Seeds of Skies, Alibis

Cantata by Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf, after Ovid, *Metamorphoseon*

Notes on the Process

Uljana Wolf
Berlin / New York

A few years ago, Canadian composer Marc Sabat invited me to write the libretto for a cantata he was commissioned to compose for the a cappella vocal ensemble Ekmeles in New York [1]. Marc and I had met at the Villa Aurora Artists residency in Los Angeles in 2010 where we ended up collaborating on a song cycle based on my erasure-poems of the *Letters to Calamity Jane by her daughter,* written by Jean Hickok McCormick [2], and later on *is land a part*, a composition based on contrapunctally superposed readings of the German and English versions of my *falsche freunde* [3] or false friends poems. Our conversations and friendship over the next years often touched on the interplay between lyrical and conceptual practices—such as erasure, homophonic translation, or mathematical constraints like the Fibonacci sequence in Inger Christensen's *Alphabet* (1981)—in making music and poetry, and on how these practices could be used to achieve works at once sophisticated and simple, playful and poetic, sounding out complex affective realities without surrendering to essentialist notions of self and world. For the cantata Marc invited me to think about homophonic translation as a possible writing strategy, and after months of trial and error with different texts we landed on the first 88 Latin lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoseon*—the unfolding of creation until the beginning of humans.

1. *Seeds of Skies, Alibis*, cantata by Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf, after Ovid, *Metamorphoseon*, lines 1-88 (2007).

2. Wolf, Uljana, *CAL [A] MI [T Y] JANE*, *karawa.net* #3 (`www.karawa.net/content/cal-mi-jane-\ \uljana-wolf`).

3. Wolf, Uljana, *falsche freunde, Gedichte*, Idstein, Kookbooks Verlag, 2009. Engl. Trans.: *false friends*, trans. by Susan Bernofsky, New York, Ugly Duckling, 2011.

We agreed that the work would have to represent our nomadic linguistic realities, our moving back and forth between continents, between English and German, as well as my ongoing interest in multilingual writing. We also decided, because the work was commissioned by a North American ensemble, that the libretto was to be *mainly* in English—a decentered, multilingual or German-infused English, but English no less, which is not my first language. Our metamorphosis, then, was to be a sonic exploration of unbelonging, moving between unmoored languages—an attempt to release the fixed forms which objects and shapes had taken in Ovid's prologue into a fluid and more dissociate linguistic realm. This release of meaning was partly possible due to the rather strict phonemic transcription process we adopted. Marc suggested preserving the prosodic pattern of the Hexameter as closely as possible, as well as retaining stressed vowels and consonants. The text was also to be distributed across six voices, each iterating differing lexical interpretations of similarly sounding material, flowing in to and out of dialogue with each other.

Over the course of the last years, as I was working on the libretto on and off between teaching, translating, writing, and caring for two small children, the world saw radical, troubling changes. Brexit, the Syrian civil war, the refugee crises of 2015, the election of Donald Trump, the resurgence of hypernationalist, racist movements all over Europe and worldwide were and continue to be a frightening reality, a stark backdrop to whatever creative projects I was involved in. It became more and more clear that the text we had chosen—a Ur-European text, as it were, in which a continuous strain of disasters (rape, conquest, war, jealousy) initiates a series of transformations—eerily speaks to this political moment we find ourselves in. A moment which, paradoxically, appears to move towards solidification and sameness rather than a changing of forms. Facing the ongoing challenges of globalization, the nomadization of life styles, and changing demographics, many Europeans and Americans seem to react with a yearning for essentialist rather then pluralistic or ruptured notions of self, for monolinguality rather then multilinguality. In addition, the unfolding ecological crisis of global warming and climate change, fueled by neoliberal politics and denial, continues to leave its mark on all our lives.

