

## AURAL ARCHITECTURE: THE CONFLUENCE OF FREEDOM

MYRA MELFORD

*A man sets himself the task of drawing the world. As the years pass, he fills the empty space with images of provinces and kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fish, houses, instruments, stars, horses and people. Just before he dies, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his own face.<sup>19</sup>*

*"Where is the plan you are following, the blueprint?"*

*"We will show it to you as soon as the working day is over; we cannot interrupt our work now," they answer.*

*Work stops at sunset. Darkness falls over the building site. The sky is filled with stars.*

*"There is the blueprint," they say.<sup>20</sup>*

*...vivid forms have been created in man's search to experience the divine. These spaces are the embodiment of deeper reality, maps that point the way and offer pathways back to the Self within...These spaces are enlivened by the power of the One who resides there, whom we meet on our own inner ground.<sup>21</sup>*

19. Jorge Luis Borges, *El Hacedor (Dream-tigers)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), from the epilogue.

20. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanich, 1974).

21. G. Gilbert, "Patterns of Faith," *Darshan* 97 (New York, April 1995).

The house in which I lived from the ages of three to eighteen, designed and built by Frank Lloyd Wright, had a major impact on my development and direction as a composer and improvising pianist.

Another such building is the mosque, La Mezquita, in Cordoba, Spain, which I visited in 1994. I happened to walk into this building one morning before it was officially open to the public. As soon as I entered I felt like a different person. All the distracting thoughts and chatter in my mind were suddenly stilled. The space was beautiful, quiet, and dark except for occasional shafts of dusty sunlight; and it was completely empty except for a forest of stone columns and arches which my guide book aptly described as a meditation in stone. This experience kindled an aspiration for me as a musician: to create an aural space, if you will, that is not only structurally and esthetically satisfying, but that also allows for the individual listener or player within it to have her



ves one feeling alone, but that deepest feelings or longings. Those of Frank Lloyd Wright, creating music. And music, it might. In the first volume of his testament of his vision for modern music: "...as a small boy...I used to...To my young mind it all came since learned it was *the language* to me architecture is just as human heart...I know there are ways of putting things together sense of fitness what music is sound."<sup>22</sup> These words suggest intellectual process, which is a connection between the language of creation.

One of the most extra-musical influences on music as designed by Frank Lloyd Wright was the house in Glencoe, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago in Michigan. Built in 1915 in a style Wright intended for middle-class use which was built for his own use and had elegant poured concrete poured into the neighborhood and all designed by Wright. As a result, if I'd lived in many other houses with this aesthetic experience. The exterior was made of wood trim defining the house and ended beautifully with the windows bringing in a lot of light and textures and woodwork. One of the wooden slats, between the slats, allowed sound to filter through. The slat was placed in the middle of the wall of the living room. Every wall was vanishing—that

interior space should be fluid, not boxy, and in turn should flow out and blend into the surrounding landscape. Wright aspired to "the natural building, naturally built, native to the region...a building as beautiful on its site as the region itself."<sup>23</sup> The Booth House was an even more dramatic example of this, with its many rooms and levels seeming to grow out of its hilltop perch and its cantilevers jutting out over the ravine.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 311.

In high school, I began studying Wright's architecture and philosophy. I visited many of his buildings in the Chicago area and in Spring Green, Wisconsin, where he had built Taliesin East, his home and school. I haven't yet had the opportunity to visit his house, Fallingwater, in Bear Run, Pennsylvania, but I came across a description which would apply to many of his designs: "For Wright's rooms were rarely enclosed by four walls; rather areas were defined by a change in ceiling height or the position of built-in furniture, so that functions as well as spaces interpenetrated and overlapped, especially at corners. What constituted the indoors and outdoors was deliberately left vague; even the continuous metal windows...touched the walls without a frame to emphasize the same materials used either side of them. The same stone floors seep out under the doors."<sup>24</sup>

After moving to New York City, when I began to practice composition and improvisation seriously, I realized there were certain of Wright's ideas I could apply to creating music:

