



# 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](http://cnah.org/cnah_pdf.asp)

## About the piece



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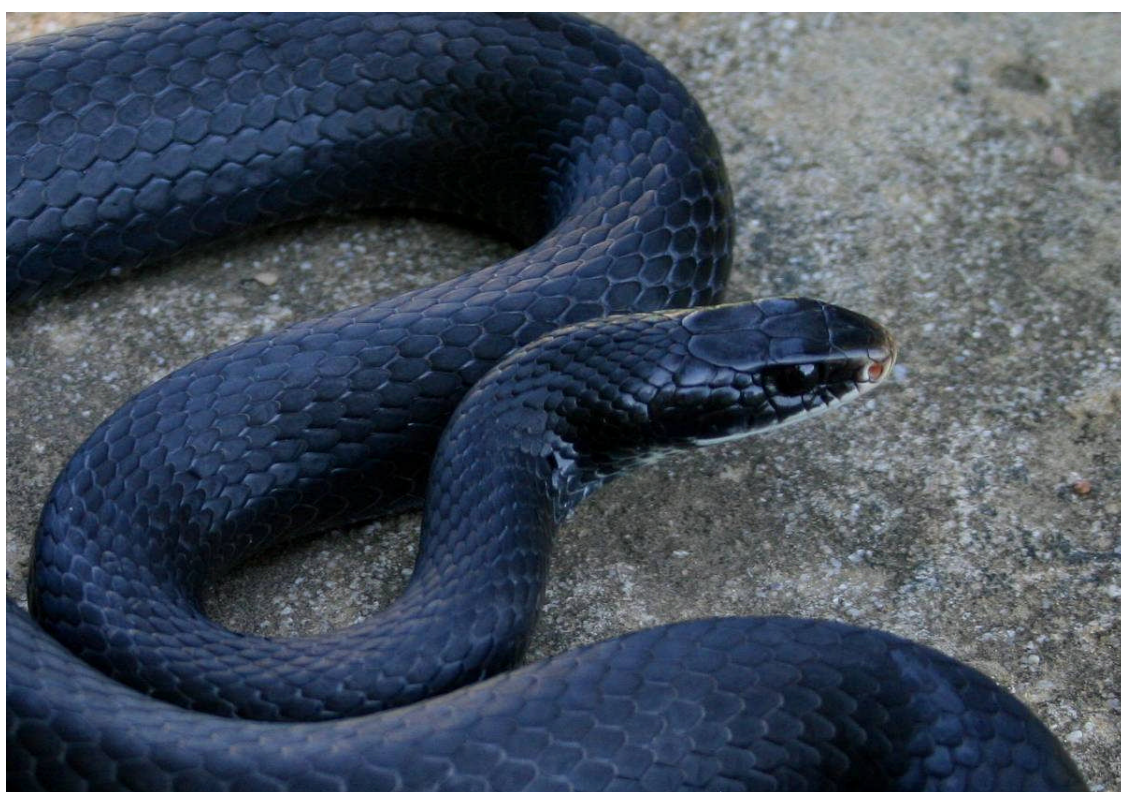
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**The Serpentes Preludes: Twenty-four preludes for piano**

**Composed**

**By**

**Brian S. Gray**



**PART ONE**



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

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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

### New World Species

**Prelude No. 1: *Coluber constrictor* (Eastern Racer)** Ditmars (1936) described North American racers as “slim and graceful, of large size, and capable of extreme activity...” Although they are quick (ca. 4 mph), they are not the fastest; this title goes to the Black Mamba (*Dendroaspis polylepis*) of Africa, which can attain a maximum speed of ca. 7 mph.

This prelude should be played with the right hand triplets imitating a Racer gracefully slithering through grasses, with its head up, occasionally pausing (measures 10-11) to look around for possible prey.

**Prelude No.2: *Clonophis kirtlandii* (Kirtland’s Snake)** This small “water snake” of the Midwestern United States has an orange reddish belly and a brownish dorsum with faint dark blotches. It is found primarily in wet meadows, and also in parks and urban areas. It is named after nineteenth century Ohio naturalist Jared Potter Kirtland (1793-1877). As a defensive mechanism, this harmless snake will flatten itself dorsoventrally, making it appear larger and more threatening.

The only foreseeable difficulty in this Prelude is playing the quarter note triplets in the treble against the straight eighth notes in the bass (e.g., measures 1-3).