The work on *Seeds of Skies, Alibis* unfolded within this context of pressing social, political and ecologic concerns. But it was also a work of burying deep into a text purely as sound, of translating as non-understanding, of writing as losing grip and voice. The cantata evolved as a collaborative process, a kind of ambient procedure of de-centered listening in several stages. At first we asked the singers of Ekmeles to each record themselves reading the Latin texts and send us their recordings. I would listen to these recordings over and over, observing different pronunciations and prosodic patterns, listening to the dead language coming alive in all its plurality, error, and possibility. After that I would work on the text in batches of ten lines or so by reading the Latin together with various literal translations such as the "literal interlinear translation" from 1828 carried out "on the plan recommended by Mr. Locke"[4], and

4. *The First Book of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, with a literal interlinear translation, and illustrative notes, on the plan recommended by Mr. Locke, London 1828.

the 1857 literal translations by Dr. Giles [5]. These drafts would go back and forth between New York to Berlin, across the ocean, where Marc added more sonic variants, both German and English, vernaculars, bits of dialogue, questions. During this time I began hearing—not in the Latin, but in the discombobulated word material we produced—clusters of voices that spoke to our present context, or rather spoke out of it. Sometimes a polyphonous 'we' emerged from the sonic noise, which I came to understand of as representing precarious and pluralized subjectivities, carrying with it echoes of voices lamenting the mutation of animals, land, seas, and skies.

Rome, Villa Massimo, January 2018

5. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Books I.-IV., Construed Literally and Word for Word by the late Rev. Dr. Giles, London 1857.

