ISOLARIO

Dario Calderone

(2021-2022)

Table of Contents

Isolario

Dario Calderone (Amsterdam 2021-2022)

Isolario is a cycle of 9 duets, which can be performed, or just imagined, by any instrument or voice. The scores consist in a textual part and in a visual part; the music resides in the clash between these 2 sorts of material.

The textual part of the scores consists of 3 sections.

The first section is a quote from different medieval writers from the arabic world (*al-Qazwīnī, Ibn Waṣīf Šāh, al-Ḥimyarī),* compiled by Angelo Arioli in his book *Le isole mirabili (1989 Einaudi, Torino)*. These are descriptions of special islands, and they belong to the tradition of the literature of wonder.

The second section is a commentary on the quote, in which I talk about what these stories communicate to me, and what make me think of, expanding the meaning of the first part.

The third section contains instructions for the performance of the piece, in which I attempt to translate some characteristics of these islands, or some behaviours, into music; ultimately they create a bridge between the textual part of the score and the visual.

The visual part of the scores consist of my versions of preexisting maps from the medieval Arab and Persian tradition of KMMS[1]. The use of these non-mimetic maps[2] was certainly not for navigation, as in the case of the modern ones, but they had an iconographic use: they could be defined as carto-ideographs. Therefore these pictures can be seen not as descriptions of territories but rather as spaces[3], in a very similar way as graphic scores do not necessarily describe the final auditive result. My versions of these maps insert in the tradition of inexact copies of copies; nevertheless they have been bonded to my musical necessities, and therefore transformed into musical graphic scores.

The instructions part of the text provided information about how to read and use the visual material.

Each of the 9 pieces can be performed separately from the others, or in combination with all of them, in any order, with any duration. Since the material of these pieces is not defined, these scores are ment as tools for any musician or artists who can use them regardless of the style, language or media. The performers are therefore responsible for making important choices, which can be very personal and different every time, influencing dramatically the colour of the outcome, though the structure of the pieces should be strictly respected.

---

1 From the acronym of the work of Iṣṭakri (b.-d 957AD) *Kitāb al masālik wa-al-mamālik Ṣurāt* (Book of Routes and Realms Picture). Keren C. Pinto invented this acronym in *Medieval Islamic Maps, 2016, The University of Chicago Press, London.*

2 A non-mimetic maps are intended as a non-mimetically accurate representation of the world

3 *This world of images and signs... is situated at the edges of what exists,...between the conceived (abstraction) and the perceived (the readable/visible), between the real and the unreal. Always in the interstices, in the cracks...it presents itself as "transparent world"...The more carefully one examines space, considering it not only with the eyes, not only with the intellect, but also with other senses, with the total body, the more clear it becomes aware of the conflicts at work within it, conflicts which foster the explosion of abstract space and a production of a space that is other.*
(Henri Lefebvre: The production of space, 1974 Anthropos, Paris)

Definitions:

Climax:
Differently from how it is intended in our times, this latin word could refer to an increase or decrease of a certain element in rhetoric. In this piece it can refer to any parameter. A diminuendo can be seen as a decreasing climax in the parameter of dynamics. Similarly an accelerando can be seen as an increasing climax in the parameter of speed, or a descent into a lower register, as a decreasing climax in the parameter of pitch.

Codification/Encoding:
Direct and strict relationship between a certain stimulus and its musical response. It is normally meant as a set of rules to determine a fixed translation of a specific sign, visual or acoustic, into sound. When an element is encoded, it corresponds to one and only specific sonic result, or to a specific technique to produce sound, or to a specific mental state in which the musician produces sound. The condition for a code to exist, is its coherence through the performance.

Modulation:
A gradual passage from one state of one or more parameters to another one. For example a modulation in the pitch parameter implies a gradual change from one pitch to another, while leaving unadulterated the other parameters you have settled in advance. The pace of a modulation is left to the performer's possibilities. More parameters can be modulated at the same time. For example speed can be decreased at a pace x, while pitch is increased at a pace y, and the bow pressure decreased at a pace z.

Parameter:
Any characteristic of the sound you are producing, which can be increased or decreased gradually while you are playing. Parameters could be the frequency, the intensity, the timbre, the density, speed, but also could be something related to the way you produce sound on your instrument, independently from the result, like the pressure of the bow, the amount of air you blow inside or outside, or the hardness of the sticks you use to percuss, the direction in which you pluck the string.

Soul:
What survives after death. If you are religious, you can easily relate to this as the immortal soul of monotheistic religions, or as Anupadaka (or specifically the Jiva) for the Indus, or the spirits for tribal shamanic religions . It's the vital and spiritual part of every human being, opposed to the body. If you are not religious you can relate to this term as the set of traces in our memory that a dead person has left inside us.

Sound Material:
Any sound texture with any means of coherence which creates a unity within it. I could be a drone (high or low) or a mix of different gestures, and can be sustained or pulsating, very sparse or dense.

Soundscape:
Is the acoustic environment as perceived by humans, in context.