In music the Romanza is only a free form or freedom to make one's own form. A musician's sense of proportion is all that governs him in it. The mysterious remains just enough a haunting quality in a whole—so organic as to lose all tangible evidence of how it was made—and the organic whole lives in the harmonies of feeling expressed in sound. Translate 'sounds and the ears' to 'forms and the eye,' and a Romanza, even, seems reasonable enough, too, in architecture.... To be potentially poetic in architecture, then, means—to create a building free in form (we are using the word Romanza), that takes what is harmonious in the nature of existing conditions inside the thing and outside it and with sentiment (beware of sentimentality)—bringing it all out into some visible form that *expresses those inner harmonies perfectly, outwardly*, whatever the shape it may take.<sup>25</sup>

24. Charles Kneivitt, *Shelter* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1996), p. 128.

25. Wright, *Collected Writings*, p. 314.

This idea of working within a free form, guided by one's sense of proportion, not being able to tell how the form was created, as well as allowing for

a free flow between inside and outside, made sense to me metaphorically as I started to develop my musical and compositional vocabulary. I was exploring sound and texture within mostly free and structured improvisations, experimenting with different frameworks, playing with the balance of composed and improvised material within a piece and also trying to create an invisible seam between what was notated and improvised. I was also developing my keyboard and inside-the-piano vocabulary—playing directly on the strings and soundboard. At the same time I was beginning to write within more traditional sounding song forms using the language of jazz, classical, folk, blues, and gospel music, and I was looking for a way to synthesize or make sense of these seemingly contradictory tendencies—improvising both within and without form; playing inside the harmony or rhythmic feel as well as with a greater sense of tonal and rhythmic freedom. Through my understanding of Wright's approach to architectural design and subsequent composition lessons with Henry Threadgill, I began to find a way to integrate these ideas into a coherent whole through combining composition and improvisation in an organic way. Both Wright and Threadgill likened the creation of their work to that of a living organism.

One of the key ideas of Wright's philosophy pertained to what he called 'organic architecture': the building growing out of the site, out of materials that fit with the site, out of the function it needs to serve, without imposing a design, rather, letting the design create itself. He explained it this way: "An architect must 'grow' his buildings from his motif, so that his building is

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 259, 261.

just as natural an expression of thought and feeling directing power toward ultimate purpose as any tree or any engine for that matter... Things of themselves begin to proceed from generals to particulars—they begin to build of themselves, to develop, emerge, and take inevitable form, forcing nothing, imposing not at all... There is destiny inherent in every chosen motif and it finds destiny anew in your hands guided by imagination to your heart's desire."<sup>26</sup> During my composition lessons, Threadgill talked about organic composition—starting with a small cell or musical phrase and allowing a whole composition to grow naturally, through an infinite number of permutations, out of that initial material including the form or structure of the piece. This lesson from Henry continues to be the basis for my approach to composing and improvising—allowing/following this organic growth.

Some of the techniques I use for developing the initial musical cell are familiar to many composers. They include the analysis of the phrase in terms of

its intervals and the transposition of the cell above, a minor 3rd below, and the cell's complement; reordering the intervals from stacking or verticality to horizontal and then developing permutations of the cell called crystallization: "... shapes or groups of sound that emerge from the form of the work is the crystallization of the form of crystals—the dimension of time has much larger implications for the work accorded with both Threadgill's and Wright's organic architecture. Variations in visual and sculptural approach to manipulating timbral blocks.

The Varèse technique of interval projection, expansion, and contraction to derive variations in intervallic structure: a 4th with a minor 3rd above and a 4th below the lowest note, or a 4th below to a minor 3rd above, or a 2nd-inversion minor triad.



One way I'll use the cell is to derive the harmony [F...]

I once read that Stravinsky had a pen technique to which Henry Threadgill what might be a pretty compelling. The e

its intervals and the transposition of the phrase into all those keys (i.e., a 4th above, a minor 3rd below, etc.); finding the inversion, retrograde inversion, and complement; reordering the notes within the phrase; and deriving the harmony from stacking or verticalizing the horizontal phrase (putting it on another axis) and then developing permutations of that through a concept that Edgar Varèse called crystallization: "...internal structure expanded and split into different shapes or groups of sound constantly changing shape, direction and speed, the form of the work is the consequence of this interaction—limitless as the external form of crystals—the dimension of the infinite."<sup>27</sup> This process of crystallization has much larger implications in terms of overall compositional structure, which accorded with both Threadgill's concept of organic composition and Wright's organic architecture. Varèse was working with a very visual and sculptural approach to music—creating and manipulating timbral blocks of sound within space.

