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## *Translation, Translation, Rehearsal in Conversation*

Scott Hunter and Alexandra Macheski

Scott Hunter's "Translation, Translation, Rehearsal"<sup>1</sup> is a sound piece that explores issues of translation when a tarot deck is used to dictate the fate of each note for a saxophone quartet. Each translation of a tarot card, be it "the fool" or "the hermit," manifests in a harmonic progression of rehearsals that culminate in an infinite play on what is lost, or not lost, in the act of translation. Accompanying "Translation, Translation, Rehearsal" is a brief interview between Scott Hunter, a PhD student of literature at UC Santa Cruz, and Refract editorial board member Alexandra Macheski about how tarot and music composition, and the concept of rehearsal can create new and unforeseen harmonies. This interview, from June 15 to August 4, 2019 started as a face-to-face conversation in Santa Cruz, California, and then moved to written correspondence.

**Alexandra Macheski: What sparked your exploration in translation with a tarot card deck and music?**

**Scott Hunter:** I started using tarot cards in my musical practice as an aleatory procedure. I wanted a more concrete and regular way of working on music than sitting around and waiting for an idea to come, so I tried to turn the tarot into a machine with which I could generate raw material in a fairly reliable way. At first the question was: how do you translate a spatial arrangement into a sequence of time? Of course, this is what it is to read music in the first place. But musical notation is legible as music. Tarot is "legible" in a totally different sense—or maybe I should say it's infinitely suggestive, which gives it a mask of legibility.

To try to “read” tarot as music meant playing music that came to me more or less intuitively in response to a suggestive group of images. This is more ekphrastic than aleatory, which meant that I was back where I started: waiting for an idea to come. My next step was to try and codify the logic by which I “intuitively” read a musical phrase from a given spread of cards, so that I could use that logic to give the element of chance more of a voice. This involved learning a lot more about the structuring principles of tarot—various numerologies, symbols, the significance of different colors, and so on. I became fascinated with the potential that a shuffled tarot deck—as a whole—could be made to determine the overall structure of a composition. So the practice I ended up with, which produced this piece, was to begin with an “intuitive” reading of a few cards; to construct a kind of cipher which took that reading as a direct “translation” of each card into a tone and a duration; and to use that cipher to translate the whole deck into a harmonic sequence.

**AM:** Can you describe the methodology, or your practice, when you composed this piece?

**SH:** It’s essentially a game I play with the tarot deck. So my answer will begin with a description of the deck before I try and explain the “rules” of my game. A tarot deck consists of seventy-eight cards—fifty-six minor arcana, and twenty-two major arcana. The minor arcana is split into four suits: wands, cups, swords, pentacles. Each suit consists of ten “pip” cards, numbered one to ten, and four face cards—page, knight, king, queen. The major arcana are numbered zero to twenty-one and do not have suits. When I begin, the major arcana are the only cards that have a fixed note value—I use the note values assigned to the major arcana by an occultist named P. F. Case, about whom I should probably know more.

I draw out the shuffled cards by three until one of the major arcana shows up and declares a note. And then I start assigning notes to the minor arcana as they appear in the spread in relation to that major arcana. I try to do so as “intuitively” as possible. The trick is that once I’ve assigned a note value to a pip card or a face card, all cards of that number or face are also assigned a value in relation to the one I’m seeing. So I have a total of fourteen decisions to make in the process of laying out the harmonic progression. Most of my decisions will be made in the space of five or six triads. What I have at the end of the procedure is a sequence of twenty-six triads of variable duration which I call the “Rehearsal.” The simplest way to define a Rehearsal is that it is a chord chart derived from a tarot deck in the way I’ve been describing, or an interpretation of such a chord chart.

**AM: Can you speak of other composers who have played with translation? How do you situate your work among them?**

**SH:** To begin with, I think that questions of translation are implicit in the production of music. Musical genres, I think, can be usefully defined by the kind of stance they take on the question of translatability. I'm thinking of the way generic subcultures navigate their distance from a mainstream fantasy of full inclusion. To paint with very broad strokes: hardcore, noise, black metal, and other types of "extreme" music are forceful negations of that fantasy of inclusion. If you do not "get" the music you hear at a black metal show, for example, it's not because the musicians have failed to speak the universal language, and it's not because something has been lost in translation. You heard exactly what you heard, and it wasn't for you. In this sense, I think filtering my musical intuition through a tarot game is a way of productively mediating contradictions in my thinking about inclusion and elitism—accessibility and esotericism—in the music world. I want everyone to be open and accepting; but I also want to hear music that is off-putting, often strategically so, to the majority of people.