Le tre isole, for 2 instruments

...The author of the Gift of Wonders says that there are three, side by side, in each a prodigy. In the first the sky flashes all night, in the second a violent wind always rages, in the third the clouds send rain.
Year after year it is always like this...

al-Qazwīnī, I, 112

Comments:
Mircea Eliade in his treatise on the history of religions speaks of a population in the Andaman archipelago, in which Puluga is the supreme being; he is imagined in an anthropomorphic way, but he lives in heaven, his voice is thunder, the wind is his breath, the hurricane is the sign of his anger, as with lightning it strikes those who violate his commandments. As in the Christian religion he is a triune god, whose essence is threefold.

Instructions:

Before performing the 2 players should go to an external environment and listen to the soundscape which surrounds them. They can listen to the same soundscape or to different ones, or listen to the same environment at different times.
Each player should focus on separating 3 different layers of what they hear.
Each of these layers will be used as a model to establish 3 different sound materials.
These could be a literal imitation of those from the soundscape, or be the result of an encoding process, a sort of translation on his own instrument of the layers heard before.
Alternatively, instead of a soundscape, the players can use as a source a complex recorded sound or noise, or a grain of it reiterated through a freezing process, recognizing also 3 different layers.
These materials should be fixed by memory, or transcribed on a music notation, or sampled by means of audio software.
The performance consists of a rapid alternation of these materials, each player independently from one to another, passing drastically, with a sudden interruption, from one material to another.
In case the 2 performers go to the same external environment at the same time to listen to the same soundscape, still each of them could understand the material in a different way, and therefore encode it or translate it to its own instrument in a different way, creating a more rich combination of textures.
The 2 performers use the map as a score, creating their own individual path freely crossing the globe from east to west, passing by an undetermined number of territories. Each of these is the home of one of the sound materials derived from the soundscape; these are indicated by 3 different letters (ج،ب ,ا). Each territory is a space, and has its own duration according to its size on the map.
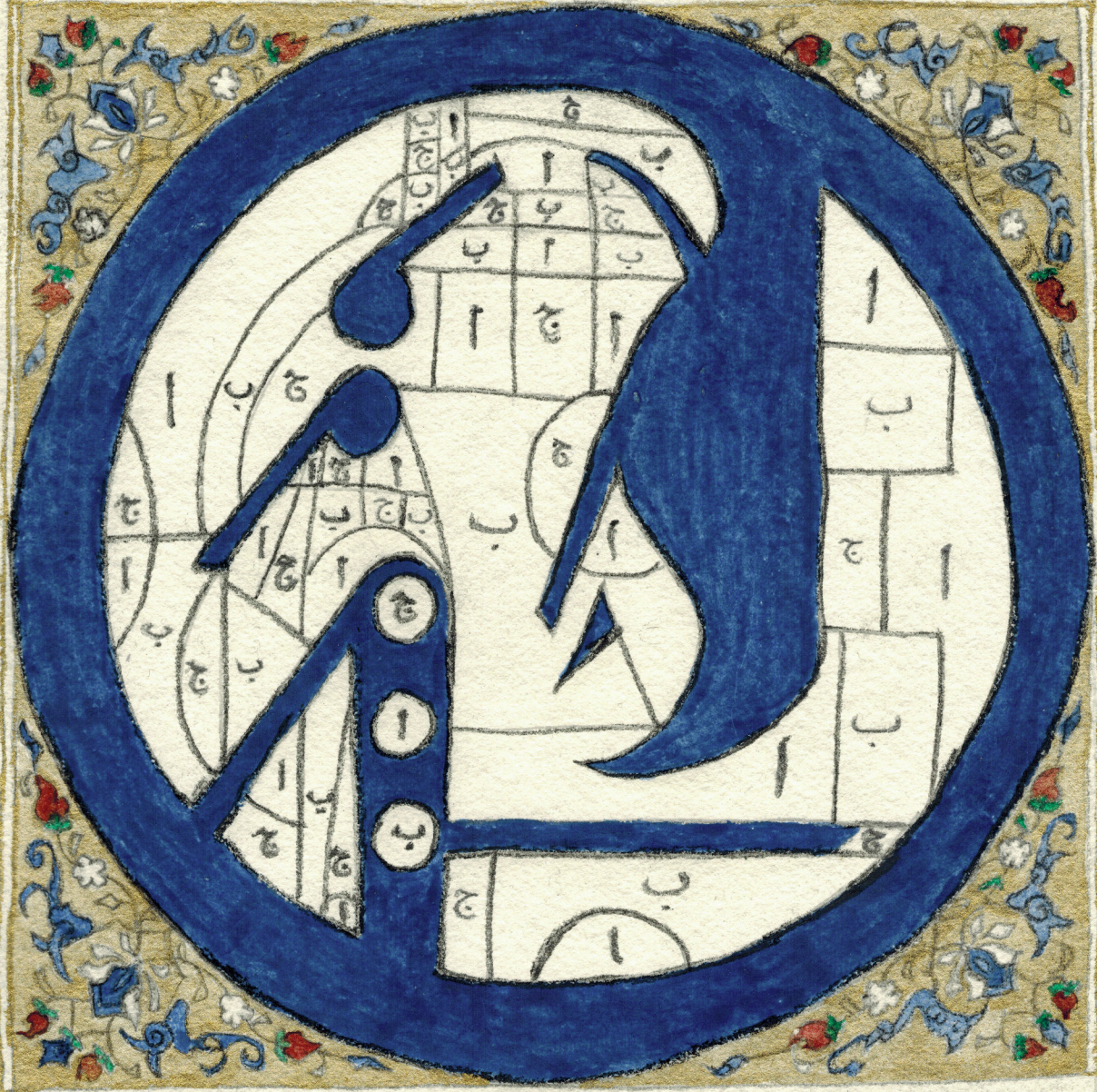
Isola combusta, for 2 performers

