

# A new alphabet

*I will create a new alphabet for you,  
An alphabet that is unlike any other.  
In it you will find: a phrase of rhythm from the rain,  
A dusting of powder from the moon,  
A moment of sorrow from the clouds as they grey,  
And a sigh of pain from the willow leaves as they fall  
Under the swiftly turning wheels of autumn.*

A setting of the last seven lines of the first letter  
in the collection *One hundred love letters* by Nizar Qabbani,  
in Arabic and English, translated by the composer,  
for twelve-part mixed chorus (SSMMAATTRRBB) *a cappella*

## Eric Banks

Commissioned and composed in April 2009  
for Anthony Trecek-King and the Boston Children's Chorus,  
revoiced in August 2009 for The Esoterics and the concert *MYSTERIUM*.

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# About this work

Nizar Qabbani was born in 1923 in Syria to a traditional, well-to-do family. Qabbani's poetry has been described "more powerful than all the Arab regimes put together" (*Lebanese Daily Star*), and "like water, bread, and sun in every Arab heart and house" (*Tishreen*). Qabbani's verses are simple and direct, describing everyday life. He was a constant campaigner for women's rights, and a great many of his poems praise the beauty of the feminine form. He was an Arab nationalist, but often criticized Arab dictators for the lack of freedom that they caused throughout the Arab world. He worked as a diplomat in Syria for more than two decades, but settled in London in the mid-1960's for political reasons. Qabbani died in London in 1998, and is buried in Damascus.

Here are the seven lines of *A new alphabet* in its original Arabic and in IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet):

'uridu 'æn 'ɔsnæ'æ læki 'æbʒæddæ'æh,  
wæ'iræ kullil-'æbʒæddæ'æt.

fi hæ ʃæ'i'un min 'iqɔɪl-mɪʔɪr,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min wubæ'ɪl-qɪmɪr,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min huʒnɪl-wu'jumɪr-ræmædi'æh,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min tæwæʒʒuɪ 'æwɪɔqɪʒ-ʃɪʃɔf

tæntæ ʃæ'ræbæti 'æ'iul.

In addition to the "wheel" of melody that sets the Arabic phrases in Qabbani's poem, there are four natural images that intone every letter of the Arabic alphabet.

The sounds are grouped according to linguistic similarity, and are marked in this score with their Italian names: the clouds (*nuvole*), the dust (*polvere*), the raindrops (*gocce di pioggia*), and the falling leaves (*foglie cadenti*).

The *clouds* intone the seven vowel sounds in standard Arabic. These slowly rise through both lower and upper octaves

U (as in boot); i (as in beet); U (as in book); I (as in bit); O (as in bought); æ (between bat and bet); and A (as in but)

The voices of *dust* hiss dryly through each of Arabic's eight unvoiced consonants. There are several non-English sounds in this group.

f (as in fin); θ (as in thin); ʒ (a retroflex s, with the back of the tongue raised to the palate); h (as in hint); ʃ (as in shin); X (as in the German ich); S (as in sink); and H (a glasses-fogging version of h, but higher in the mouth)

The *raindrops* fall through fourteen plosive and fricative consonants in Arabic, and each is followed by an immediate hum.

ð (as in thus); b (as in bus); k (as in key); ʔ (the glottal stop, as in 'us); q (a guttural k, produced in the back of the throat); ʒ (as in pleasure); d (a retroflex d, with the back of the tongue raised to the palate); z (a retroflex z); ʕ (a guttural r, as in French); t (a retroflex t); d (as in doom); z (as in zoom); r (a lightly flipped r, as in Italian); and t (as in tomb)

The six *falling leaves* reach to the lowest notes of the maqam (the Arabic scale) by way of semi-consonant glides.

ʕ (a velar approximative, not in English: make the sound of ŋ as in song without touching the tongue to the palate); w (as in wet); j (as in yet); m (as in met); n (as in net); and l (as in let)

The seven pitches of this piece (G Ab B C D Eb F#) comprise a transposed maqam called Suzidil. This symmetrical set of tones is said to connote the melancholy of autumn. The translation of Nizar Qabbani's poem is my own, and has been tailored for *A new alphabet*.



