

OF THE NEAR AND FAR

I've always been captivated by the night sky, endlessly wondering about what lies beyond. Amidst the vast expanse of stars, there is a sense of balance and symmetry that fascinates me—an order within the chaos. The innate patterns of the constellations sparked my curiosity, prompting me to explore how these celestial forms might be translated musically.

In the summer of 2024, I developed a process that allowed me to collect pitch and numerical data from constellations. I overlaid the shapes of constellations onto a circle of fifths, intrigued by whether the symmetry of the constellations could translate into musical symmetry—whether harmonic or melodic. The circle of fifths is already a highly symmetrical structure that organizes pitches in a sequence. By mapping the constellations' shapes onto this circle, I discovered new relationships between pitches, chords, and even key signatures. These relationships emerged purely from the constellations' symmetry, not from traditional music theory.

To my surprise, many of the pitch collections I gathered were harmonically consonant and “made sense” from a theoretical standpoint. The material I collected became raw material for my compositional process. Most of the pieces on this record are entirely based on the data I gathered, with each composition drawing from the unique patterns of the stars. I also explored the mythology behind each constellation—some well-known, others less so—but all rich with history and inspiration for generations of artists.

Since it was summer, I was naturally drawn to the constellations surrounding the Summer Triangle, often observing them through my telescope. Some of the constellations featured on this record share stars that form part of this iconic stellar pattern.

The five constellations explored on this record are: Antlia (The Air Pump), Aquarius (The Water Bearer), Andromeda (The Chained Woman), Lyra (The Lyre), and Aquila (The Eagle). Also included is a composition inspired by the essence of this work, rather than any specific constellation: “When You Stare Into The Abyss.” As part of the compositional process, I created two graphic scores: “Citlalli I” and “Citlalli II.” During the recording process, the ensemble improvised a version of each score, and this material was used to shape the electroacoustic track “Citlalli.”

The sonic palette for this record is inspired by my background in classical music and in new music, combined with the sonic possibilities of jazz rhythm section instruments. My musical education was

shaped significantly by my roles in orchestras, percussion ensembles, and chamber music groups. My first professional job as a musician was as the timpanist for a state-funded orchestra in Mexico. This path led to other orchestral positions, eventually bringing me to the U.S.

Although I later shifted toward improvised music, I continue to draw inspiration from orchestral works, including compositions by Brahms, Debussy, Dvořák, Stravinsky, Copland, and more. As a percussionist, I had the opportunity to lead my own percussion ensemble and also explored contemporary chamber music. These experiences introduced me to groundbreaking composers such as John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Paul Lansky. Additionally, I draw inspiration from the popular music that influenced me growing up, particularly rock bands and other groups from the mid-to-late 90s, most prominently Radiohead and Soundgarden.

The instrumentation of this ensemble reflects these inspirations. It features a jazz quintet—piano, bass, drums, guitar, and mallet percussion—along with a standard string quartet and also includes an electronic musician. The electronic components take on different roles throughout the record. Sometimes, they function as interstitial elements, while at others they take a more prominent role within a composition, adding another textural layer. On the track “Citlalli,” the electronics take center stage. The piece features improvisations by the ensemble members, based on the graphic scores of the same name. These improvisations merge into a single track, which is then electronically manipulated to create a new narrative.

Although the ensemble blends different styles and traditions, I wanted to treat it as a unified whole. Each instrument plays an indispensable role in the compositional fabric.

As on my previous records, I aimed to challenge conventional expectations of each instrument’s role and expand their sonic palette. For example, the strings might adopt a melodic role, which is more traditional, or they might take on a textural role, creating layers of sound. Ultimately, the sonic possibilities of the ensemble are shaped by the needs of each composition and my overall vision for this project.

As you listen to this music, I invite you to free your imagination and encourage you to look not only inward and upward, but also to seek the light of hope amidst the darkness of the abyss.

Patricia Brennan

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ANTLIA

Antlia (The Air Pump) was identified by the French astronomer Nicolas-Louis de Lacaille in the 18th century. He named several constellations after scientific instruments, honoring the spirit of scientific exploration, and he named this one after the air pump. I wanted this piece to feel mechanical, as if we were inside the workings of a machine. Each player becomes a part of this machine, with a specific role that is indispensable to its function. The piece features “gear changes” that mark transitions within each layer, as if the machine were performing a new function using the same components. Despite the mechanical nature of this composition, groove elements guide its flow. The piece includes elements of rhythmic elasticity as well as more danceable moments inspired by Afrobeat and electronic dance music. This piece says: let’s adventure together and move without inhibitions.

AQUARIUS

Aquarius (The Water Bearer) is one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac, often depicted as a figure carrying a vessel of water. One of the larger water-themed constellations, it is commonly associated with humanitarianism, idealism, and innovation. In Greek mythology, Ganymede was abducted by Zeus to serve as the cupbearer to the gods for eternity. The constellation symbolizes Ganymede’s role and is also linked to the god of rain. This composition focuses on the textural qualities of water—its flow and the resistance to it, the roughness and imperfections that shape its surface. The melody, carried by the vibraphone and guitar, pours through the bar lines with polyrhythmic fluidity. The strings create a layered soundscape made up of overlapping rhythmic figures. Each string instrument plays a unique rhythmic pattern with specific pitches that, when combined, evoke the image of light reflecting off a shimmering, fractured aquatic surface. The rhythm section sets the course for an eternal journey towards an unreachable horizon until the final note of the piano is heard. Water represents life—a life full of beautiful imperfections.