**Prelude No.3: *Diadophis punctatus* (Ringneck Snake)** This gentle little snake is widespread in wooded areas of the United States. It gets its common name from the light colored (usually cream, yellow, or orange) collar around its neck. Its belly is usually bright yellow, orange, or red and contrasts with the slate-colored dorsal surface. It is fond of salamanders and earthworms. It is a gregarious species, and sometimes half a dozen will share the same cover object.

This prelude should not be too difficult to master, as long as it is initially practiced at a somewhat slower tempo, and gradually building up to the recommended tempo.

**Prelude No.4: *Agkistrodon contortrix* (Copperhead)** The Copperhead is one of North America's venomous pit vipers. The pit is located between the eye and nostril and is sensitive to infrared radiation (heat), allowing the snake to detect warm-blooded prey in the dark. Its venom has been instrumental in the development of a new drug for the treatment of hypertension.

My fondness for the violin is particularly evident in this Prelude, and serves as a petite tribute to the Italian violin virtuoso Niccolò Paganini.

**Prelude No. 5: *Gyalopion canum* (Western Hooknose Snake)** Most of this snake's life is spent underground. Using its upturned snout, it burrows into the soil to pass away the day. At night it may surface to hunt its prey of spiders, scorpions, and other invertebrates. The triads in the bass of measures 7 and 8 add a slight jazzy feel to this prelude. On the third beat in these measures, make sure to play the triads in the bass staccato.

**Prelude No.6: *Heterodon platirhinos* (Eastern Hognose Snake)** This North American snake plays 'possum as well as, or even better than, the marsupial for which the act of playing dead is usually attributed. If molested, this snake will first try to bluff the attacker by spreading the anterior part of its body, much like a cobra, and with mouth closed will "strike" (unlike the cobra, the Hognose Snake is essentially harmless). If this performance fails, the snake rolls onto its back, and with open mouth and tongue dangling out, plays dead. It even releases secretions from scent glands near the cloaca which makes the snake smell like it's dead!

This prelude is just as much a tribute to Johann Sebastian Bach as it is to the Hognose Snake. The syncopated fugue-like opening was composed with Bach in mind, as were measures 14–16, which pay homage to Bach's Prelude in C minor from book 1 of the Well-tempered Clavier (BWV 847).

**Prelude No. 7: *Farancia abacura* (Mud Snake)** The Mud Snake is an inhabitant of swamps, bogs, and stagnant areas of streams; it feeds primarily on salamanders and in particular on *Amphiuma*, a type of salamander. It has a spine on the tip of its tail, which

in days of old was thought to be a stinger. This of course is false; the keratinous spine is completely harmless and cannot penetrate skin.

Another prelude inspired by Bach's compositions, especially his short preludes. In this Prelude, I used a whole tone scale (C, D, E, G flat, A flat, B flat) in measure five to good effect.

**Prelude No. 8: *Hypsiglena torquata* (Chihuahuan Night Snake)** This snake is found in arid regions in northern Mexico. *Hypsiglena torquata* is a nocturnal snake that feeds on other reptiles and their eggs. Although mildly venomous, this species does not attempt to bite when handled, and only uses its venom for subduing prey.

The chord progression of this prelude was composed on guitar. I recommend that it be played in a stately manner.

**Prelude No. 9: *Arizona elegans* (Eastern Glossy Snake)** The Eastern Glossy Snake of the western United States spends most of its time underground; coming out at night to forage on small mammals. If encountered, it may vibrate its tail in an attempt to fool the intruder into thinking the snake is a rattlesnake.

Prelude No. 9 is written in an imitative style, with the opening theme being played in the treble, and then four measures later repeated two octaves lower in the bass. After sixteen measures of development the theme is once again stated in the bass.

**Prelude No. 10: *Elaphe guttata* = *Pantherophis guttatus* (Eastern Corn Snake)** The Eastern Corn Snake is found in the southeastern United States in open areas such as pine barrens and old fields. It is an excellent climber, and can occasionally be found a considerable distance up trees. Males have been known to perform combat dances, a behavior common in some rattlesnakes. This "dance" is accomplished by a more dominant male attempting to pin down a subordinate male.

Although the writing in this prelude suggests a guitar, I actually had a harp in mind, and this should be taken into account during performance.

**Prelude No. 11: *Contia tenuis* (Sharptail Snake)** This small brown to tan colored snake is found in the western United States. It spends a great deal of time beneath rotting logs in search of its preferred food of slugs.

