2004)  
[away across the ice, the boys come home](#) (2004)

## **References**

**de Saumarez, M.** (1964). *Basic design: the dynamics of visual form*. London, Reinhold Publishing.  
Itten, J. (1970). *The Elements of Colour*. New York, John Wiley & Sons

Scholes, P.A. (1984). *Oxford Companion to Music* (10th ed.). Oxford, Oxford University Press.

## Web sites

[www.antarcticanz.govt.nz](http://www.antarcticanz.govt.nz)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Falcon\\_Scott](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Falcon_Scott)

<http://www.south-pole.com>

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## Biography



Patrick Shepherd is a senior lecturer at Canterbury University and is active as a conductor, composer and teacher. He holds degrees from the universities of Manchester (BMus (Hons)), London (MMus) and Canterbury (DMus), as well as a Fellowship and a Licentiate in Composition from Trinity College, London. He is a regular CD and concert reviewer for The Press.