# A new alphabet

Eric Banks

Plaintively  $\text{♩} = 128$  ( $\text{♩} = 64$ )  
(beating 3+2+3+2+2 throughout)

2 3

S1

S2

M1

M2

A1

A2

T1

T2

R1

R2

B1

B2

*come nuvole*

*p* 'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - ʃæ læ - kɪ 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - 'jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - lɪ -

*p* u \_\_\_\_\_ i \_\_\_\_\_

*p* 'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - ʃæ læ - kɪ 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - 'jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - lɪ -

*p* 'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - ʃæ læ - kɪ 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - 'jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - lɪ -

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SAMPLE

S1 4 5 6

S2

M1

M2

A1

A2

T1

'æb - zæd - dæ-jæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæj - 'un - min - 'i - qɑ - ʃil - ml-ʃl - r, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - ʊbæ - ril - ql-mɔ - r, wæ

T2

'æb - zæd - dæ-jæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæj - 'un - min - 'i - qɑ - ʃil - ml-ʃl - r, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - ʊbæ - ril - ql-mɔ - r, wæ

*come nuvole*

R1 *p* u i

R2 u i

B1

'æb - zæd - dæ-jæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæj - 'un - min - 'i - qɑ - ʃil - ml-ʃl - r, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - ʊbæ - ril - ql-mɔ - r, wæ

B2

'æb - zæd - dæ-jæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæj - 'un - min - 'i - qɑ - ʃil - ml-ʃl - r, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - ʊbæ - ril - ql-mɔ - r, wæ

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SAMPLE

7 8 9

S1

S2

M1

M2

A1

*come nuvole*

*p*

o æ

8

T1

ʃæj - 'un - min - HUZ - - - nil - wu - ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - jæ - h, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - tæ - wæʒ - zu - ʃi 'æw -

8

T2

ʃæj - 'un - min - HUZ - - - nil - wu - ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - jæ - h, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - tæ - wæʒ - zu - ʃi 'æw -

R1

u I

R2

u

B1

ʃæj - 'un - min - HUZ - - - nil - wu - ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - jæ - h, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - tæ - wæʒ - zu - ʃi 'æw -

B2

ʃæj - 'un - min - HUZ - - - nil - wu - ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - jæ - h, wæ ʃæj - 'un - min - tæ - wæʒ - zu - ʃi 'æw -

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SAMPLE

10 11 12

S1

S2

M1

*come gocce di pioggia*

*p* ðm bm km 'm qm 3m

M2

A1

*come nuvole*

*p* o æ

A2

^ u

T1

ro - qis - saf - so - - - f tæH - tæ fæ-ræ-bæ - tr 'æj - - lu - - l. - - - 'u -

T2

ro - qis - saf - so - - - f tæH - tæ fæ-ræ-bæ - tr 'æj - - lu - - l. - - - 'u -

R1

R2

i u

B1

ro - qis - saf - so - - - f tæH - tæ fæ-ræ-bæ - tr 'æj - - lu - - l. - - - 'u -

B2

ro - qis - saf - so - - - f tæH - tæ fæ-ræ-bæ - tr 'æj - - lu - - l. - - - 'u -

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SAMPLE

S1 13 14 15

S2

M1 qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm

M2 *come gocchie di pioggia*  
*p* ðm bm km 'm qm zm

A1 u

A2 o

T1 ri - du 'æen\_\_ 'ɔs - næ-ʃæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - t. fi - hæ

T2 ri - du 'æen\_\_ 'ɔs - næ-ʃæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - t. fi - hæ

R1 u i

R2 I

B1 ri - du 'æen\_\_ 'ɔs - næ-ʃæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - t. fi - hæ

B2 ri - du 'æen\_\_ 'ɔs - næ-ʃæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæj - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - t. fi - hæ

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SAMPLE

16 17 18

S1

S2

M1

ðm bm km 'm qm zm d̥m zm ʊm t̥m dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm

M2

d̥m zm ʊm t̥m dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm d̥m zm ʊm t̥m dm zm rm tm

A1

A2

æ ʌ

T1

ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_i-qɔ - ʃɪl-mʌ-tʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_ʊbæ - rɪl-qʌ-mʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_hʊz - - - nɪl-ʊ-

T2

ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_i-qɔ - ʃɪl-mʌ-tʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_ʊbæ - rɪl-qʌ-mʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_hʊz - - - nɪl-ʊ-

R1

u r

R2

B1

ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_i-qɔ - ʃɪl-mʌ-tʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_ʊbæ - rɪl-qʌ-mʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_hʊz - - - nɪl-ʊ-

B2

ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_i-qɔ - ʃɪl-mʌ-tʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_ʊbæ - rɪl-qʌ-mʌ-r, wæ ʃæj - 'ʊn\_mɪn\_hʊz - - - nɪl-ʊ-

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SAMPLE

S1 19 20 21

S2

M1 qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm

M2 om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm

A1 o ae

A2 u

T1 ju - mir - rae-mae-di - iae - h, wae saei - 'un\_min\_tae - wae3 - zu - si 'ae^w - ro - qis - saf - so - - - f