This Prelude, like No. 8, was first “worked out” on guitar, and then arranged for piano. The performer may wish to imitate the guitar by allowing the notes in the arpeggios to slightly overlap.

**Prelude No. 12: *Atropoides mexicanus* (Central American Jumping Pit Viper)** The etymology of this species’ name is given by Campbell and Lamar (2004) as follows: “*Atropoides* is derived from Atropos, the name of one of the three Fates in Greek mythology, who cuts the thread of life, and *-oides*, meaning “similar to” or “having the nature of.” The species name *mexicanus* is derived from the country name Mexico, and essentially means “of Mexico.” This species, however, is also found in Guatemala. Once the sixteenth note runs in measures 4, 5, 18 and 19 are mastered, the rest of the prelude is child’s play.

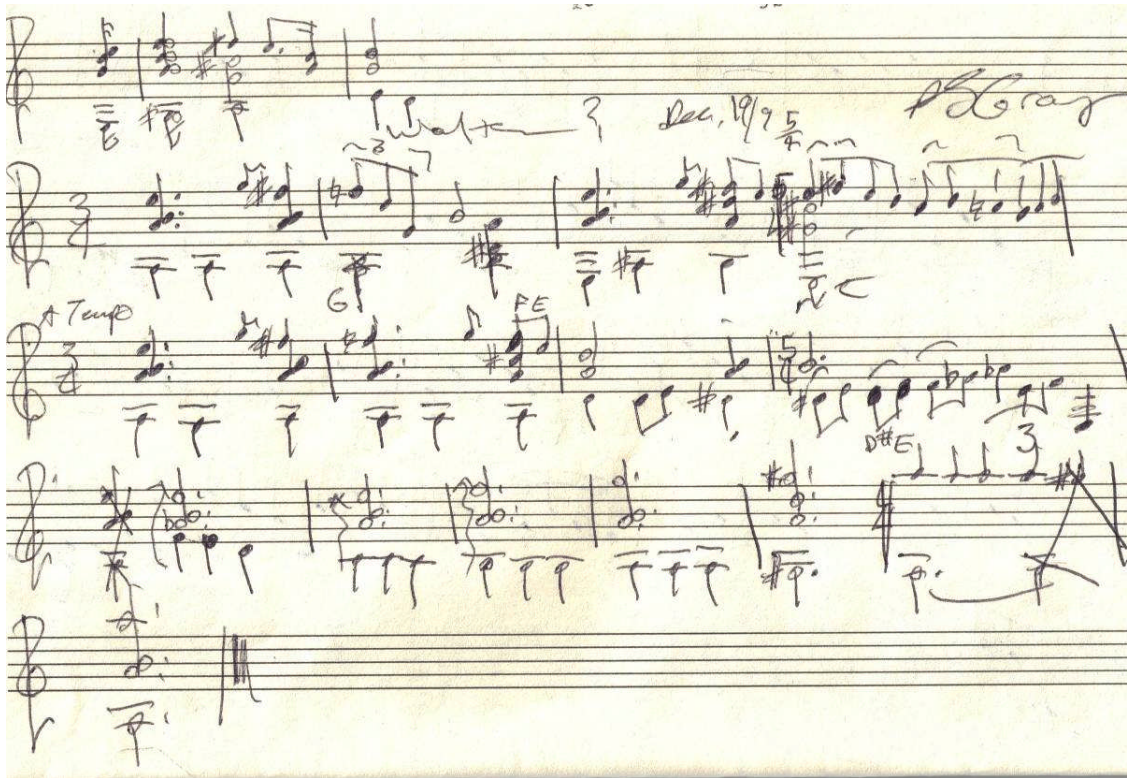
I wish to thank my mother, Marlene Gray, for her continued support and encouragement of my musical interests, and also for her tolerance in years past of the many snakes I’ve kept. Thanks are also due to Jeff Beane for suggesting corrections and comments that improved the manuscript. In addition to being 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.1

## Coluber constrictor

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 141

Piano

mf

4

7

10

fz mf fz mf

14

rit.

p

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# Serpentes Prelude No. 2

Clonophis kirtlandii

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 121

Piano

*mf*

4

7

10

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13

Musical notation for measures 13-15. Measure 13 has a fermata over the first note. Measures 14 and 15 have fermatas over the first notes. The bass line features triplets of eighth notes.

16

*rit.*

Musical notation for measures 16-19. Measure 16 has a fermata over the first note. Measures 17-19 have fermatas over the first notes. The bass line features triplets of eighth notes. The piece ends with a double bar line.