But it's more common, I think, to try and sidestep questions of translation altogether, no doubt because the experience of music seems to lack mediation—hearing those sounds, I feel this way, and it feels truly immediate. Full enjoyment of music, I think, begins with giving yourself over to that sense of immediacy, conflating your affective response with the music itself. But as soon as you carry that conflation of reaction and content away from the moment of listening, then you begin to think in terms of a quality of immediacy intrinsic to music, which renders translation beside the point. That sidestepping tends to take one of two routes: there's the Pythagorean approach, which appeals to the "music of the spheres," and there's the humanist approach that celebrates music as a "universal language."

If music is regarded as a universal language, then the sphere of music production becomes a utopian space where nothing can ever be lost in translation. This notion might seem innocuous, but if we look at the history of its deployment, then we find that some languages are more universal than others and need to be "universalized" by someone like, to take the obvious example, Elvis Presley. Material theft of the kind that followed from Elvis's imitation continues to be licensed by precisely the claim that music is a universal language that needs no translators. To call music a "universal language" is to enable the music industry's conflation of mimesis and revision with intellectual property theft. This does nothing to correct the distributive problems arising from cultural appropriation and does quite a bit to stunt the evolution of music as an art form.

If music derives from the “music of the spheres,” on the other hand, then a bit of mathematical work is necessary to make that music audible—to make it music at all. The harmonic vibrations of the planets, on this line of thinking, are too vast for us to hear, and so they must be transposed to a scale we can manage—say, a length of string on a lute. Musical harmony is a transposition of cosmic harmony, and there is only one cosmos—therefore, music is universal. But the math connecting lute-string vibrations to the heavens proceeds from false premises—geocentricity and so on—which means that in effect, the rules of harmony were produced by a “translation” that used math as a universal interpretant. All the credit for this translation went to the heavens. I’m interested in the Pythagorean view, not because I think there’s anything sound about it from an ontological perspective, but because something interesting happens to the concept of originality when it is understood to be both a given and beyond reach: music is allowed to retain the mystery that gives it power in the first place, and the paradigm for music production begins to look less like origination (producing intellectual property) and more like creative translation.

To answer your question in more concrete terms: my process takes cues from experiments in scoring (Pauline Oliveros, Julius Eastman); from aleatory music (John Cage, Brian Eno); and, though it probably doesn’t come through in this recording, from the traditions that get lumped together as spiritual jazz. I love Albert Ayler and Alice Coltrane, and in more contemporary terms I’ve been really excited by a lot of stuff from International Anthem—Resavoir, Ben Lamar Gay, Makaya McCraven.

**AM:** How does your background as literature scholar influence, or direct, your acts of translation in this piece?

**SH:** As a scholar of literature, I’m thinking about fiction as a force of subjectivation. What do subject positions in narrative have to do with lived, embodied, historical subjectivity? What other subjects are fixed into place when, for example, a chivalric hero proves his worth? What imaginative possibilities are foreclosed by the formal resolution of a fictional narrative? What does reading have to do with that foreclosure?

These questions are surely present in the back of my mind as I read a story into a random spread of cards and as I try to translate some version of that story into a harmonic progression. Following through with that initial reading—that is, reading the rest of the deck according to the logic by which I read the original spread—is a way of staging those questions. In literary scholarship, these questions can be partially answered—that’s what the profession is about. But my approach

to creative work, on the other hand, consists in tracing the changes that questions undergo as they persist in being unanswered—of allowing mystery to remain mysterious, that I might continue to respectfully and amateurishly mess around with it.

**AM: Why “Rehearsal?”**

**SH:** The name is a nod to the novelist Wilson Harris and the ways in which reading his work nudged my own work along in this particular direction. I like the term because it suggests that the object itself is constitutively unfinished, open to interpretation and revision. The concept of rehearsal is central to Harris’s work and bears a fascinating relation to his ideas about originality. In a 1996 radio broadcast called “The Music of Living Landscapes,” Harris poses the question: “Is there a language akin to music threaded into space and time which is prior to human discourse?” He doesn’t answer, but the question isn’t exactly a rhetorical one. Though he proceeds with his creative work as though the answer were a definite yes, Harris is careful to never claim that there is anything universal about the language he imagines. Rather, he endows his imagined language with a quality of transcendent originality that cannot be finally understood, in large part because it is always in a state of evolutionary flux. This is not a historically specific point of origin, like the big bang. It is, rather, a transcendent, ongoing “originality” vaguely related to that of Pythagorean numbers.

