



Brian Gray

Arranger, Composer

United States (USA), Erie, Pennsylvania

About the artist

Brian S. Gray is a self-taught musician / composer. He also has an interest in amphibians and reptiles, thus, many of his compositions have herpetological titles. Brian Gray started playing guitar when he was 13. He became interested in classical guitar and composition while in high school. Several of his herpetological publications can be downloaded at: http://cnah.org/cnah_pdf.asp

About the piece



Title:	The Serpentes Preludes Part Two
Composer:	Gray, Brian
Licence:	Copyright © 2009 Brian Gray
Publisher:	Gray, Brian S.
Instrumentation:	Piano solo
Style:	Classical

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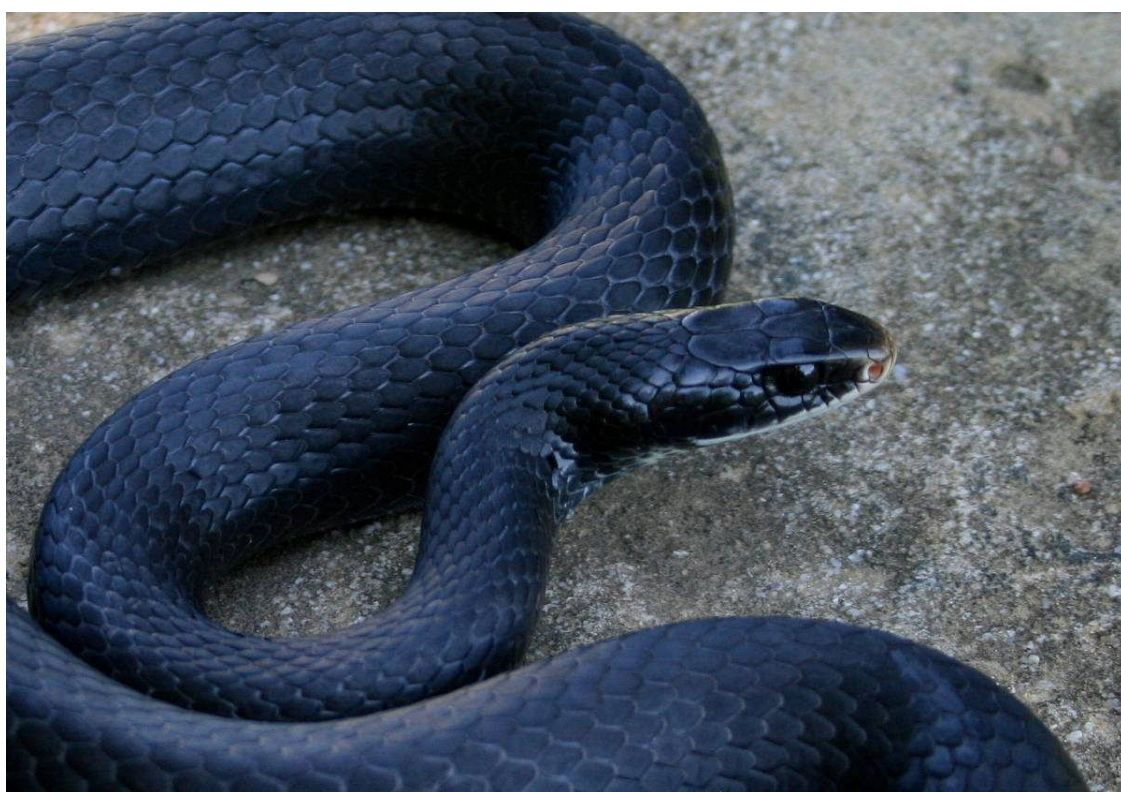
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The Serpentes Preludes: Twenty-four preludes for piano

Composed

By

Brian S. Gray



PART TWO

,

The Serpentes Preludes:
Twenty-four preludes for piano
By
Brian S. Gray

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Printed in the United States of America

Front cover image of an Eastern Racer (*Coluber constrictor*) by Brian S. Gray.

For Declan Gray.