27. Jonathon W. Bernard, *The Music of Edgar Varèse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 43.

The Varèse techniques I use include rotation, projection, expansion, and contraction. Here's a simple example of using rotation to derive variations in harmony: say you have a chord like e-a-c, a perfect 4th with a minor 3rd above it. You rotate the middle note (a) from a 4th above to a 4th below the lowest note creating this chord: b-e-c; or from a minor 3rd below to a minor 3rd above the c: e-c-eb (e-flat). So this traditional sounding 2nd-inversion minor triad evolves into something more unusual [Fig. 1].

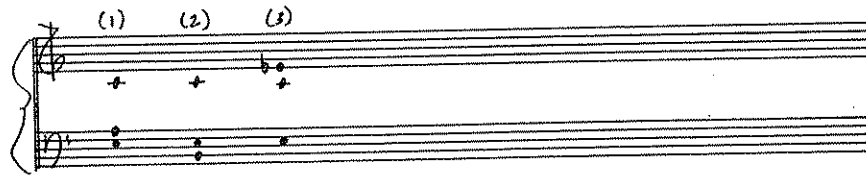


Figure 1.

One way I'll use expansion is to widen the intervals of a phrase by a minor 2nd (or larger) and then play two or more of these lines simultaneously to derive the harmony [Fig. 2].

I once read that Picasso would intentionally take an initially pretty idea and work it over and over again to find something more substantial, and that Stravinsky had a penchant for a certain awkwardness in a work of art. The techniques to which Henry Threadgill introduced me gave me the tools to take what might be a pretty or conventional idea and develop it into something more compelling. The ear plays a crucial role in all of this. It's the ear that

Handwritten musical score for five staves: Flute (Flt.), Trumpet (Tr.), Piano (PNO.), Bassoon (Bsn.), and Voice (VC). The score shows the final measure of 'Changes I'. The piano part has a complex texture with many notes and rests. The voice part has a simple melody with lyrics 'e be + e'. There are various musical notations including accidentals, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Figure 2. *Changes I*, last measure.

decides finally which of the many permutations get used and how; determining order, rhythmic feel, and tempo. My own hand size and physical tendencies influence my choices as well. Sometimes I'll deliberately choose something that's awkward to play in order to break away from habit and arrive at a new sound or feeling.

The first piece that I worked on with Threadgill was in fact the piece I titled "Frank Lloyd Wright Goes West to Rest." The title comes from the headline of an editorial in the *New York Times* about how Wright's second wife was having his remains disinterred from his burial site in Wisconsin and sent to be buried next to her in Scottsdale, Arizona, where Wright had lived the latter part of his life and where he built Taliesin West. At the time, I had been thinking about writing some kind of homage and quasi-portrait of Wright ('quasi,' because I was basing the piece more on subjective feelings of having grown up in and around his architecture and persona; it's really a very personal impression).

The musical cell I chose to start with is this one [Fig. 3]:

Handwritten musical score for two staves, likely piano and bassoon. It shows a short musical cell with various notes, rests, and accidentals. The notation is dense and includes many accidentals.

Figure 3.

Then I began making and came up with the first idea for a reading by the Brooklyn Philharmonic. I had a tremendous amount of feedback from the ensemble before, nor ever provided. This piece has had piano pieces from the original both for trio and quintet.

That initial phrase theme [Fig. 4]:

Handwritten musical score for five staves: Flute (Flt.), Trumpet (Tr.), Piano (PNO.), Bassoon (Bsn.), and Voice (VC). It shows an initial phrase theme. The piano part has a complex texture with many notes and rests. The voice part has a simple melody with lyrics 'e be + e'. There are various musical notations including accidentals, slurs, and dynamic markings. The word 'accelerand' is written at the bottom of the piano part.