..An island deep in this sea, in which rarely lands anyone from our countries.
A certain merchant says: -I embarked and after the vicissitudes had made me turn for a long time, I reached this island where I saw many people. I stayed there for a long time, got acquainted with them and learned something of their language. One night, here they are gathered to scrutinize a planet that has risen to the breeze and then start crying, complaining, despairing. I asked why and they said: -This planet rises every thirty years, and when it reaches our zenith, everything on this island is on fire.
Then they got busy taking boats, got them ready for departure and when the planet approached the zenith they embarked taking light things to transport. I embarked with them.
We moved away from the island for a while and when they realized that the planet was no longer at its zenith we returned. We found everything reduced to ashes.
And they started building again...

al-Qazwīnī, I, 120,-21

Comments:
 This story is about taking knowledge of its own circularity. And poses the question about what shall I bring with me from my "previous life" in order to reconstruct my future?

Instructions:

The 2 musicians start playing from the same territory close to the encircling ocean; as the piece enfolds, they proceed along the circumference, moving clockwise towards the next territory.
Each territory is a space where one specific paramether is variated. Each parameter is associated with a letter (د,ج,ب,ا); however which parameter has to be varied, and to which letter it connects, is decided freely by the players, before performing the piece. For example, letter ا could correspond, in the case of a performance by 2 string players, to the amount of pressure used with the bow, letter ب could be associated with the volume, and so on. The duration of each territory is relevant to its size on the map.
The variation of a parameter is for of a climax, both ascending and descending. Once the acme of the climax is reached, each player proceeds to the following territory, with a new material. This new material is derived from, or contains elements of, the material used while playing in the previous territory.
The performers enter the new territory one after the other, in a way that the second player (which moves later) always waits for the first player to be half way on the new territory, before entering himself into the next one.
The piece ends when the 2 performers enter a new territory at the same time; when this happens they wait for the last modulation to exhaust. This could just happen accidentally, or could be decided in advance; in this case the 2 players agree before the performance on a certain amount of territories to be crossed.
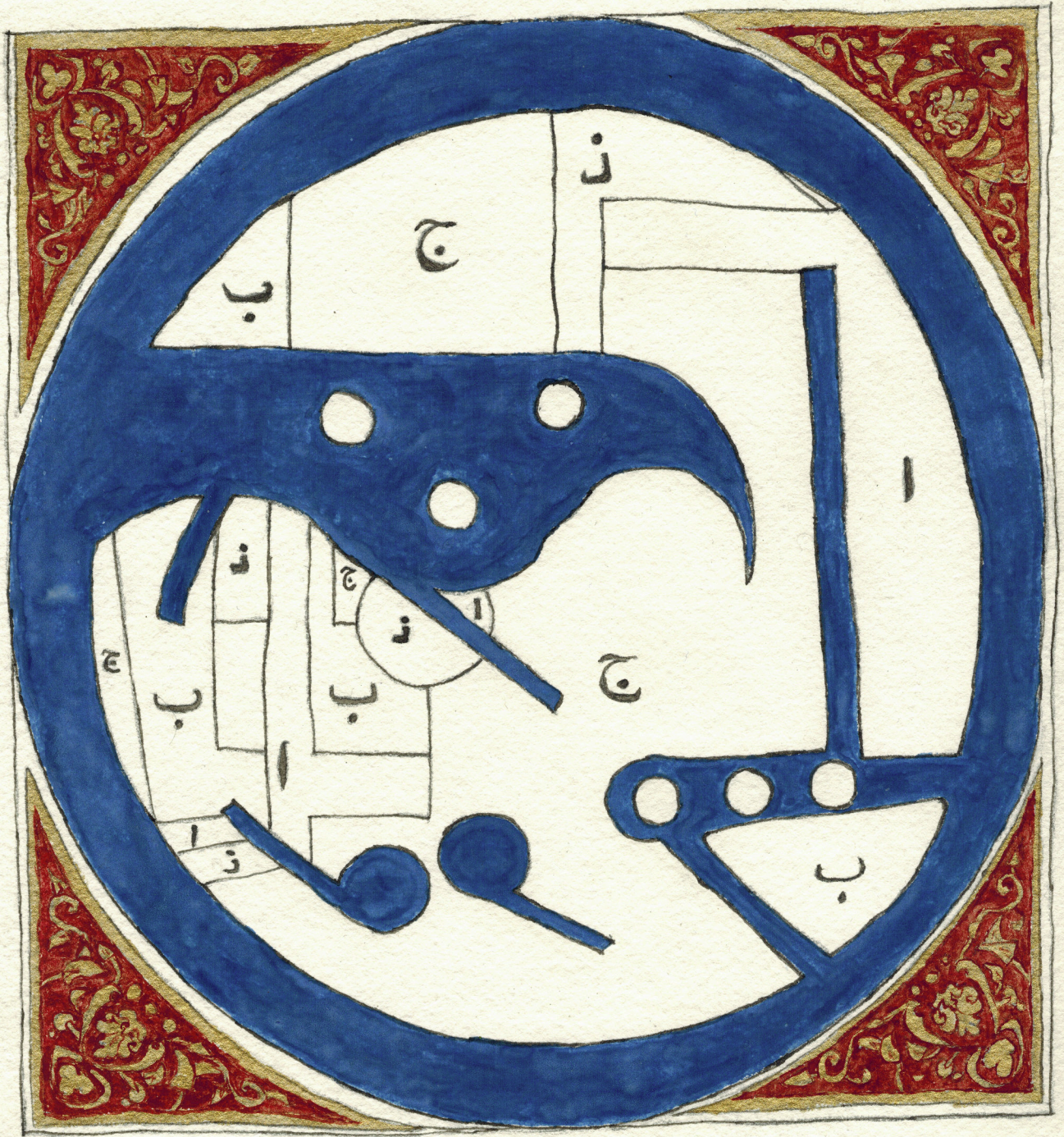
L'isola del Frastuono, for 2 performers