Introduction

From an early age (at least 11 or 12 years old), snakes and music have been an integral part of my life; however, the attention I have paid these two pursuits has been independent of one another, until now. As far as I'm aware, snakes have not inspired too many compositions in the classical piano repertoire. Snakes have, however, appeared as subjects in a variety of musical styles. The Seri Indians of Sonora, Mexico are known to have sung songs containing references to Rattlesnakes and Coachwhip snakes (Nabhan, 2003). Both the Pueblo and the Hopi Indians of the southwestern United States used snakes in rain dances (Morris and Morris, 1965). Further examples can be found in the blues of the 1920s. For example, guitarist Lonnie Johnson performed and recorded Victoria Spivey's Garter Snake Blues, and Blind Lemon Jefferson "cut" Black Snake Moan. There are other examples in bluegrass and other genres that could be cited. Incidentally, the snake has inspired the naming of at least one instrument, a 16th century cornett. This brass instrument was called a serpent because of its snake-like curves. But for now, however, we'll return to the works contained herein. As a musician (classical guitarist), I decided that if flowers could inspire Mauro Giuliani's Opus 46: *Choix Mes Fleurs Chéries ou Le Bouquet Emblématique* (Choice of My Dear Flowers or The Emblematic Bouquet), why couldn't snakes, with their many fascinating characteristics and behaviors, inspire me to compose some short piano pieces? The twenty-four *Serpentes Preludes* are the fruit of that inspiration. I chose the piano because it is an instrument for which, although I don't play, I enjoy listening to and wish I could play.

Snakes are among the most misunderstood, underappreciated, and disliked of animals, and I'm certain there are many who would raise an eyebrow at the idea of dedicating musical compositions to them. Snakes are, for the most part, deaf to most airborne sounds after all, and will never hear a note of them! The cobra doesn't hear the snake charmer's flute, but instead follows his swaying motions. While these pieces may not be enjoyed by members of the suborder *Serpentes*, it is my hope that the performers and their audiences will be inspired to learn more about the snakes for which these works are dedicated. Snakes benefit us in many ways. For instance, rodent-eating species benefit farmers by consuming mice and rats, which feed upon crops. Even the venomous

species are important to us; by studying their complex venoms, researchers are better able to develop new medications—for instance, those for the regulation of blood pressure, treatment of osteoporosis, or the development of blood thinners and analgesics.

The following quote is in Barbara Froom's *The Snakes of Canada*. I have included it here, as I think it makes quite clear one more reason why we should preserve not just snakes, but all wildlife.

“The beauty and genius of a work of art may be reconceived, though its material expressions be destroyed; a vanished harmony may yet again inspire the composer, but when the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another heaven and another earth must pass before such a one can be again.”

Charles Wm. Beebe



Ringneck Snake, *Diadophis punctatus* (see *Serpentes Prelude* No. 3). Photograph by Brian S. Gray.

Methods

I have used characteristics of each species (e.g., number and type of dorsal scales) to set certain parameters (e.g., number of measures, key, tempo, etc.) of each prelude. I have also included a brief “biography” of each featured serpent in the discussion section. For those who wish to seek more information on these fascinating animals, I suggest the works listed in the bibliography that follows this introduction.

As noted above, each of the Preludes is dedicated to a species of snake; the first twelve are New World species, whereas the last twelve are Old World species. Key, tempo, time signature, and length (number of measures) were determined as follows:

Key was determined by the first letter in the species’ generic (genus) name. In biological nomenclature, a scientific name is made up of two (sometimes three) parts. The first part represents the genus the species is assigned to. A genus is a group of species that share certain characteristics. For example, humans are in the genus *Homo*. The second part is the specific or species name; for us humans, our species is *sapiens*, therefore we are *Homo sapiens*. No other species has this two-part combination. In the case of genera (plural of genus) that begin with H, such as *Heterodon*, I follow German nomenclature, where H = B natural. Also, in the twenty-fourth prelude, *Xenopeltis unicolor*, X = any key.

Dorsal scale type was used to determine whether a prelude was to be in a major or minor key as follows: if the species has smooth scales, the prelude was to be in a major key; if the scales are keeled, then the key was minor.

Meter was chosen based on whether the anal plate was single or divided. The anal plate is a scale located ventrally near the base of the tail and covering the cloaca. If the scale is single, a triple or compound meter was chosen ($\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{6}{8}$); if it is divided, a duple or quadruple meter was chosen ($\frac{2}{4}$ or $\frac{4}{4}$).

Tempo was based on the number of ventral scales reported for the species. The ventral scales are wider than long and occur on the belly from behind the head to the base of the tail. In most cases I chose the lowest reported number. In two cases (Preludes No. 19: *Elaphe rufodorsata* and No. 21: *Dendroaspis jamesoni*) there are two tempos; the

faster represents the number of ventral scales, whereas the slower tempo represents the number of subcaudal scales.