# Serpentes Prelude No.3

Diadophis punctatus

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 132

Piano

*p* *mf p mf p*

4 *mf*

7

9

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11

mp mf mp

This system contains measures 11, 12, and 13. The right-hand part features a melodic line with slurs and ornaments. The left-hand part provides harmonic support with chords and single notes. Dynamic markings are *mp*, *mf*, and *mp*.

14

ff

This system contains measures 14 and 15. The right-hand part has a melodic line with slurs. The left-hand part has a more active bass line. A *ff* dynamic marking is present. The system concludes with a double bar line.

# Serpentes Prelude No.4

Agkistrodon contortrix

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 140

Piano

*mp* *mf*

5

8 *mp* *mf* *mp* *mf*

11 *f*

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15

mf mp mf mp mf mp

This system contains five measures of music. The first measure features a rapid sixteenth-note run in the right hand and a steady eighth-note bass line. The second measure continues with a similar pattern but with a change in dynamics to *mp*. The third measure shows a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a sharp sign. The fourth and fifth measures consist of block chords in the right hand and sustained notes in the bass, with dynamics alternating between *mf* and *mp*. A fermata is placed over the final note of the fifth measure.

20

mf mp f mp

This system contains five measures of music. The first two measures feature block chords in the right hand and a bass line with a flat sign. The third measure has a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a sharp sign. The fourth measure features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a sharp sign. The fifth measure concludes with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line with a flat sign, marked with a fermata and a dynamic of *f*. A double bar line is at the end of the system, with a *mp* dynamic marking below the bass line.

# Serpentes Prelude No. 5

Gyalopian canum

Brian S. Gray

$\text{♩} = 122$

Piano

5

9

13

*p* *mf* *mp* *p* *mf* *mp* *pp* *mp* *p* *mf*

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# Serpentes Prelude No. 6

Heterodon platirhinos

Brian S. Gray

moderato  $\text{♩} = 118$

Piano

*f*

3

6

8

*mp*

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10 *tr* 3 *tr* 3 2

13 *mf* *mp* *mf*

16

18 3 3

20 *tr* 3

22

Musical score for measures 22-23. The piece is in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. Measure 22 features a treble staff with a melodic line of eighth notes and a bass staff with a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. Measure 23 continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns.

24

Musical score for measures 24-25. Measure 24 continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns from the previous measures. Measure 25 concludes the phrase with a final chord in the treble staff and a sustained note in the bass staff.

# Serpentes Prelude No. 7

Farancia abacura

Brian S. Gray

Allegro ♩ = 169

Piano

*p*

*mf*

*mp* *mf* *p*

*mp* *mf*

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16

*rit.*

*tr*

*p*

# Serpentes Prelude No. 8

Hypsiglena torquata

Brian S. Gray

brisk  $\text{♩} = 162$

Piano

*f*

6

10

14

*rit.*

19

*mf*

*ff*

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# Serpentes Prelude No. 9

Arizona elegans

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 183

Piano

*f*

*f*

6

12

*mf*

*mf*

17

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23

Musical score for measures 23-28. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The melody in the treble clef consists of eighth and quarter notes. The bass clef accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern with some rests.

29

Musical score for measures 29-34. The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#). The melody in the treble clef includes a fermata over the final note of measure 34. The bass clef accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern. The dynamic marking *mp* (mezzo-piano) is present in both staves.



# Serpentes Prelude No. 10

Elaphe guttata

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 202

Piano

5

9

14

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17

Musical notation for measures 17-20. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including a triplet of eighth notes in measure 18. The bass clef staff contains a simple accompaniment of quarter notes. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

21

*rit.*

Musical notation for measures 21-24. The treble clef staff continues the melodic line, with a "rit." (ritardando) marking above measure 23. The bass clef staff continues the accompaniment. The key signature and time signature remain the same.

25

Musical notation for measures 25-28. The treble clef staff shows a series of sixteenth notes in the first measure, followed by rests. The bass clef staff shows a series of quarter notes. The key signature and time signature remain the same.

# Serpentes Prelude No. 11

Contia tenuis

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 147

Piano

4

7

10

13

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# Serpentes Prelude No.12

Atropoides mexicanus

Brian S. Gray

♩ = 114

Piano

*f* *mp* *mf*

6 *mp* *pp*

14 *mp* *p* *mp* *p*

20 *f* *rit.* *mf*

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