

To tell the sea

*In the sultry days of summer,
I stretch out on the sandy shore,
And immerse myself in thoughts of you.
If ever I were to tell the sea
Everything I feel for you,
It would abandon its shores,
And its shells,
And its fish,
And follow me.*

Setting verses from 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 by Anthony Trecek-King, and composed
in August 2010 for the Boston Children's Chorus.

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 nine lines of *To tell the sea* in their original Arabic, and in IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet):

fi 'æi:jæmɪs-ʂʌ'f,
'ætæmæddædu ʃælæ rɪmæliʃ-ʃɔ'tɪr,
wæ 'umærisu hi'wæ'ætæt-tæfkɪrɪ-bɪki.
læw 'ænnæni 'ɔqulu lɪlbæhri
mæ 'æʃ'æru-bɪhi næn'wæki,
lætærækæ ʃæwɔ'tɪ'æhu,
wæ 'ɔʂdæfæhu,
wæ 'æsmækæhu,
wæ tæbɪ'æni.

Here is a pronunciation key of the IPA for Arabic vowels:

æ	between bat and bet
ɔ	as in bought
ʌ	as in but
i	as in beet
ɪ	as in bit
ʊ	as in book
u	as in boot

And key of of the IPA for Arabic consonants:

bdfkhlmnstz	are pronounced as in English
ɖʂʈʂ	are retroflex versions of their English equivalent, and are pronounced with the back of the tongue raised to the palate
ʕ	a velar approximative, pronounced as the ŋ as in song without touching the tongue to the palate
ð	a voiced fricative, as in thus
θ	an unvoiced fricative, as in thin
ħ	a 'glasses-fogging' version of h, high in the mouth
q	a guttural k, produced in the back of the throat
r	a lightly flipped r, as in Italian
ʁ	a guttural r, as in French
ʃ	an unvoiced fricative, as in shin
ʒ	a voiced fricative, as in pleasure
x	as in the German ich
ʔ	the glottal stop, as in 'us
j	as in yet
w	as in wet

The pitches of this piece (G Ab B C D Eb F# G) comprise a transposition of the maqam Suzidil. The translation of Nizar Qabbani's poem is my own, and has been tailored especially for this work.



Eric Banks

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فِي أَيَّامِ الصَّيْفِ،
أَتَمَدَّدُ عَلَى رِمَالِ الشَّاطِئِ،
وَأُمَارِسُ هَوَايَةَ التَّفَكِيرِ بِكَ.
لَوْ أَنِّي أَقُولُ لِلْبَحْرِ
مَا أَشْعُرُ بِهِ نَحْوِكَ،
لَتَرَكْتُ شَوَاطِئَهُ،
وَأَصْدَافَهُ،
وَأَسْمَاكَ،
وَتَبَعِي.

Arabic "chor-alligraphy"

In *To tell the sea*, I have incorporated an optional dimension for performance that will provide its singers the opportunity to learn the letters of the Arabic alphabet in their "isolated forms." In the opening and closing sections of this work, before the Arabic and English verses are sung, the letters of the alphabet are presented in linguistic groups that create various parts of the seascape in Qabbani's poem. As each Arabic letter is sung, the singers can draw its calligraphic shape largely with their entire arm directly in front of them. Each singer should keep the fingers of his or her hand together and his or her palm flat, so that the arm and hand resemble the stem and point of a calligraphy pen. The hand-drawing of each letter should be done slowly when the sung duration of the letter is longer, and more quickly when the sung duration is shorter. Each letter should be drawn as if the singer is writing it from their own perspective, and not draw it for the audience to read. Each singer should imagine a large sheet of paper directly in front them. The impetus of each letter should happen on strong-beats, and the various singers in each section should practice these motions so that they are performed in unison. This "chor-alligraphy" should be large, confident, and beautiful, as if the chorus is conducting the audience; I hope that the overall effect will be calm, flowing, and water-like.