T2 ju - mir - rae-mae-di - iae - h, wae saei - 'un\_min\_tae - wae3 - zu - si 'ae^w - ro - qis - saf - so - - - f

R1

R2

B1 ju - mir - rae-mae-di - iae - h, wae saei - 'un\_min\_tae - wae3 - zu - si 'ae^w - ro - qis - saf - so - - - f

B2 ju - mir - rae-mae-di - iae - h, wae saei - 'un\_min\_tae - wae3 - zu - si 'ae^w - ro - qis - saf - so - - - f

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SAMPLE

23

24

S1 *mf* I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, —

S2 *mf* I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, —

M1 ðm bm km 'm qm zm ḍm zm ʋm ṭm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm

M2 ḍm zm ʋm ṭm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm ḍm zm ʋm ṭm dm zm rm tm

A1 ʌ u

A2 *mf* I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, —

T1 tæh - tæ fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æj - - - lu - - - l. *mf* I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, —

T2 tæh - tæ fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æj - - - lu - - - l. *mf* I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, —

R1

R2

B1 tæh - tæ fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æj - - - lu - - - l.

B2 tæh - tæ fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æj - - - lu - - - l.

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SAMPLE  
DO NOT PRINT

28 29 30

S1 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

S2 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

M1 ðm bm km 'm qm zm dñm zm ðm tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm

M2 dñm zm ðm tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm dñm zm ðm tm dm zm rm tm

A1 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

A2 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

T1 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

T2 rain, A dusting of powder from the moon, A moment of sor-row from the clouds as they grey, And a

R1

R2

B1

B2

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DO NOT PRINT

31 32 33

S1  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au -

S2  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au -

M1  
qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm

M2  
om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm em tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm

A1  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au -

A2  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels

T1  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au -

T2  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au -

R1

R2

B1

B2  
*come polvere*  
mp f θ s

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SAMPLE

35

36

S1 tumn. \_\_\_\_\_

S2 tumn. \_\_\_\_\_

M1 *dm bm km 'm qm zm d m zm m m t m d m z m r m t m d m bm km 'm qm zm*

M2 *d m z m m m t m d m z m r m t m d m bm km 'm qm zm d m z m m m t m d m z m r m t m*

A1 *come foglie cadenti*  
tum. \_\_\_\_\_ *mp* j w m n l

A2 *come foglie cadenti*  
*mp* j w m n l s j w m

T1 tumn. \_\_\_\_\_

T2 tumn. \_\_\_\_\_

R1 \_\_\_\_\_

R2 \_\_\_\_\_

B1 *come polvere*  
*mp* f \_\_\_\_\_ t s \_\_\_\_\_

B2 \_\_\_\_\_ h \_\_\_\_\_ j \_\_\_\_\_ x \_\_\_\_\_ s \_\_\_\_\_ H \_\_\_\_\_

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SAMPLE

37 38 39

S1

S2

M1  
 qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm

M2  
 om bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm om bm km 'm qm zm

A1  
 f j w m n l f j w m

A2  
 n l f j w m n l

T1

T2

R1  
*come foglie cadenti*  
 mp f j w m

R2  
*come foglie cadenti*  
 mp f j w m n l

B1  
 h f x s H

B2  
 f θ s h f x s

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SAMPLE

40 41 42

S1

S2

M1

*come nuvole*

*p* u \_\_\_\_\_ i \_\_\_\_\_

M2

ḍṃ ẓṃ ʋ̣ṃ ṭṃ      ḍṃ ẓṃ ṛṃ ṭṃ      ð̣ṃ ḅṃ ḳṃ      'ṃ q̣ṃ ẓṃ      ḍṃ ẓṃ ʋ̣ṃ ṭṃ      ḍṃ ẓṃ ṛṃ ṭṃ

A1

n                    l                    ʃ                    j                    w                    m                    n                    l

A2

ʃ                    j                    w                    m                    n                    l                    ʃ                    j                    w                    m

T1

T2

R1

n                    l                    ʃ                    j                    w                    m                    n                    l

R2

ʃ                    j                    w                    m                    n                    l                    ʃ                    j                    w                    m

B1

f \_\_\_\_\_ θ \_\_\_\_\_ s \_\_\_\_\_ h \_\_\_\_\_      ʃ \_\_\_\_\_ x \_\_\_\_\_ s \_\_\_\_\_

B2

\_\_\_\_\_ H \_\_\_\_\_      f \_\_\_\_\_ θ \_\_\_\_\_ s \_\_\_\_\_ h \_\_\_\_\_

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