The length of each prelude (number of measures) was dependent upon the reported number of dorsal scale rows at midbody. The imbricate scales of the body are arranged in rows, and are usually counted diagonally from one side of the body to the other.

To illustrate the process I will use Prelude No. 1: *Coluber constrictor* as an example. The first letter in the genus name (*Coluber*) is C, therefore the key is C. Moreover, *Coluber constrictor* has smooth scales, so not only is Prelude No. 1 in the key of C, but in C major. The anal plate in this species is divided, and therefore the time signature chosen was $\frac{4}{4}$. The number of ventral scales in *C. constrictor* is reported as 141-189, thus the chosen tempo was 141 quarter notes per minute. The number of dorsal scale rows at midbody in *C. constrictor* is 17, and therefore Prelude No. 1 is seventeen measures long.

The only exception to the above rules (Life would be boring without exceptions!) is Prelude No. 24: *Xenopeltis unicolor*, which was composed at the composer's whim.

I have left the fingerings for each Prelude up to the performer; as a classical guitarist, I have to admit my ignorance of "proper" piano fingering. In addition, dynamics and embellishments were kept to a minimum in most of the pieces and are left to the performer's inclinations. I encourage the performer of these works to play and express them as they feel led. The Preludes as notated here are meant as detailed but flexible outlines, and it is you, the performer, who provides them with life and emotions.

The common and scientific names for the new world species follow those given in Collins and Taggart (2009).

Discussion

Old World Species

Prelude No. 13: *Causus bilineatus* (Two-striped Snake) This venomous African species is found in moist savanna and forested areas. It feeds on frogs and toads. This is a simple little prelude in C minor and should not be difficult to play.

Prelude No. 14: *Eryx conica* (Chain Sand Boa) This nocturnal, small boa is both timid and shy. Like almost all snakes, it usually chooses to avoid confrontation with humans. If approached, it may bury itself in the sand or coil into a “ball.” It feeds on rats and mice, which are notorious for pilfering stored grains and other foods.

This prelude was originally composed for guitar, and in this arrangement for piano, I have tried not to stray too far from the original. I hope it is as fun to play on the piano as it is on the guitar.

Prelude No. 15: *Echis carinatus* (Saw-scaled Viper) This venomous snake is found in northern Africa and the Middle East. The scales on the sides of the body are strongly keeled and serrated, and when threatened, this species rubs coils of its body together to produce a rasping sound. This sound is meant to serve as a warning to would-be predators, and large animals (humans included) that may accidentally step on this well camouflaged snake. Echistatin from the venom of this snake may serve as a potential new drug for the treatment of osteoporosis.

The bass line for this prelude was adapted from a guitar piece I wrote; the melody, played in octaves, was added for this Prelude.

Prelude No. 16: *Dispholidus typus* (Boomslang) Despite the bad reputation usually ascribed to the Boomslang, this highly venomous African snake is shy. Like most snakes, the Boomslang will usually only attempt to bite if handled. Its fangs are located on the posterior of the upper jaw, and are mostly used to subdue chameleons and other lizards.

This is one of a few sexually dichromatic species of snake; males are most often greenish in color, while females are usually a shade of brown.

Although this piece was not originally composed for guitar, it is not too difficult to imagine it being played on that instrument. Due to the fast tempo (164 bpm), care should be taken in measure 15, so that the sixteenth note triplets are played evenly.

Prelude No. 17: *Elapsoidea boulengeri* (Zambezi Garter Snake) This African species is not directly related to the New World Garter Snakes (*Thamnophis* spp.), and unlike them, it is mildly venomous. It is found in savannahs, where it is content hunting lizards, other snakes, and frogs. It is named after the Belgian-born herpetologist George A. Boulenger (1858-1937).

Prelude No. 17 is another piece I originally composed for guitar (originally in C major). The piano version presented here is a faithful arrangement of the original. This Prelude shouldn't present any difficulties.

Prelude No. 18: *Gloydius himalayanus* (Himalayan Pit Viper) This mountain-dwelling snake is found in the Himalaya Mountains of India and Pakistan, and holds the elevation record for a snake of 5,000 meters. As for its appetite, it has a predilection for lizards. The arpeggios in measures 3 and 4, and also 7 and 8, represent *Gloydius himalayanus* scaling the mountainsides.