The first group of eight unvoiced fricatives are meant to sound "like the wind on the beach." Hence the Italian instruction: *come il vento sulla spiaggia*. These consonants are sung by the S1, M1, M3, and A3 sections. The drawing of each letter should happen exactly when the IPA letter occur in the score. The eight shapes correspond to the IPA sounds listed below, and are drawn in the reverse order during the latter section of *To tell the sea*.

h h θ x f ʃ s ʂ

ح ه ث خ ف ش س ص

The second group of twelve voiced consonants bears the instruction *come le onde del mare*, or "like the waves of the sea." These three group of four consonants include both liquids and fricatives that should be extended and pitched. The effect should be varied -- from humming to gurgling -- and the speed of hand-drawings can be quite quick. The section S2 performs the first group below, M2 draws the second "wave" of four, and A2 executes the third quartet of consonants -- this group is particularly challenging for its combination of non-English sounds. Each group is sung at two different speeds, and in the latter half of the piece, each consonantal group is reversed in its downward sloping "wave." Here are the three "wavy" quartets:

m ʒ w ɖ

م ج و ذ

n z j r

ن ز ي ر

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ظ ل غ ع

ا ز ف ب

The effervescent third group, "bubbles and seafoam," is labeled in the score with the Italian phrase *come bolle e schiuma di mare*. This group, sung by the sections S3 and A1, is characterized by a lightning-fast onslaught of sixteenth-notes, and these phrases are much too quick to draw each letter as it occurs in the time given. There are, however, eight identical measures in the opening section of this work. Since there are eight letters and eight measures, each letter should be drawn, only once, at the downbeat of each bar. This same order should be retained in the latter section of the piece, when the "bubbles and seafoam" motive returns. Linguistically these letters comprise all of the Arabic plosives (or "stops"), both voiced and unvoiced. Please notice the changing vowels in the score, which are employed to reflect the placement of the retroflex consonants:

' d b q t k t q

ق ط ك ت ض ب د ء

In the fourth group, the hazy heat of summer is manifested by the cluster marked *come nella una foschia* ("as in a haze"). This cluster is sung by all of the choral sections except for the outermost voices. This progression of the seven Arabic vowel forms includes some noticeably smaller letters to draw, and these represent the shorter vowels. If you have observed the letters used thus far, you might notice that the Arabic vowels for "i" and "u" are represented by the same letters as the consonants "y" and "w." This "haze" of vowels is found in this order at the end of the opening section, and reversed at the beginning of the closing section of *To tell the sea*. These vowels should be sung with little or no glottal attack, and, since each vowel last for the duration of an entire bar, they should be drawn *slowly*.

u u ʌ ɔ æ i i

ي ا آ ء و

Here are a couple of web pages that clearly show the stroke content and order for these letters of Arabic alphabet:

- <http://www.islamicart.com/main/calligraphy/catalog/alphabet.html>
- <http://www.stanford.edu/dept/lc/arabic/alphabet/chart.html>

It is entirely possible, that for the sake of efficacy, the points above and below various letters could be drawn with the left hand. Please experiment with the singers in each section to determine the best possible letter-forms in unison. Happy chor-alligraphy!

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Furtively $\text{♩} = 198 (\text{♩} = 99)$
(beat 3+2+2+2 throughout)

To tell the sea

Eric Banks

come il vento sulla spiaggia

come le onde del mare

come il vento sulla spiaggia

come il vento sulla spiaggia

come il vento sulla spiaggia

come le onde del mare

come le onde del mare

come il vento sulla spiaggia

come le onde del mare

come le onde del mare

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S1 *mp* H h θ x

S2 m 3 w ð m 3 w ð m 3 w ð m 3 w ð

S3 *mp* *come bolle e schiuma di mare* 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ

M1 *mp* H h θ

M2 n z i r n z i r

M3 s *mp* H h

A1 *mp* 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ

A2 l z γ β l z γ β

A3 s *mp* H

21

S1 f s s

S2 m 3 w ð m 3 w ð

S3 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ

M1 x f s

M2 n z i r n z i r n z i r n z i r

M3 θ x f s

A1 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ 'Λ dΛ bσ qσ tΛ κΛ τσ qσ

A2 l z γ β l z γ β

A3 h θ x f

S1 *mf* h θ x f s s

S2 *p* u u Λ o

S3 *p* u u Λ

M1 *p* u u

M2 n z i r n z i r *p* u

M3 s s

A1

A2 l z ʎ u l z ʎ u l z ʎ u

A3 ʃ s s *mf* h h

S1 h h θ x f ʃ s s

S2 æ i i *mp* fi 'æj -

S3 o æ i

M1 Λ o æ i

M2 u Λ o æ

M3 *p* u u Λ o

A1 *p* u u

A2 l z ʎ u l z ʎ u *p* u

A3 θ x f ʃ s s h h

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S1 H h θ x f s s

S2 iæ - miʃ - sʌ - f, fi 'æ - iæ - miʃ - sʌ f, fi 'æ -

S3 *mp* 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, _____

M1 i

M2 I i

M3 æ I i

A1 o æ I i

A2 ʌ o æ I

A3 θ x f s s H h

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S1 H h θ x f s s

S2 iæ - miʃ - sʌ - f, fi 'æ - iæ - miʃ - sʌ - f, fi 'æ -

S3 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, _____ 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, _____

M1 *mp* ɹæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - [I - 'l, 'wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2

M3

A1

A2 i

A3 θ x f s s H h

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S1

S2
iæ - miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æj - iæ - miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æj -

S3
'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du,

M1
ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - tɪ - 'l, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2

M3
mp hi -

A1

A2

A3
θ x _____ f ʃ _____ s s _____

45

S1

S2
iæ - miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æj - iæ - miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æj -

S3
'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du,

M1
ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - tɪ - 'l, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2

M3
wæ - iæ - tæst - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki. hi -

A1

A2

A3

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S1

S2
iæ - miŋ-ŋʌl - f, fi 'æj - iæ - miŋ-ŋʌl - f, fi 'æj -

S3
'æ - tæ - mæd-dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd-dæ - du,

M1
fæ - læ ri - mæ - liŋ - ʃo - ti - 'i, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2

M3
wæ - iæ - tæet - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki. hi -

A1
mp
læw 'æn - næ - ni 'o - qu - lu li - bæŋ - ri

A2

A3

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S1

S2
iæ - miŋ-ŋʌl - f, fi 'æj - iæ - miŋ-ŋʌl - f, fi 'æj -

S3
'æ - tæ - mæd-dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd-dæ - du,

M1
fæ - læ ri - mæ - liŋ - ʃo - ti - 'i, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2

M3
wæ - iæ - tæet - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki. hi -

A1
læw 'æn - næ - ni 'o - qu - lu li - bæŋ - ri

A2
mp mæ

A3

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con abbandono

S1 *mf* In the sul - try days of sum - mer, _____

S2 iæ - mɪs - ʃʌl - f, fi 'æɪ - iæ - mɪs - ʃʌl - f, fi 'æɪ -

S3 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, _____

M1 ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - ti - 'l, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2 *con abbandono*

M3 *mf* In the sul - try days of sum - mer, _____

A1 wæ - iæ - tæ - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki. _____ hi -

A2 læw 'æ - ru - bi - hi næn - wæ - ki, _____ mæ

A3 *con abbandono*

A3 *mf* In the sul - try days of sum - mer, _____

S1 _____ I stretch out on the san - dy shore, _____ And im -

S2 iæ - mɪs - ʃʌl - f, fi 'æɪ - iæ - mɪs - ʃʌl - f, fi 'æɪ -

S3 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, _____

M1 ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - ti - 'l, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2 _____ I stretch out on the san - dy shore, _____ And im -

M3 wæ - iæ - tæ - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki. _____ hi -

A1 læw 'æ - ru - bi - hi næn - wæ - ki, _____ mæ

A2 _____ I stretch out on the san - dy shore, _____ And im -

A3 _____ I stretch out on the san - dy shore, _____ And im -

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S1 merse my - self in thoughts of you, in

S2 'jæ - miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æɪ - 'jæ miʃ - sʌl - f, fi 'æɪ -