The site of this originality goes by a number of names in Harris’s work—“the cross-cultural imagination” is perhaps the most concise, but Harris is also particularly fond of calling it the “shamanic womb of space.” It is a speculative construct—significant not because it is true in any empirical way but because it can serve as a tool for making truths visible. To use this tool, for Harris, requires great introspection—knowledge of the shadow one casts simply by existing in time and space, awareness of one’s own internal alterity, and an attitude of humble patience toward the shadows of others. The process of cultivating these things can come to no end—it is, to invoke the title of one of Harris’s novels, an “infinite rehearsal” of encounters with alterity.

**AM: I am interested in the sensorial, visceral, and visual aspect in the translation of tarot cards into the aural. What deck did you use? Could you offer some meditations on how the effect of the visual can be translated into a harmonic soundscape?**

**SH:** I use the Rider-Waite deck because it is designed specifically to create the illusion that it is communicating wisdom from another sphere. Tarot cards, I

should mention, were not used for cartomancy until the eighteenth century, when Antoine Court de Gébelin decided the tarot deck was a repository for the wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus, and people broadly agreed to believe him. A. E. Waite, who is credited with directing Pamela Colman Smith's illustrations of the Rider-Waite deck, was ambivalent about this claim: on the one hand, he was positive that the tarot system held the key to a great deal of eternal mystery; but on the other, he knew, and insisted in his writings, that the "mystery" did not come from ancient Egypt. I think Waite's ambivalence goes a long way toward explaining why the deck is so effective: the creation of the deck was motivated by Waite's unwavering faith in the ability of tarot to house and dispense eternal wisdom; but Waite was too ethical a scholar to make any unfounded claims about the real content of that eternal wisdom. The deck, as a result, is a jungle gym for the cognitive faculties, which are mystified by the games they play with numerology, symbolism, color schemes, depictions of movement, and so on.

The only real "mystery" about tarot cards is the mystery of consciousness itself; the only thing tarot can reveal to you is your own fixations and habits of mind. But fixations and habits of mind turn out to be quite meaningful when you pay attention to their interplay, as tarot tricks you into doing. I think of tarot as a mask you put on your subconscious in order to negotiate with it. The translation from the "visual" to the "aural" begins with that process of negotiation, as I try to find a musical expression that fits a spread of cards. But after all the negotiations are over, and my decisions are made, and the cards are continuing to present me with the consequences of my final decisions, then I am stuck with a bunch of really wonky harmonic moves that I would never have chosen to make. I think of these as a kind of return of the repressed, the "repressed" here being the contingency of the original spread of cards, or as a way of voicing precisely what was "lost in translation" when I chose to "translate" the spread the way I did.

**AM:** In the background of each tarot, you said you notice unique continuities within a projected landscape. However, the tarot card user needs to identify these visual continuities and mentally project themselves into this world to experience them as a unified environment. Do you see your composition as an act of filling in the physical gaps that separate each card? Meaning, is your soundscape piece actually a landscape? How does rhythm in your piece act as a unifying force and what role does translation play in rearticulating, or suturing together, an environment of some sort?

**SH:** A common conception of tarot is that each individual card is a gateway to a space where, the thinking goes, you encounter the card's specific "energy" directly. Each card is, furthermore, also expressive of two distinct wholes: the whole of the

spread in which it appears, and the whole of the deck from which it came. I think of the whole of the spread as an allegory and the whole of the deck as the entirety of the language in which that allegory found expression—a language comprising no more or less than seventy-eight parts.

I reject the idea that the cards themselves have any “energy,” but I find the spatial conceit of projection to be really useful for reasons that have mostly to do with memory. I use a “memory palace” technique to memorize the deck—this means envisioning a very concrete space and placing memorable details from the cards within that space. The cards are now “triggers”; pulling any one card, I go to that spot in my memory, which helps me remember the card’s position in the totality of the deck.