Prelude No. 19: *Elaphe rufodorsata* (Redback Rat Snake) This harmless, small, semi-aquatic snake from eastern China and Korea is found in rice fields, ponds, streams, and swamps. It is an excellent swimmer, and if approached on land usually retreats to the water and submerges as a means of escape.

The adagio should be played at 77 bpm, which is within the lower range of subcaudal scale count in this species.

Prelude No. 20: *Aparallactus capensis* (Cape Centipede Eater) This African rear-fanged snake frequents termite mounds in search of its favorite food—centipedes. With a

black head and neck collar and tan body color, it superficially resembles North American Crown Snakes (*Tantilla* spp.), which also happen to feed on centipedes.

This Prelude is a modification of an arpeggio study I composed for guitar, and should be played with this in mind. Let the notes of the arpeggios overlap.

Prelude No. 21: *Dendroaspis jamesoni* (Jameson's Mamba) The Jameson's Mamba is found in forests of west and central Africa. It is less familiar than its relative, the Black Mamba. It is reported to be shy and non-aggressive, most often fleeing when encountered.

This is a simple prelude that should be playable and enjoyed by even moderate level pianists. It also could easily be arranged for, and played on, guitar.

Prelude No. 22: *Bitis nasicornis* (Rhinceros Viper) A very stout and colorful snake of Africa. The colors and geometric pattern of *Bitis nasicornis* rival the vivid and magnificent masterpieces of Picasso, Gauguin, and Monet. Its venom has been used in studies regarding coronary blood flow and blood pressure, and may someday be used in medicines to help people.

This prelude is a demanding piece for the left hand. Care should be taken so that the melody in the treble stands out over the bass.

Prelude No. 23: *Deinagkistrodon acutus* (Hundred-Pace Viper) *Deinagkistrodon acutus* is found in mountainous areas of China. It is believed that if a person is bitten, they can only walk 100 paces before succumbing to the venom. While this is a dangerous snake, they are usually not aggressive and only bite if provoked.

The tempo (quarter note = 157) of this prelude is optional; if desired it may be played slower at 100 bpm, thus representing the 100 paces.

Prelude No. 24: *Xenopeltis unicolor* (Sunbeam Snake) The Sunbeam Snake is found in Southeast Asia. It gets its name from the iridescence of its smooth and shiny scales. It is a secretive and retiring species that feeds on rodents, amphibians, and other snakes.

As mentioned above, this Prelude was exempt from the rules used to set the parameters of the other Preludes. It was originally a guitar piece I wrote in 1995; the arrangement here is an extended version of the original.

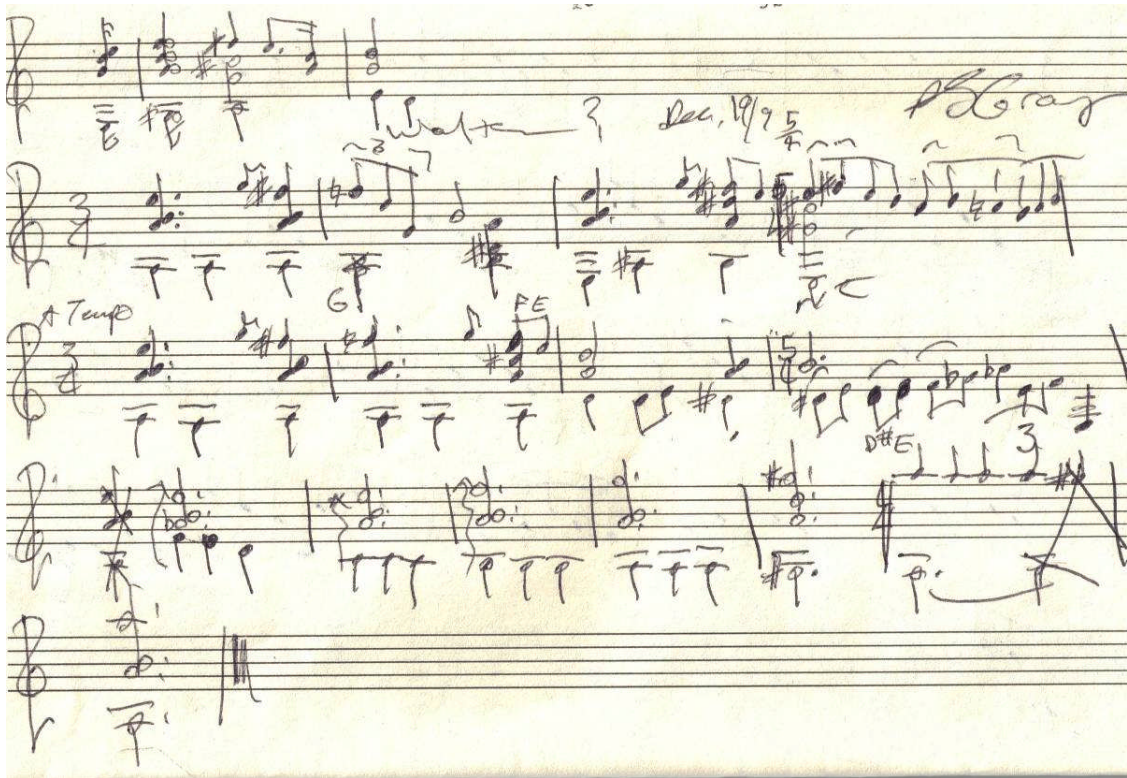
I wish to thank my mother, Marlene Gray, for her continued support and encouragement of my musical interests, and also for her tolerance in years past of the many snakes I've kept. Thanks are also due to Jeff Beane for suggesting corrections and comments that improved the manuscript. In addition to being inspired by and dedicated to snakes, the following twenty-four Preludes are also a tribute to the composers whose works have inspired and influenced me. To list every one of them would be a book in itself! So in the name of brevity I'll just list the main influences: Dionisio Aquado, Johann Sebastian Bach, Ludwig van Beethoven, Frederic Chopin, Mauro Giuliani, Franz Liszt, Heitor Villa Lobos, Niccolò Paganini, Franz Schubert, Fernando Sor, and Georg Phillip Telemann. Joseph T. Collins added his Irish tenor to the editorial task of reviewing this work.