Then I began making worksheets using the processes I've described, and came up with the first incarnation of this piece which was originally given a reading by the Brooklyn Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble. I learned a tremendous amount from that experience, having never written for chamber ensemble before, nor ever having asked classically trained musicians to improvise. This piece has had many lives since then—I later reduced it to a solo piano piece from the original orchestral score and since then have arranged it both for trio and quintet.

That initial phrase and the ensuing permutations became this opening theme [Fig. 4]:

The image shows a handwritten musical score for a piano introduction, labeled as Figure 4. The score is written on five systems of staves, each system containing a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. The first system begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The second system includes first and second endings, marked '1.' and '2.'. The third system features a 'rit.' (ritardando) marking. The fourth system includes a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking. The fifth system includes two 'accelerando' markings. The score concludes with a key signature change to two flats (B-flat major or D minor) and a common time signature (C).

Figure 4.

This theme is then developed through improvisation, sometimes structured and sometimes not, depending on the situation. One thing I enjoy is to change the game plan for the improvisation sections from one performance to the next. For instance, I might begin my improvisation by playing through the material backwards in another tempo, or turning the score literally upside down. I also use the same techniques for developing the vocabulary or language for the improvisation as I use for writing the material. In these times, when composers' music is so personal, standard jazz, blues, and even so-called 'free' improvisational vocabulary isn't necessarily or always appropriate. Whether I'm improvising on my own music or someone else's, I find that I need to mine the piece for ideas, rather than trying to apply some vocabulary that worked in other music. In a group situation, I might set up revolving duos and trios interspersed with overlapping quartets and quintets, or assign textural qualities to the smaller groups, using different devices like this in an attempt to keep the music fresh. This idea of rearranging the music on the spot was something I experienced working with both Threadgill and Butch Morris.

Many of the techniques used in developing the pitch material can be applied with regard to rhythm; for example, expanding and contracting the units—a group of four sixteenth notes becomes a group of four quarters and evolves into a walking bass line for Part II of the piece with an even more temporally spread out melody floating on top of it.

A more encompassing compositional process, that of integrating musical as well as extra-musical material, is exemplified in my piece called "Even the Sounds Shine." Before writing this piece I collected the following ideas which I intuitively felt belonged together: numerous melodic phrases I had transcribed from a bird I heard in Wiesen, Austria, that sounded like a cross between Ornette Coleman and Leroy Jenkins [Fig. 5];



Figure 5.

an impression of that bird  
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The piece starts w  
few seconds and then imr  
with little bits of melody j  
is played [Fig. 6-8].



an impression of that bird singing accompanied by hundreds of other birds and animals chattering one dawn that was one of the most beautiful sonic textures I'd ever heard; and the following poem by Fernando Pessoa:

In broad daylight even the sounds shine  
 On the repose of the wide field they linger.  
 It rustles, the breeze silent.  
 I have wanted, like sounds, to live by things  
 And not be theirs, a winged consequence  
 Carrying the real far.<sup>28</sup>

This poem inspired both the title and an image or feeling I wanted to convey—the idea that sound can shine ('seeing' with the ears) and that this sound has the potential to carry us beyond ourselves, to an understanding or awareness of something greater. Sound itself, a moving, transformative expression of energy, doesn't rest in its place of origin, but continually carries the message of its existence into the surrounding space. Within this poem are both the Zen idea of experiencing the senses in relation to sense objects typically associated with another sense, thereby short-circuiting the intellect and producing an experience of nonduality; and the potential for sound to transport one to an altered state of union with the Self.

28. Fernando Pessoa, *Selected Poems*, trans. Jonathon Griffin (London: Penguin, 1974).

I started with these birdcalls, and I came up with all kinds of permutations, and then played with them until I heard a theme emerge. The entire theme consists of the birdcall material. I then constructed the rest of the piece out of this same material used in different ways, as a series of landing points between improvisations and/or backgrounds for improvisation. Where I didn't use actual musical notation, I gave verbal instructions about the texture I was after.

The piece starts with the ensemble playing very loud and dense for a few seconds and then immediately getting quiet setting up a very soft texture with little bits of melody jumping out until the piano gives a cue and the theme is played [Fig. 6-8].

