

# 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 nine-part treble chorus (SSSMMMAAA) *a cappella*

## Eric Banks

Commissioned and composed in April 2009  
by Anthony Trecek-King and the Boston Children's Chorus.  
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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 'iɔɔɪl-mɪɫɫɪr,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min wubæriɪ-qɪmɪr,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min huʒniɪ-wu'umɪr-ræmædi'æh,

wæ ʃæ'i'un min tæwæʒʒuɪ 'æwɪɔɪs-ʃɪfʒɔf

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); ɖ (a retroflex d, with the back of the tongue raised to the palate); ʒ (a retroflex z); ʕ (a guttural r, as in French); ʈ (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 (A Bb C# D E F G#) comprise a maqam with the name 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  $\text{♩} = 128$  ( $\text{♩} = 64$ )

S1

S2

S3

M1

M2

M3

*p* come nuvole  
u i

A1  
*mp*  
'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - kt 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - lɪl -

A2  
*mp*  
'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - kt 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - lɪl -

A3  
*mp*  
'u - ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - kt 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - lɪl -

4

S1

S2

S3

M1

M2

M3

*p* come nuvole  
u i

A1  
'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - 'i - qɔ - ʃɪl - mɹ - tɹ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - wu - bæ - ɹɪl - qɹ - mɹ - r, wæ

A2  
'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - 'i - qɔ - ʃɪl - mɹ - tɹ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - wu - bæ - ɹɪl - qɹ - mɹ - r, wæ

A3  
'æb - ʒæd - dæ - iæ - t. fi - hæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - 'i - qɔ - ʃɪl - mɹ - tɹ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - mɪn - wu - bæ - ɹɪl - qɹ - mɹ - r, wæ

SAMPLE

DO NOT PRINT

7

S1

S2

S3

M1 *p come nuvole*

M2

M3

u

æ

A1

A2

A3

ʃæj - 'un\_min\_\_ huz - - - - nil - wu - 'ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - iæ - h, wæ ʃæj - 'un\_min\_\_ tæ - wæʒ - zu - ʔi 'æw -

10

S1

S2 *p come gocce di pioggia*

S3

M1

M2

M3

i

u

o

æ

u

A1 *mf*

A2 *mf*

A3 *mf*

ro - - qis - sɹf - sɔ - - - - f tæh - tæ ʃæ - ræ - bæ - tr 'æj - - - lu - - - l. 'u -

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13 *come gocce di pioggia*  
 S1 *p* ðm bm km 'm qm ʒm

S2 dʒm ʒm ʊm tʁm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm ʒm dʒm ʒm ʊm tʁm dm zm rm tm

S3 *p come nuvole*  
 u

M1 I o

M2 Λ u

M3

A1 ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - - - t. fi - hæ

A2 ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - - - t. fi - hæ

A3 ri - du 'æŋ - 'ɔs - næ - fæ læ - ki 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - h, wæi - ræ kul - li - 'æb - ʒæd - dæ - jæ - - - t. fi - hæ

16  
 S1 dʒm ʒm ʊm tʁm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm ʒm dʒm ʒm ʊm tʁm dm zm rm tm

S2 ðm bm km 'm qm ʒm dʒm ʒm ʊm tʁm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm ʒm

S3 u

M1 æ

M2 Λ

M3

A1 ʃæi - 'un - min - 'i - qɔ - ʃil - mɔ - tɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - wɔ - bæ - ril - qɔ - mɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - huɔ - - - - nil - wɔ -

A2 ʃæi - 'un - min - 'i - qɔ - ʃil - mɔ - tɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - wɔ - bæ - ril - qɔ - mɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - huɔ - - - - nil - wɔ -

A3 ʃæi - 'un - min - 'i - qɔ - ʃil - mɔ - tɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - wɔ - bæ - ril - qɔ - mɔ - r, wæ ʃæi - 'un - min - huɔ - - - - nil - wɔ -

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19

S1  
 ðm bm km 'm qm zm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm

S2  
 qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm

S3  
 o æ

M1  
 u

M2

M3

A1  
 'ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - iæ - h, wæ 'jæi - 'lun\_min tæ - wæ3 - zu - ʔi 'æw - rɔ - qɪʃ - ʃɪf - ʒo - - - - f

A2  
 'ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - iæ - h, wæ 'jæi - 'lun\_min tæ - wæ3 - zu - ʔi 'æw - rɔ - qɪʃ - ʃɪf - ʒo - - - - f

A3  
 'ju - mir - ræ - mæ - di - iæ - h, wæ 'jæi - 'lun\_min tæ - wæ3 - zu - ʔi 'æw - rɔ - qɪʃ - ʃɪf - ʒo - - - - f

22

S1  
 qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm

S2  
 ðm bm km 'm qm zm qm zm um tm dm zm rm tm ðm bm km 'm qm zm

S3  
 ʌ u

M1  
 I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, \_\_\_\_\_

M2  
 I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, \_\_\_\_\_

M3  
 I will cre - ate a new al - pha - bet for you, \_\_\_\_\_

A1  
 tæh - tæ 'fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æi - - - - lu - - - - l.

A2  
 tæh - tæ 'fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æi - - - - lu - - - - l.

A3  
 tæh - tæ 'fæ - ræ - bæ - ti 'æi - - - - lu - - - - l.

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SAMPLE  
DONOT PRINT

25  
S1  
ōm bm km 'm qm 3m d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm ōm bm km 'm qm 3m

S2  
d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm ōm bm km 'm qm 3m d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm

S3

M1  
An al - phabet that is un - like a - ny oth - er. In it you will find: a phrase of rhy - thm from the

M2  
An al - phabet that is un - like a - ny oth - er. In it you will find: a phrase of rhy - thm from the

M3  
An al - phabet that is un - like a - ny oth - er. In it you will find: a phrase of rhy - thm from the

A1

A2

A3

28  
S1  
d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm ōm bm km 'm qm 3m d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm

S2  
ōm bm km 'm qm 3m d̄m zm ʁm tm d̄m zm ʁm tm ōm bm km 'm qm 3m

S3

M1  
rain, A dus - ting of pow - der from the moon, A mo - ment of sor - row from the clouds as they grey, And a

M2  
rain, A dus - ting of pow - der from the moon, A mo - ment of sor - row from the clouds as they grey, And a

M3  
rain, A dus - ting of pow - der from the moon, A mo - ment of sor - row from the clouds as they grey, And a

A1

A2

A3

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SAMPLE  
DO NOT PRINT

31

S1  
ðm bm km 'm qm 3m dm zm ʀm tm ðm bm km 'm qm 3m

S2  
qm zm ʀm tm dm zm ʀm tm ðm bm km 'm qm 3m dm zm ʀm tm dm zm ʀm tm

S3

M1  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au-

M2  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au-

M3  
sigh of pain from the wil-low leaves as they fall Un-der the swift-ly turn-ing wheels of au-

A1  
*mp come polvere*  
f θ s

A2

A3

34

S1  
qm zm ʀm tm dm zm ʀm tm ðm bm km 'm qm 3m qm zm ʀm tm dm zm ʀm tm

S2  
ðm bm km 'm qm 3m qm zm ʀm tm dm zm ʀm tm ðm bm km 'm qm 3m

S3

M1  
tumn. *mp come polvere*  
f θ s

M2  
tumn.

M3  
tumn.

A1  
h x s H

A2  
*mf come foglie cadenti*  
f j w m n

A3  
*mf come foglie cadenti*  
f j w m n

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