When I pull a random spread of cards, however, the utility of the memory palace is limited to individual cards, and I have to do a different kind of projecting. This is where the topographical detail in the cards’ imagery comes in handy: say I pull Temperance, the Moon, and the Ace of Pentacles. I notice a pathway runs through each of these cards, and I leap to the conclusion that I am looking at three different segments of one long path. Why? Because I know that there are only four cards in the whole deck that show paths explicitly—the three cards I’ve pulled, and the Eight of Pentacles. This is a pattern—a very unlikely one—and it is impossible to traverse in the memory palace with which I recall the deck. So I have to put aside the memory palace for a moment while I assemble a projected space out of those parts of it I see in front of me in the spread. This is an exercise in apophenia—in freely translating pattern into allegory.

The process of composing a “Rehearsal” begins with fixing that allegory into place musically—with a harmonic progression that I think resolves in accordance with the allegory I see in the spread before me—and then proceeds to destroy that allegory by gradually reintroducing all the other elements of the deck. What is being staged at this point is a kind of cannibalization of the spread by the deck—of an allegory by its language. With that cannibalization, the allegorical space of the spread is reincorporated in the space of the deck—put away in the “memory palace.” There’s certainly a therapeutic aspect to this process, an aspect of getting to know my “shadow,” so to speak. The “Rehearsal” is the by-product of that therapeutic moment, both a memorial to the allegory whose wholeness was lost to its language and a monument to what was lost in the translation I imagined my initial reading to be.

The harmonic progression, then, belongs in a separate space, a differently structured space, from the projected space I associate with tarot. This space is no longer structured by visual or architectural detail, or by anything taken from the tarot cards, but by harmonic structures. For this particular piece, my rule for the



rhythmic progression was to stay with a given triad for the number of beats that corresponded to the number on the card positioned at the top of the triad; if the top card of a triad is an Ace, I have one beat to express that triad; and if the top card is the World, I must stay with that triad for twenty-one beats. Rhythm is a unifying force here in the sense that I am forced, as an improviser or composer, to keep passing through the structure at the prescribed pace, to linger on or pass through each triad as dictated by the chord chart.

**AM: I find it intriguing that you chose a saxophone quartet for your piece. Can you tell me why?**

**SH:** I was listening to a lot of Julius Hemphill, particularly his work with the World Saxophone Quartet, when I made this piece—so the simple answer would be that I wanted to explore a form I found exciting. On a pop-cultural level, the figure of the saxophonist—whether Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Clarence Clemons, Bill Clinton, or Lisa Simpson—steps out in front of the band and asserts their individuality. Because of this cultural baggage, if you have more than one saxophonist improvising at a time, the tendency has long been to treat it as a battle: Who is outplaying whom? Who is building higher on the foundations provided by the rhythm section?

But when you remove the rhythm section from the equation, the whole paradigm changes. Absent the solid foundations of a rhythm section, there is nothing to “battle” over, so to speak. The saxophone quartet seems to hold itself together by a kind of surface tension, floating through time like a bubble. Initially, I chose to write for a saxophone quartet because I was interested in messing around with that surface tension. I can’t say I really achieved the effect here, but it is what drove me to try and work in the form.

**AM: What computer software did you use to generate “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal?” Can you comment on the quality of sound and the aural simulacrum of a computer-generated piece in regard to understanding or playing with another layer of translation?**

**SH:** As soon as I have a song structure on paper, I start improvising through it on the keyboard. I’ll write down whatever melody sticks in a program called MuseScore, and then I’ll add in voices in support and counterpoint the first voice. The program has a MIDI-playback feature, so I’m constantly listening back to the MIDI simulation and tweaking my lines in response to what I hear. This particular version is the result of a whole lot of such tweaking—so I guess MIDI has to be

counted as a participant in the process. As for the recording: computer simulation was a concession to the limitations of time and money.

**AM: Do you consider “Translation, Translation, Rehearsal” an end product of translation? What are your thoughts on “an end product” and how do you consider your role as a musician in this process?**

**SH:** No—I don’t think this is an end product. I think of this as a snapshot of a process. I would love to get the chord charts into the hands of more able musicians so that they can unmask me as a charlatan with tarot cards. My role as composer in this process is first to bring the structure of the song into being, and then to revise and reenvision the network of paths that might be taken through the structure in time.

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Scott Hunter is a musician, fiction writer, and student of medieval literature. He lives in Santa Cruz, California.

Alexandra Macheski is an editorial board member of *Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal*.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scott Hunter’s *Translation, Translation, Rehearsal* is available for listening at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6kg3223z#supplemental>.