Improvisation, sometimes  
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 Fig. 5];







MELFORD

Handwritten musical score for a piano trio. The score is written on multiple systems of staves. The instruments are labeled on the left: *trp* (trumpet), *sax* (saxophone), *pno* (piano), *db* (double bass), and *cham* (chamberlain). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *mf*, *p*, and *mt*. There are also performance instructions like *END* and *MOLTO RITARD* at the bottom. The score is annotated with handwritten numbers (1, 4, 5) and brackets, possibly indicating rehearsal points or structural divisions.

Figure 8.

The piece then moves in  
duet improvisation that

Handwritten musical score for a duet improvisation section. It features two systems of staves. The first system is for *trp* and *sax*, with the instruction *continue ad lib.* above the saxophone staff. The second system is for *pno* and *cham*, with the instruction *continue ad lib.* above the piano staff and *continue w/ alto pno* below the chamberlain staff. The tempo is marked *II. J=88*.

At the end of the  
saxophone to solo over

Handwritten musical score for a piano solo section. It consists of two staves labeled *PNO*. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

This develops  
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Handwritten musical score for a piano solo section. It consists of two staves labeled *PNO*. The notation includes notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The piece then moves into a slower tempo to set up an open bass and trumpet duet improvisation that leads into a trumpet solo over this material [Fig. 9].

Handwritten musical score for Figure 9. It consists of five staves: trumpet (tp), alto saxophone (as), piano (pno), double bass (db), and drums (drms). The tempo is marked as *IV. J=48*. Annotations include "continues ad lib" for the saxophone and "continues ad lib" for the double bass. The piano part has a handwritten note "many" above it. The drums part has a handwritten note "trp ends" above it. The score features complex rhythmic patterns with many triplets and slurs.

Figure 9.

At the end of the trumpet solo, the piano sets up a background for the saxophone to solo over which sounds like this [Fig. 10]:

Handwritten musical score for Figure 10, showing piano accompaniment for saxophone solo. It consists of two staves: piano (pno) and saxophone (sax). The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many triplets and slurs.

Figure 10.

This develops into either a piano and saxophone duet or trio with drums. As the improvisation develops, the trumpet and bass come back in with another written background and this moves into a high-energy, densely textured piano trio with bass and drums, based on the diminished triad material, which is also one of the birdcalls [Fig. 11].

Handwritten musical score for Figure 11, showing piano accompaniment for a piano trio. It consists of two staves: piano (pno) and saxophone (sax). The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many triplets and slurs. The tempo is marked as *MOLTO RITARD*.

Figure 11.

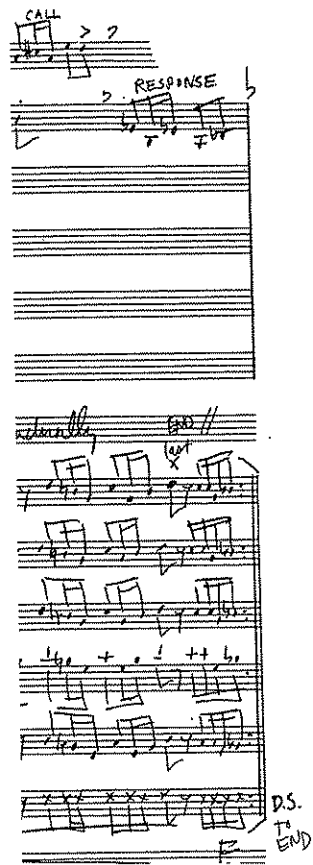


sections; and to create music that is constantly evolving within each piece, as well as from performance to performance. My techniques include the use of cross-fades and overlapping sections of improvisation and written material, one plane of music dissolving to reveal another, as well as the juxtaposition of contrasting materials. I'm interested in finding new ways of using improvised sections to develop the music—exploring how a player might improvise his or her part in a particular section without it being a featured 'solo' per se, or how a group might improvise a section with the emphasis on ensemble texture and interplay, again, rather than featured solos. For me, the use of improvisation is the key to making 'expansive' music—music that's fresh, vital, and spontaneous with a sense of inevitability to it, like the flow of a river or the flow of space in a Frank Lloyd Wright building. "The contrast of light and shade, different materials, solids and voids, and varying bright colours and textures, create a rich tapestry where inside, outside, and their interface merge imperceptibly."<sup>29</sup>