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The original version of Prelude 24 was this fifteen measure “waltz” composed for guitar 19 December 1995.

Serpentes Prelude No.13

Causus bilineatus

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 121

Piano

f

f

5

mp

mp

10

mf *mp* *mf*

14

ff

ff

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Serpentes Prelude No.14

Eryx conica

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 162$

Piano

4

8

11

mf

mp

mf

mf

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15

18

22

mp

26

32

37

rit. 41 *a tempo*

45 *mf*

49 *mp*

Serpentes Prelude No. 15

Echis carinatus

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 132

Piano

mf

5

9

f

13

mf

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Serpentes Prelude No. 16

Dispholidus typus

Brian S. Gray

perform at a slithering pace ♩ = 164

Piano

4

7

10

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14

15

16

rit.

Serpentes Prelude No. 17

Elapsoidea boulengeri

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 138$

Piano

f

5

10

rit.

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Serpentes Prelude No. 18

Gloydus himalayanus

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 147$

Piano

mf

5

mp

9

p

14

mf

rit.

19

a tempo

p

The musical score is written for piano in 3/4 time. It begins with a tempo marking of 147 bpm. The key signature has two flats. The score is divided into five systems. The first system starts with a piano (Piano) instruction and a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. It includes a triplet in the right hand. The second system starts at measure 5 with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The third system starts at measure 9 with a piano (p) dynamic. The fourth system starts at measure 14 with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic and includes a trill (tr) in the right hand. The fifth system starts at measure 19 with a ritardando (rit.) marking and ends with a piano (p) dynamic. The piece concludes with a final chord.

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Serpentes Prelude No. 19

Elaphe rufodorsata

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 154

Piano

6

10

14

18

Adagio

f *mf* *f* *mf* *ff*

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Serpentes Prelude No. 20

Aparallactus capensis

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 140$

Piano

mf

4

7

10

14

mp

p

mp

p

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Serpentes Prelude No. 21

Dendroaspis jamesoni

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 204$

Piano

p

6

f

11

Moderato ($\text{♩} = \text{c. } 91$)

mf *mp* *p*

mf *mp*

17

mf *sf*

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Serpentes Prelude No. 22

Bitis nasicornis

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 117$

Piano

f *mf*

4

7

10

mp

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30

30

f sfz f mf

33

sfz mp f

sfz mp

rit.

38

sfz mp f ff

sfz mp f ff

Serpentes Prelude No. 23

Deinagkistrodon acutus

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 157

Piano

p

sfz mp

mf

f sfz mf sfz mf

p mf p mf

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18

f

fff

Serpentes Prelude No. 24

Xenopeltis unicolor

Brian S. Bray

♩ = 130

Piano

6

11

17

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23

28

33

38

42