ANDROMEDA

Andromeda (The Chained Woman) is a large constellation in the northern sky, named after the princess Andromeda. The name Andromeda also refers to the M31 galaxy, which is the closest major spiral galaxy to the Milky Way and, as the brightest external galaxy, the most distant object we can observe without a telescope. The Andromeda galaxy is on a collision course with the Milky Way, but fortunately this event won't occur for another 4.5 billion years. This composition is inspired by the tumultuous fate of Andromeda, who was chained to a rock as a sacrifice to a sea monster in order to appease the gods. The piece is also influenced by the spiral shape of the M31 galaxy and the inevitable galactic collision—that spiral nature shapes the melodic structure of the main theme, which ultimately leads to a sonic collision. The harmonic structure of the composition explores nearly all common triads related to a single pitch. My intention was to create a sense of harmonic dizziness as the piece travels through these shifting harmonic changes. The expansive rhythmic structure of the composition is inspired by the large size of the Andromeda constellation. Although the piece is in five, it incorporates spaces of four, seven, and

three, creating a dynamic coexistence within this musical pentameter. Towards the end of the piece, a progression of eight chords, spread out across the ensemble, serves as a backdrop for a yearning, melancholic piano feature, which is clouded by chaotic chatter that ultimately leads to the piece's conclusion. This represents the end of an era, while also signaling the beginning of a new one.

CITLALLI

This electroacoustic track is based on the ensemble's improvisations on two graphic scores by the same name. The word *citlalli* comes from the Nahuatl language of the indigenous Mexican people and means star. It also carries associations with light, beauty, shine, and hope. The concept of *citlalli* encompasses the divine light and the idea of a spiritual beacon, guiding people through life. For the Aztecs, stars also held great significance; they were seen as the spirits of the past or as gods guiding the living. The graphic scores feature altered shapes of the constellations represented on this record, along with pitch collections—gathered from the process of drawing the constellations over the circle of fifths, and additional symbolic shapes.

LYRA

Lyra (The Lyre) is a small but easily recognizable constellation, home to the second-brightest star in the Summer Triangle—Vega. I chose this constellation because of the rich mythology behind it, the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice. I was first introduced to this Greek myth through Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, one of the most important works in the history of opera and the only opera that explores this myth. The story tells of Orpheus, a skilled musician whose music could charm all things in this world and beyond, even the gods themselves. Orpheus played the lyre, which became a symbol of his musical prowess. He marries Eurydice, but shortly after their wedding she is bitten by a snake and dies. Devastated by her death, Orpheus descends into the Underworld to plead with the god of death to bring Eurydice back to the land of the living. An agreement is made: Eurydice can return, but Orpheus must not look at her until they have both reached the surface. Just before they reach the light, Orpheus, overwhelmed by doubt and longing, turns to look at Eurydice, causing her to be lost forever. After Orpheus' death, Zeus placed his lyre in the sky as a constellation to honor his musical gift. This composition is inspired by the purity of love—wholehearted and eternal. It reflects an operatic portrayal of this tragic love story: the beauty of their love, the darkness that Eurydice's death brings, the hope of one day being reunited, Orpheus' journey to the Underworld, and eternal loss.

AQUILA

The constellation Aquila (The Eagle) shares a star, Altair, with the Summer Triangle. Altair is only 16.73 light years away from Earth, making it one of the closest stars to our planet. This constellation represents the eagle that carries Zeus' thunderbolts and that is also credited with bringing Ganymede (Aquarius) to Zeus and the gods. In ancient Greece, the eagle represented strength, majesty, and the divine and it served as the messenger of the gods, carrying their will and power across the heavens. In the case of Aquila, this symbolism was directly tied to Zeus and his supreme control over the cosmos. The story of Aquila reflects the ancient Greeks' deep reverence for powerful, soaring creatures that bridged the world of mortals and gods. For this composition, I created a composite scale using the pitch collection gathered from drawing this constellation over the circle of fifths. I wrote the piece in a fugue-like form to create a flowing effect, emulating the eagle's flight. Additionally, I incorporated a chattering texture to symbolize the density of the air. This density also reflects the complex and powerful presence of this loyal and mighty creature.

WHEN YOU STARE INTO THE ABYSS

The title of this composition is inspired by a phrase from philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. In this text, Nietzsche writes: "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you." This composition reflects on the overwhelming nature of the universe, the unknowable future, and the existential void. Nietzsche's warning suggests that delving too deeply into such immensity may cause

us to lose hope. In response, the piece invites us to gaze in two directions: to both look up at the sky and to look inward and examine the human condition. This dual perspective marks the beginning of our exploration of the abyss, symbolizing the infinite journey we undertake through the vastness of the universe, all while keeping the light of hope shining.

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- Patricia Brennan