...Finest island in the Zanğ country. On this island, says a certain merchant, there is an amazing city in white stone from which noise and tumult can be heard even though there is no human being.
Sometimes the sailors land there, take the water, drink it and find it sweet, good, of fragrant camphor ... In the vicinity, however, there are mountains from which at night a mighty fire is released, from which voices are heard and din. There are those who say that those voices, that great crackle indicate the death of their king...

al-Qazwīnī, I, 121

Comments:
The idea of the acoustic nature of the soul which was transmitted through the Middle Ages in Europe (Hildegarde von Bingen: "Symphonalis est anima") and was resumed by the German romanticism, embodies in tribal cultures in the believe that the soul of the dead survives as perceptible essence only as a sound.
"The vocal imitation is the strongest form of mystical participation in the surrounding world. By singing the name or the melody or the acoustic substance of the totem, the spirit is forced to immerse itself in the breath of the singer." *Bruce Chatwin*

Definitions:
Soul: What survives after death. If you are religious, you can easily relate to this as the immortal soul of monotheistic religions, or as Anupadaka (or specifically the Jiva) for the Indus, or the spirits for tribal shamanic religions . It's the vital and spiritual part of every human being, opposed to the body. If you are not religious you can relate to this term as the set of traces in our memory that a dead person has left inside us.

Instructions:

Preparation: Through any means of mystic, religious or psychological practice, the performers should get in contact with one or more relatives, or an important person from his/her past, who passed away.
Try to focus on the sound of his/her soul.
Try to reproduce this sound on your instrument, creating a "Totem sound".
Watch at the golden lines of the map as if they were streets of an imaginary city. Imagine that you are strolling around silently in this deserted space. At times, at turns, on opening towards the sea, the totem sound appears.
Use the map as a score: each musician decides before where to place its totem sound on the map. Perform your totem sound as you encounter it, and play it continuously and reiterating it, for a duration of 15 to 30 seconds. When finished, go back to silence. Then continue your journey through the map, and as you encounter your totem sound, play it again.

Isola del Sommerso, for 2 performers

...It is a compact beast like a sphere that emits very high screams, screams that you don't know where they come from. For six months, it is said, he dwells in the sea, the other six he appears on that island.
It is not known what it is, nor what its food is, nor how he eats it..

Ibn Waṣīf Šāh,23r

Comments:

The most surprising thing about this story is that it pushes us to imagine a form of life radically different from what we know, yet inserted into the order of creation as a normal anomaly. It does not give much information, but rather creates a mystery.
The idea of sphericity perhaps has a possible historical interpretation. Plato (*Laws X, 898*) judged that the planets and stars are alive; he thus endowed the fantastic zoology with vast spherical animals. Later Origen taught us that the blessed will enter by spinning into eternity. Giordano Bruno thought that the planets were large calm animals, with warm blood and regular habits, endowed with reason. Kepler also speculated that the Earth was a living monster, whose breathing reproduced the ebb and flow of the sea.

Instructions
For this piece, both performers will have to limit the frequency range to a set of pitches, in a register in which their instrument, or voice , is not anymore recognisable as such. Both performers have to imagine a form of sound completely different to those she/he is used to.
The two players perform their chosen sounds, each of them at a regular pulsation, but at individual tempi.
Use the jade mountains which surround the encircling ocean, as a reference to count regular pulsations, and to establish a total duration. You can count how many full circles around the map you are going to make, before performing. The proximity or the distance with objects contained in the map should determine deviations in the pulsations, or in the quality of the sounds.

L'isola di Malakān, for 2 performers

...Huge sea beast is Malakān, who has made his home on that island. He has many heads, different faces, curved canines, and he feeds only on other sea beasts that he is able to hunt.
They say that he serves as a mount for some ruler of the geniuses who inhabit the sea, since he has two wings, which are raised and joined at the ends becoming like a vault that shelters from the sun. The ancients spoke of it considering it as a mountain.
On the island of Malakān there are people with human features, but their heads resemble those of beasts. They immerse themselves in the sea and, as far as they can, bring out marine animals, which they eat...