Annex

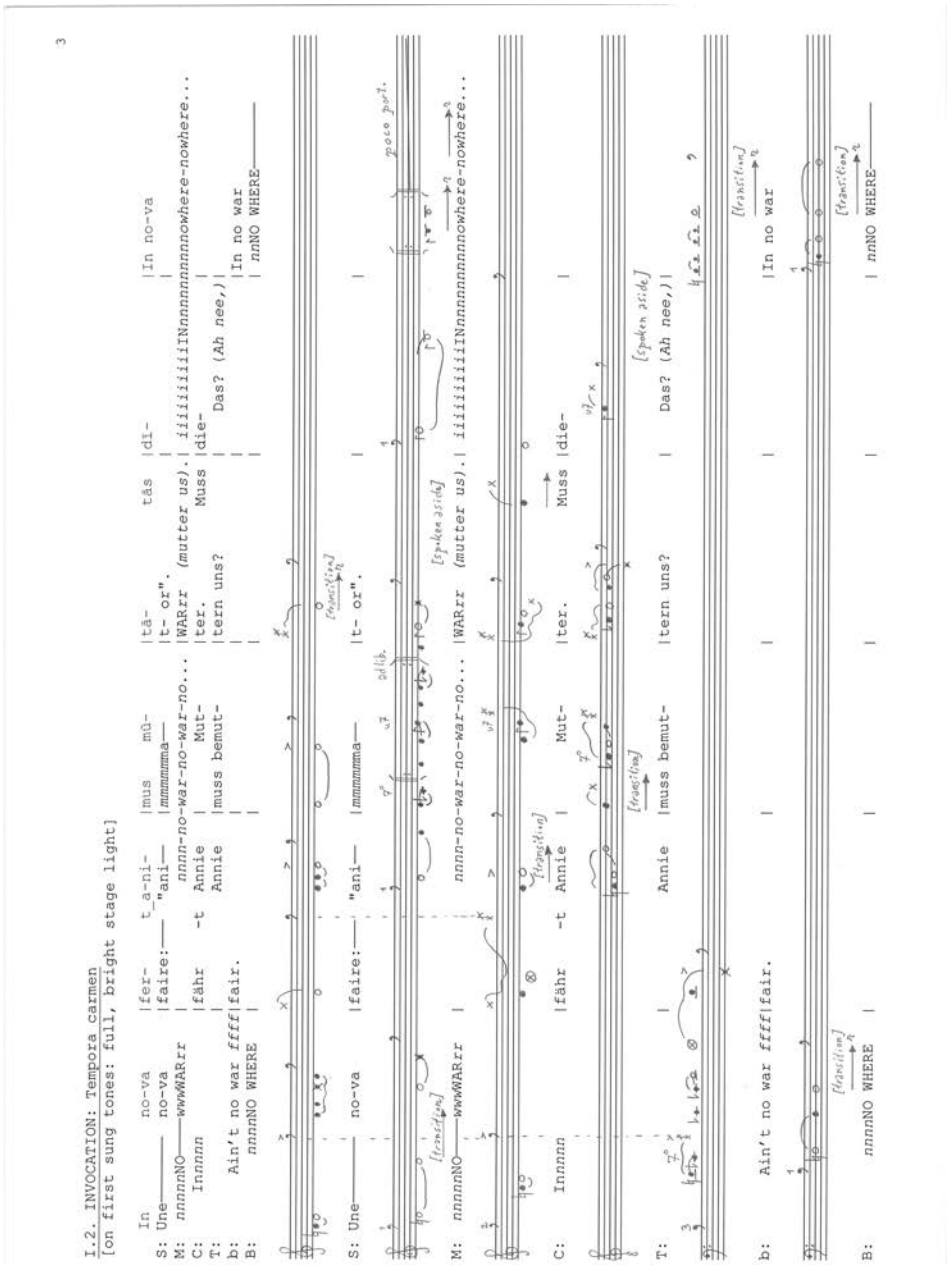


Figure 1 – Extract from Marc Sabat's score of *Seeds of skies, Alibis* (cantata for 6 a capella voices, speakers, and instruments), ca. 35' (page 3, reprinted with kind permission of Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf).

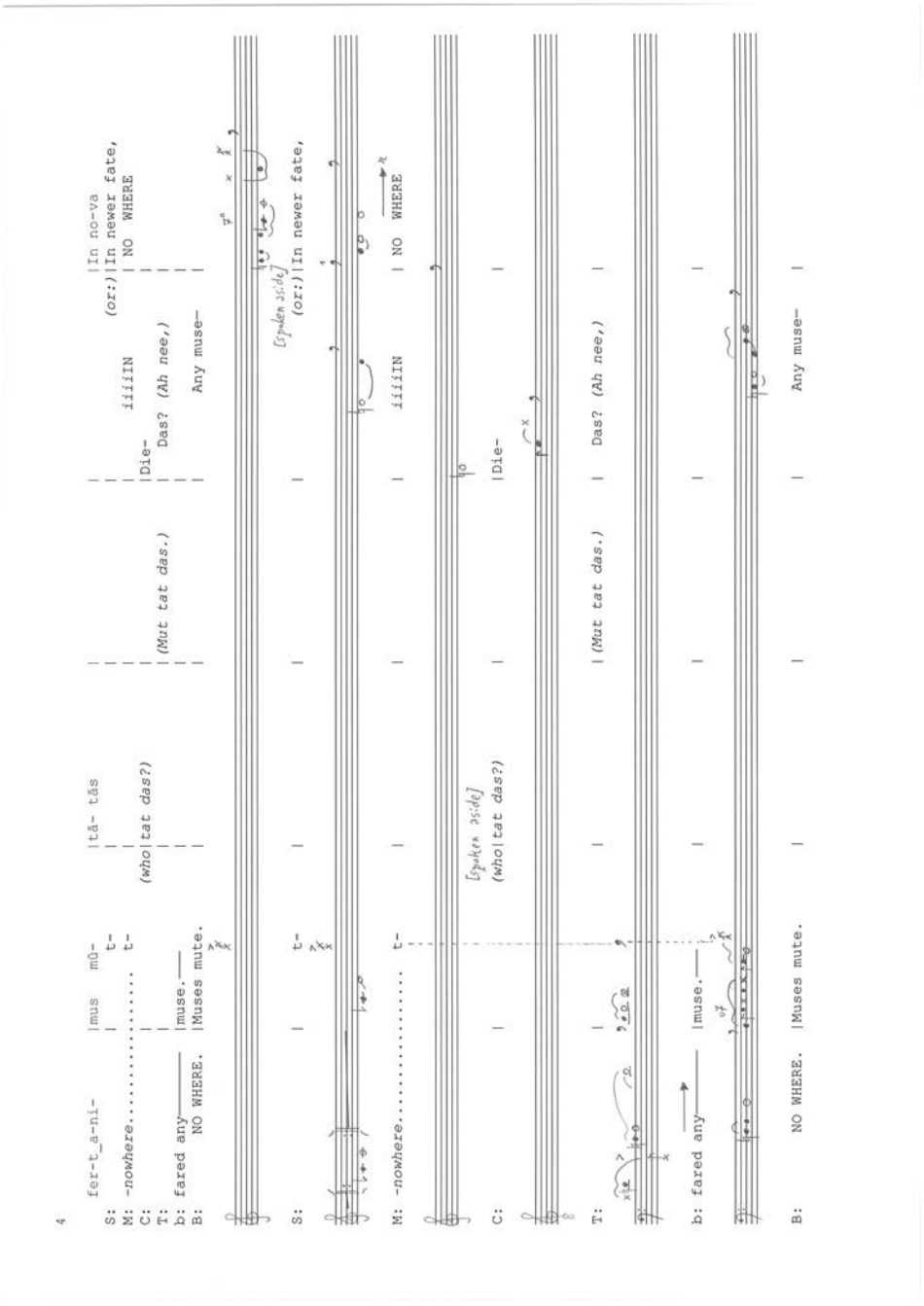


Figure 2 – Extract from Marc Sabat's score of *Seeds of skies, Alibis* (cantata for 6 a capella voices, speakers, and instruments), ca. 35' (page 4, reprinted with kind permission of Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf).