29. Kneivitt, *Shelter*, p. 136.

In recent years, my practice of the martial arts (*aikido* and *nei kung*) and meditation has provided inspiration for pursuing my musical goals. It has increased my overall energy level and my understanding of the subtle presence of *chi* (life-force or universal energy), and how to begin to use it to create/perform music by focusing on the movements of chi within the player, amongst the players, and between players and audience. The process of learning to still and focus the mind in the present moment has strengthened my ability to concentrate. I'm able to react with greater flexibility and to trust my spontaneous musical choices, both as a composer and improviser. But more than this, the insights and the physical experiences I've had while meditating have become the goal that I want to reach through playing music and to communicate experientially with the audience. There's a tangible link for me between being in a meditative state of focus—experiencing vast, infinite internal space; the dissolution of boundary between self and other (the sense of being a separate body/person); a sense of timelessness; and a deep sense of well-being and joy—and the aural space I want to build through music.

Through my studies of Eastern philosophy I've come across two ideas which seem to shed some light on my own creative process and aspirations and point me in a direction for further investigation. One is the Sanskrit word *spanda* which is the root for our word 'expand,' and which contains within it the unstruck sound *om*, from which the universe arises. The other is *Saraswati*, originally the river goddess and later the goddess of knowledge, language, the



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arts, and music, which is directly linked to *spanda* through the potent quality of sound contained within her. "Saraswati is the embodiment of the purity of supreme Consciousness from which all creation flows."<sup>30</sup>

30. E. Grimbergen, "Sweet Flows the Voice: Deities of Inspiration," *Darshan* 97: 8.

I'm reminded of a childhood ritual I had when I would go swimming in the Wisconsin River where it flowed through Spring Green, not far from Taliesin and right next to a restaurant that Wright had designed. Whenever I entered the water for the first time, I'd face upstream, hold up my arms, and ask the spirit of the river to heal me. In some way I was talking to Saraswati then, as I am now, working with "The Same River, Twice" and related ideas and projects.

I've read that all music is an attempt to recreate this internal, divine music, the primordial *om*, that is itself the same energy that creates all forms — buildings, cities, compositions—and which is also the source of supreme bliss. Emotion is projected through sound, and when that sound vibrates at the right frequency to harmonize or create a resonance with the physical world, a space of union and healing is created. The key is in "identifying and expressing the appropriate combination of vibrations for the effect you desire...the right use of intention, awareness, and sound."<sup>31</sup> This gives rise to the experience of time-

lessness—when there's no distraction or awareness of duality, no separation from immediate experience. Again, the concept of flow—that meditative state of focus in which there's no awareness of past or future. There's only a sense of merging and the knowledge that everything that exists in the universe comes from the same source of universal consciousness which

dwells within all people in the space of the heart. Everything we create, whether material, conceptual, aural, or imaginary, is only a projection or reflection of ourselves, the universal speaking through the personal. "A man sets himself the task of drawing the world."<sup>32</sup>

Unity is the goal. A transient experience that longs for eternity. In that moment when the musician, the listener (which includes the performer as well as the audience), and the music are One, this aural space of union is created and one experiences the Self of all. It's for this experience referred to as 'the confluence of freedom' that I look forward to continuing my exploration of the relationship between internal, external, and aural space—meditation and architecture; and the healing and transformative power of music and sound.

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31. T. Kenyon and V. Essene, *The Hathor Material* (Santa Clara: S.E.E. Pub. Co., 1996), p. 162.

32. Borges, *El Hacedor*, from the epilogue.

33. Kabir, *Songs of Kabir*, trans. Rabin-dranath Tagore (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1974).



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30. E. Grimbergen, "Sweet Flows  
the Voice: Deities of Inspiration,"  
*Darshan* 97:8.

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The flute of the Infinite is played  
without ceasing, and its sound is love:  
When love renounces all limits, it reaches truth.  
How widely the fragrance spreads! It has no end,  
nothing stands in its way.  
The form of this melody is bright like a million suns:  
incomparably sounds the vina, the vina of the notes of truth.<sup>33</sup>