<div align="right">

Ibn Waṣīf Šāh,20v

</div>

Comments:
In the description of this island, three kinds of characters appear: Malakān (the beast), the genius (the human which dominates the animal), and the people with human features but with beast heads (human-beast). This latter figure, half way between an animal and a human, appears already in Assyrian world, with the Lamassu, winged Taurus with a human head, that guards the gates of Nineveh and Khorsabad; it also survives in Ezekiel's vision, in the Tetramorph. In medieval Christian iconography, the representatives of redeemed and accomplished humanity have the heads of animals. Over the centuries, the split between man and animal has been the basis of the anthropomorphic machine. On the one hand, the human, capable of interpreting the world around him by re-creating it (*weltbildend*), and on the other hand, the animal, with its "world poverty" (*weltarm, see Heidegger Gesamtausgabe vol 34*), with a mechanical reaction to the signs that surround it, thus perceiving reality not as an entity, but only in relation to what it means for itself. The animal-man is the one who, beatified by the redemption, practices the *agnoìa (ἀγνοία)*, as an area of non-knowledge, a state very similar to that of Heidegger's deep boredom, that is a survival of nature to the dismissal of logos (λογος).

Instructions:
The two performers use the map as a graphic score; though they have to make a clear distinction between three different ways of interpreting it. These three different ways constitute three separate sections of the piece, which gradually fade into each other.
The first section is the reading of the Beast, which indicates an irrational way of playing the graphic score: these signs can be chosen among any sign on the map, and will be codified as connected to a specific sound material.
The second section is the reading of the Human, which establishes a free interpretation of the same signs of the map, establishing relationships among them. The performers have to build a logical development of their sound material, creating connections and transformations of the different materials previously encoded.
The third section is the reading of the Human-Beast. Here the performers interpret the score as a whole, suspending the judgment, and react to the visual stimulus of the maps. Do not follow your logic, nor your instinct, but just live in the score, listening with indifferent amazement to the sound produced by your instrument, or voice.
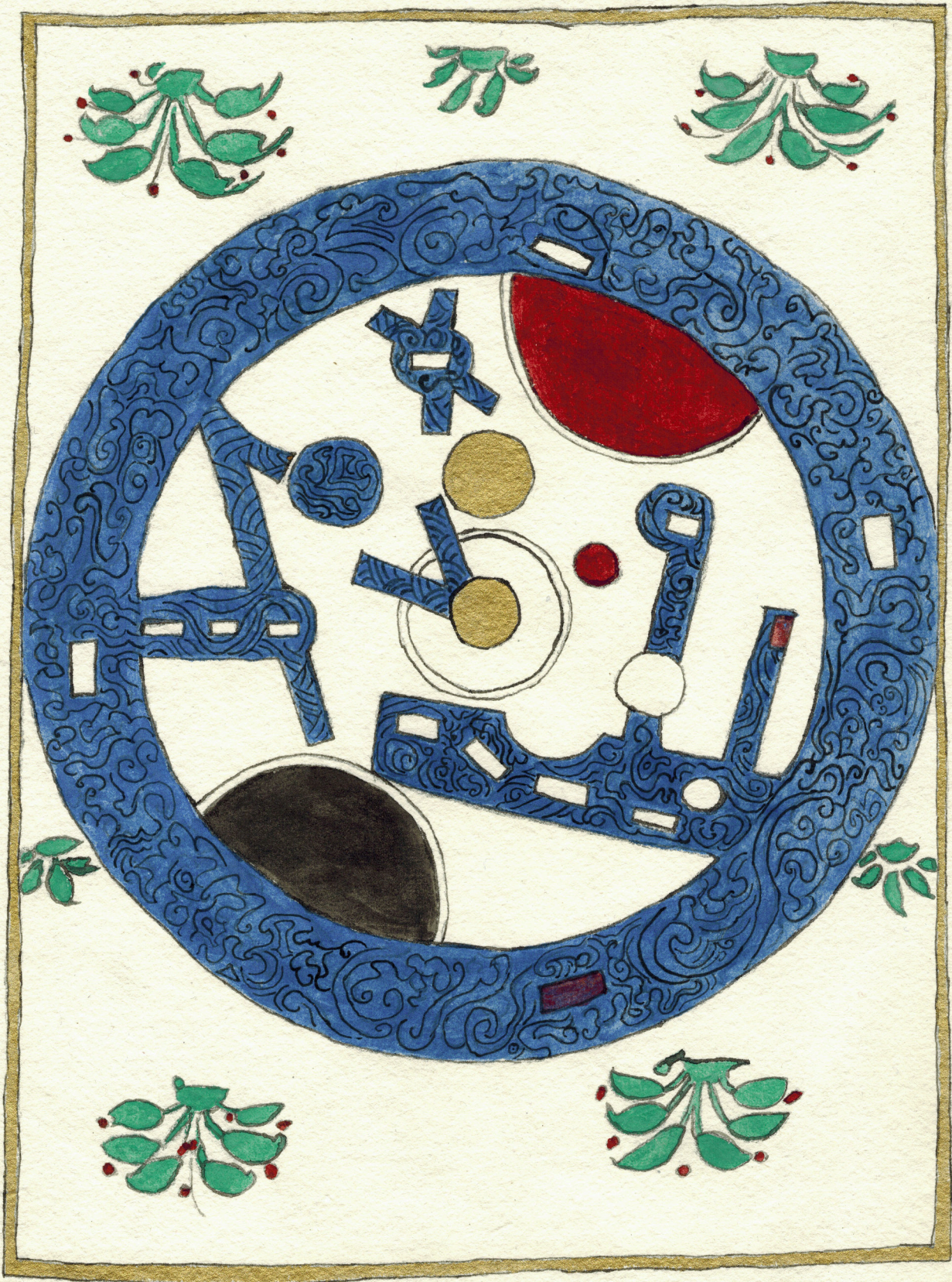
Isola di Tārān, for 2 performers