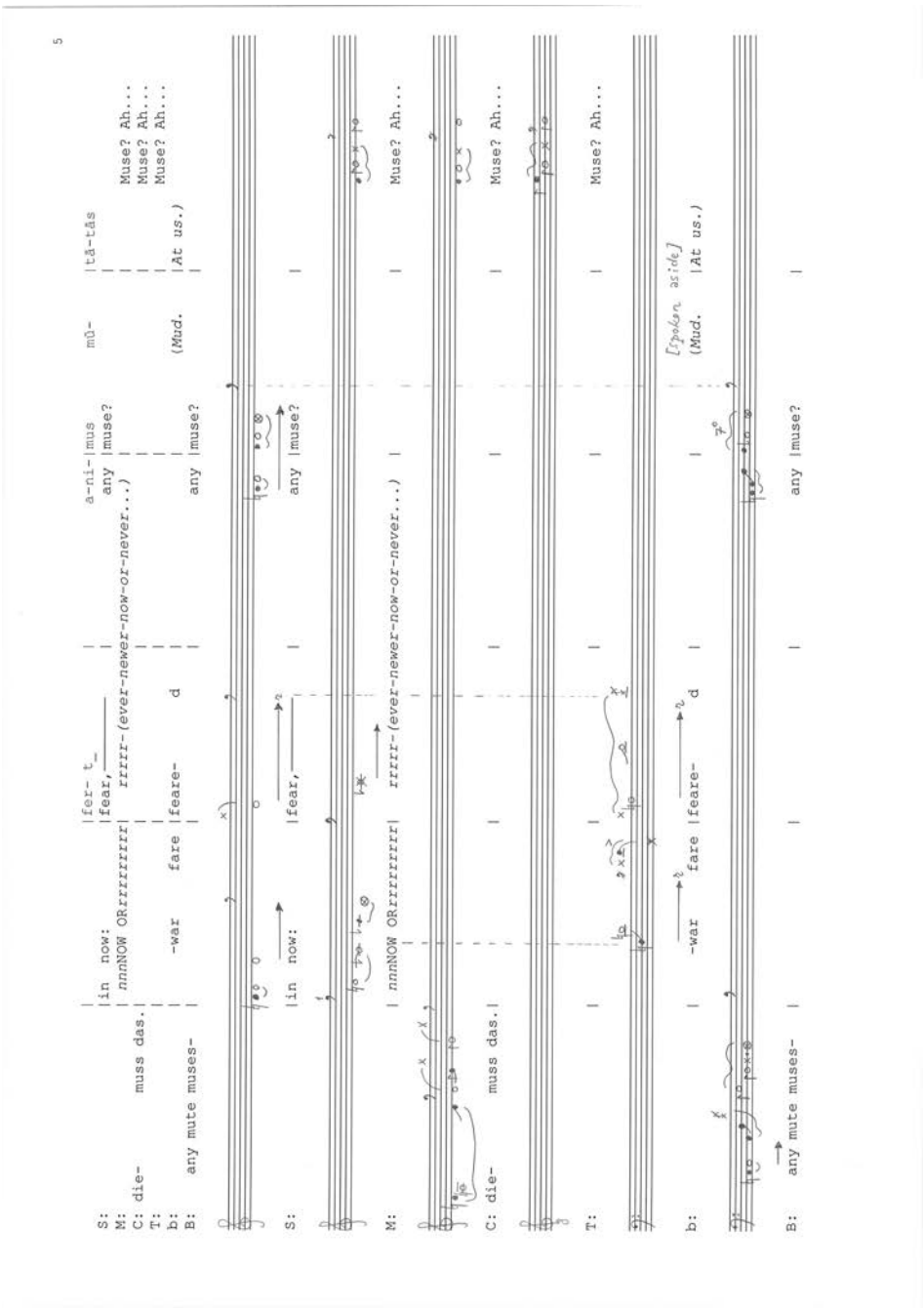


Figure 3 – Extract from Marc Sabat's score of *Seeds of skies, Alibis* (cantata for 6 a capella voices, speakers, and instruments), ca. 35' (page 5, reprinted with kind permission of Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf).