S3 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du,

M1 fæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - ti - r, wæ 'u - mæ - ri - su,

M2 merse my - self in thoughts of you, in

M3 wæ - 'jæ - tæ - tæ - f - ki - ri - bi - ki. hi -

A1 læw 'æn - næ - ni 'o - qu - lu lɪ - bæ - ri

A2 'æʃ - fæ - ru - bi - hi næ - wæ - ki, mæ

A3 merse my - self in thoughts of you, in

69

S1 thoughts of you. *p* lf

S2 'jæ - miʃ - sʌl - - f, *p* lf

S3 'æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, *p* lf

M1 *p* lf

M2 thoughts of you.

M3 wæ - 'jæ - tæ - tæ - f - ki - - ri - bi - ki. *p* lf ev - er I were to tell the sea,

A1 *p* lf ev - er I were to tell the sea,

A2 'æʃ - fæ - ru - bi - hi næ - wæ - ki, *p* lf ev - er I were to tell the sea,

A3 thoughts of you. *p* lf ev - er I were to tell the sea,

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S1 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea,

S2 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea,

S3 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea,

M1 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea,

M2 *p* Ev - ery - thing I feel for you, *mp* ev - ery -

M3 *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mf* if

A1 *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mf* if

A2 *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mf* if

A3 *mp* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *mf* if

S1 *mf* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to

S2 *mf* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to

S3 *mf* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to

M1 *mf* if ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to

M2 thing I feel for you, *mf* ev - ery - - - thing, *f* ev - ery -

M3 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to tell the sea! to

A1 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to tell the sea! to

A2 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to tell the sea! to

A3 ev - er I were to tell the sea, *f* to tell the sea! to

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SAMPLE
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S1 tell the sea!

S2 tell the sea! *mp* fi 'æi -

S3 tell the sea!

M1 tell the sea!

M2 *sola facoltativa*
thing, *ff* ev - ery - thing. I feel for you,

M3 tell the sea! *mp* hi -

A1 tell the sea!

A2 tell the sea! *mp* mæ

A3 tell the sea!

82

S1 *f* It would a - - ban - don its shores,

S2 iæ - miʃ - ʃʌi - - - f, fi 'æi - iæ - miʃ - ʃʌi - f,

S3 *mp* æ - tæ - mæd - dæ - du, 'æ - tæ -

M1 *mp* ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - ti - 'l, wæ 'u -

M2 *tutti*
f It would a - ban - don its shores,

M3 wæ - iæ - tæet - tæf - ki - ri - bi - ki.

A1 *mp* læw 'æni - næ - ni 'o - qu - lu lii - bæh ri

A2 'æʃ - ʃæ - ru - bi - hi næh - wæ - ki,

A3 *f* It would a - - ban - don its shores,

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mf And its shells *mp* And its fish,

fi 'æj - jæ - mɪʃ - ʃʌ - f, fi 'æj - jæ - mɪʃ - ʃʌ - f,

mæd-dæ - du, 'æ - tæ - mæddæ - du, 'æ - tæ -

mæ - ri - su, ʃæ - læ ri - mæ - liʃ - ʃo - ti - 'i, wæ 'u -

mf And its shells *mp* And its fish,

hi - wæ - jæ - tæ - tæ - f - ki - ri - bi - ki.

læw 'æ - n - næ - ni 'o - qu - lu li - bæ - ri

mæ 'æj - ʃæ - ru - bi - hi nænwæ - ki,

mf And its shells *mp* And its fish,

p And fol-low... me.

mæd-dæ - du,

mæ - ri - su,

p And fol-low... me.

læ - tæ - ræ - kæ ʃæ -

læ - tæ - ræ - kæ ʃæ - wɔ - ti - 'æ - hu, wæ ʃs -

f læ - tæ - ræ - kæ ʃæ - wɔ - ti - 'æ - hu, wæ ʃs - dæ - fæ - hu, wæ 'æs -

come il vento sulla spiaggia

p And fol-low... *mf* s s f f x θ

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