...It is close to Ayla, inhabited by unfortunates called Banū Ğaddān who live on fish having neither agriculture, nor breeding, nor fresh water; their houses are wrecks of ships. They take bread and fresh water from those who occasionally pass by their part, and when asked: -What is it that makes you stay in this place? - They answer: -The belly! The belly! It is definitely the worst place in this sea..

<div align="right">

al-Qazwīnī, I, 119

</div>

Comments:

The belly, as the part of our body which connects us to our family and to our traditions, appears in this story as an inner force that puts us in contrast with the external forces of the circumstances. Poverty is here in opposition to genetics, and the hunger to the belly itself. The collision between these two forces, brings to a sort of immobility, which prevents the inhabitants from escaping or acting to change the status quo.

Instructions:

The 2 performers read the map/score clockwise, starting from any of the mountains that surround the encircling ocean. Each mountain represents a time unit which is measured individually by each of the players. The proximity to a certain object in the middle of the map, determines a modulation of a single parameter. Each modulation has to return to the same material which was established as a base at the beginning.
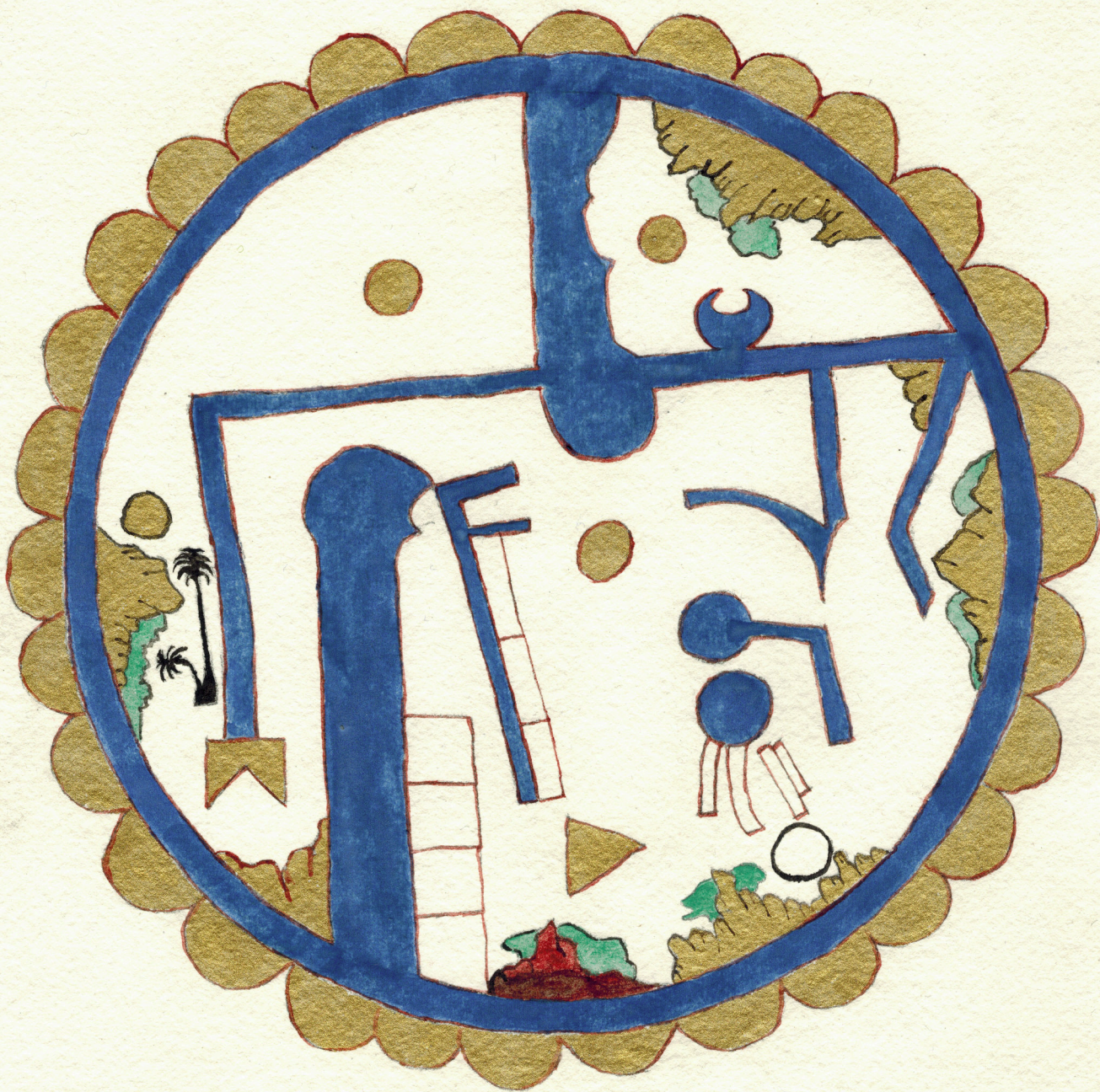
Isola Mobile, for 2 instruments