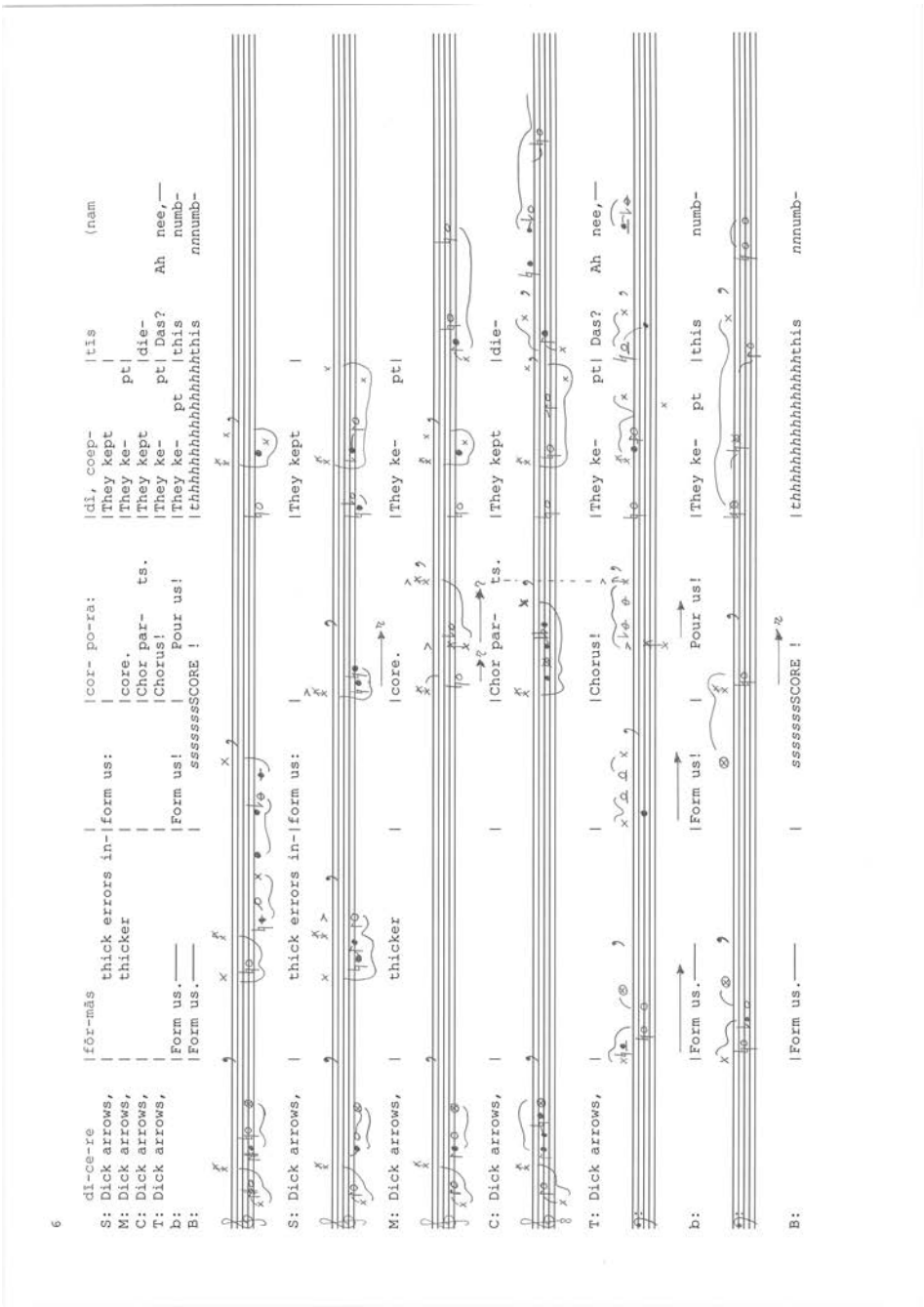


Figure 4 – Extract from Marc Sabat's score of *Seeds of skies, Alibis* (cantata for 6 a capella voices, speakers, and instruments), ca. 35' (page 6, reprinted with kind permission of Marc Sabat and Uljana Wolf).