..and there is an island with white houses and domes that appear and take shape in the eyes of the sailors who immediately yearn to reach it.
But the closer they get, the more it goes away, and they insist until desperate they turn elsewhere..

Ibn Waṣīf Šāh, 17v

Comments:

This story speaks about the tension towards something that we cannot finally reach. It is connected to the despair of an uncorresponded love, as well as the strain (*streben*) towards the noumenic truth for romantic idealistic philosophers.

Instructions

For this piece the performers will have to determine, before the performance, 2 different roles: the first player will lead the piece and the second player will follow the first one.
As the first player will start playing, the second one will follow him slightly after, in the attempt of imitating the material of the first one.
During the performance, the first player will have to constantly change his material, through a gradual modulation in one parameter at time. When one parameter modulates, the other ones have to remain constant. For example, if the performer makes a modulation in the parameter of volume, this will be the only parameter changing within the sound material that he chose.
The map/score will indicate which parameter has to be modulated by the first player; the second player follows him slightly after, never reaching a perfect unison with the other.
Both players start from the same territory in the map/score, and decide a path together, crossing as many territories as wished. Each of these contain one letter (ذ,ج,ب,ا), which is freely assigned to one parameter. The difference in size of each territory is relevant to the duration of each modulation of the assigned parameter.
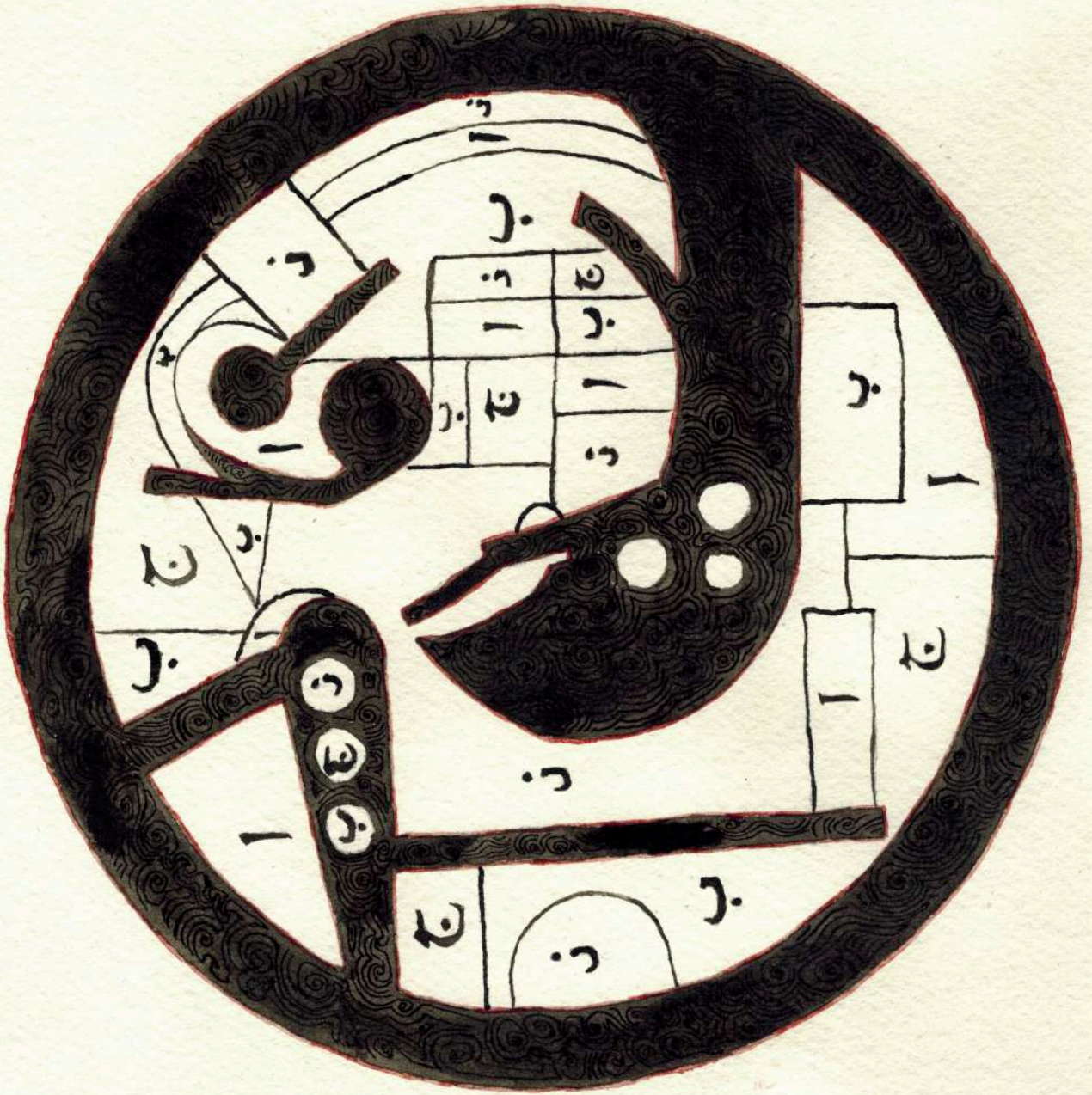
Nell'oceano for 2 performers

...Wanting the Bicorne to know the shore of that sea, he sent a ship with the order to travel for a whole year, because perhaps he would return with some news.
One year the ship went, and they saw nothing but the surface of the sea, and they wanted to return. But one of them said: - Let's go another month, there is some way of discovering something for which to appear well in the presence of the king; we ration for the return water and viaticum.
Another month they traveled, and here is a ship with people. But at the meeting no one could understand the other's speech. Then the people of Bicorne gave them a man in exchange for their woman, and with her they returned. They gave her in marriage to a man and she had a son who understood the language of both parents.
-Ask your mother- they told him- where she came from.
"From that other side I'm coming," she said
-And for what reason?
- Our king sent us to have knowledge of this side of the world.
-But is there a king there?
-Sure, a king more mighty than yours, a vaster kingdom, and more people ...

<div align="right">

al-Qazwīnī, I 105-6

</div>

Commentary:

Plato, in Phaedo, hypothesizes the idea of the antipodes, a part of land as opposed to the one we know, separated by a large sea, and inhabited by other peoples. The antipodes were already used in Roman times to justify colonial expansions towards unknown lands. Even the medieval Christian world was influenced by this belief, so much so as to condition Dante Alighieri, who places Paradise at the antipodes; later Christopher Columbus set out in search of the antipodes, and the travelers and colonizers of subsequent eras followed him with the same motivations.
Concerning our text from al-Qazwīnī, we do know how the story continues from the perspective of the inhabitants of the other side of the world, after the brutal exchange of hostages; but we can assume that the exchanged man was also given in marriage to a woman from these lands to generate a son able to speak both languages. These antipodes are specular, and their extreme distance paradoxically unites them.

Instructions:

The 2 performers agree, before the performance, on a common material that they share, and that will be considered the "meeting point". This is not indicated in the map/score, but it can be placed anywhere within the encircling ocean, arabic gulf, mediterranean, river or lake.
The performance of the piece will consist in an improvisation of a gradual transformation of a sound material towards and from the "meeting point". Here the 2 parts should be as similar as possible, if not in total unison. If a unison is not possible, because of the nature of the different instruments or voices, then keep the idea of a unison restricted to at least 2 parameters (for example rythm and timbre, or pitch and speed). This can be tematic, or pitchless, or just a sustained sound.
The performers create their paths freely among the different territories towards the "meeting point". Each territory has a different gradation of ultramarine. The intensity of the colour should influence the amount of deviation from the material which has been established as "meeting point". The deviations can be gradual or sudden, and they can interest any parameter, and eventually more than one at the same time.

Sindarūsa, for 2 performers

...Island in the ocean. Some people, it is said, passed on an island in this sea when it raged and surged. They looked, and behold, they saw a white-haired old man, with a white beard, in green clothes. Immobile on the water he said:

Glory be to him who ordered things
that he knows the secrets of hearts
who entangled the seas with his power.
Go between West and East until you reach some mountains, go into them.
By the power of God High and Mighty you will escape it and you will be saved.

And they followed the way marked off by those until they came to this island of Sindarūsa. Here was a community with long faces, with forged golden scepters on which they rested and with which they fought. They had gold on their heads and their garments were woven with gold...

al-Ḥimyarī,327

Commentary:
According to the medieval Sufi tradition, beyond the encircling ocean, mystical mountains of jade surround the earth, separating the visible world from the invisible one of the cosmos and eternal life: the Jabal Qāf. Those who have the spiritual stamina and patience to make it across the encircling ocean that separates us from cosmos, will obtain wisdom and peace.

Instructions:
During the performance the interprets must make a musical spiritual journey, questioning themselves, while crossing the ocean of their own thoughts. Gradually the performers learn to observe their own thoughts from an external perspective.
Each player uses the map/score starting from the center, where the Ka'bah is represented, towards any of the jade mountains encircling the map. Their path can either go through the different territories, thus being fragmented, or go through the sea, therefore being a continuous modulating sound. At each obstacle on the map (a border or a new sea, or a new strain) the performers learn to observe their thoughts from an external perspective, detaching themselves, and progressively moving away from the tyranny of the ego.

They are made exclusively with 23,75 Karat Gold, Afghan lapis lazuli powder, Madder root, malachite powder, charcoal, Indian Ink, Arabic Gum on Khadi cotton paper.