

A M P  
American Museum of Paramusicology



Issue 1

“Fire”

April 2023

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The

# A.M.P. Journal

from the American Museum of Paramusicology

Issue One • April / 2023

Written, edited, designed, and illustrated by Matt Marble  
in Greensboro, North Carolina

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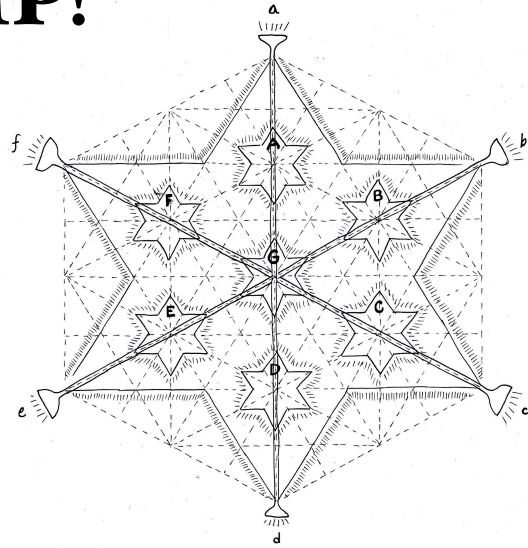
# Welcome to the AMP!

The ears of the spirit are seldom opened in this life.

**Andrew Jackson Davis**

A new review of the field of possible auditory experience is called for in which attention would be focused upon the co-presence of the imaginative.

**Don Ihde**



Welcome to the American Museum of Paramusicology (AMP) Journal. The AMP is a unique physical and digital media archive and forum pertaining to the role of esoteric traditions and paranormal experiences in American music history. Over the last two decades I've been researching and discovering forgotten American visionaries across several centuries, while exploring the metaphysical traditions that inspired them. Along the way I've actively collected rare books, musical scores, audio recordings, photographs, letters, and other ephemera related to this history. There is nowhere else in the world where many of these items can be found in one place. I've previously shared this archival research through podcasts (*Secret Sound*), books (*Buddhist Bubblegum*), essays, interviews, and social media offerings. The AMP was established to consolidate these efforts and offer a more experimentally focused mouthpiece for this archive as it grows into the future. The *AMP Journal* offers exclusive essays, book reviews, and supplemental media content. While the journal is focused largely on the historical, American, and sonic or musical—as an experimental forum, I'll freely include creative, contemporary, non-American, and intermedia perspectives which reflect on this history and the spiritual imagination at its heart.

## “What is *paramusicology*?”

Musicology being the study of music, paramusicology is the study of paranormal music experience. Though the term has struggled to find solid footing, the paranormal generally refers us to that which is "beyond" or "outside" the normal—to experiences or phenomena which cannot be explained by scientific reasoning, objective perception, or causal agency. This points our awareness to what may be called the numinous\* in human experience. Due to its abstract nature, to even convey the numinous requires active imagination and symbolic communication. The AMP explores how the numinous informs human listening. And it unpacks the esoteric philosophies and intuitive disciplines which facilitate and draw from our spiritual and auditory imagination.

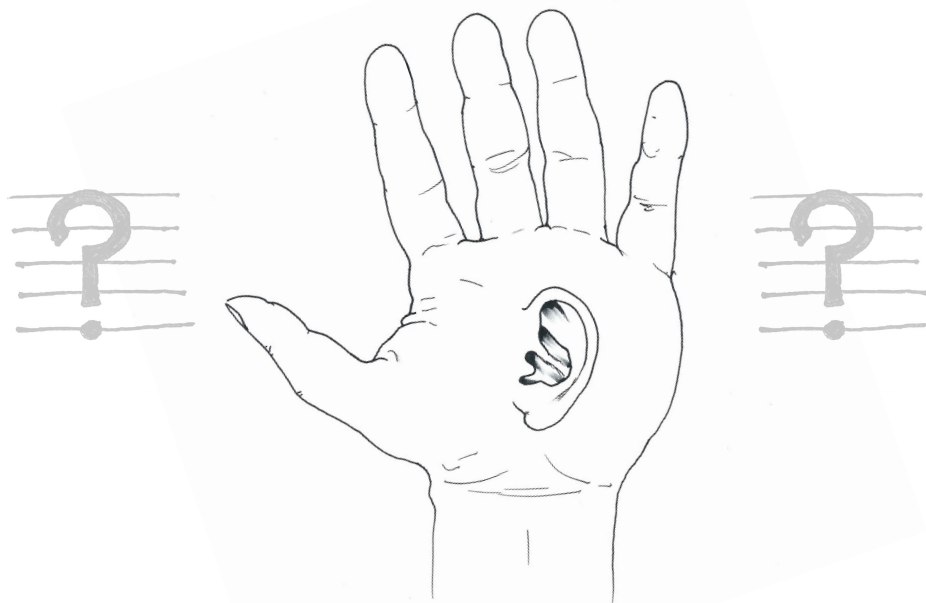
\* **numinous** (adj): the “non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self [...] the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures” (Rudolf Otto, 1917).

The term “paramusicology” was first coined in 1993 by author Melvyn Willin to address psychic and pagan histories of music. Expanding upon Willin’s conception, I want to present the full range of paramusicology through the larger lenses of spiritual imagination, creative symbolism, inspiratory methodologies, and intuitive disciplines involving sound. The AMP also addresses the broader lack of attention among scholars regarding the influence of esoteric traditions in American music history.

For centuries musicians have creatively applied intuitive methods, largely drawn from these esoteric traditions. Such methods include divination (astrology, numerology, tarot, I-Ching), meditation (mantra, mandala, prayer, audio-visualization), mediumship (clairaudience, trance, automatism), dreamwork and alchemy, ritual and ceremonial magic, psychedelics and altered states of consciousness, mental and sensory healing practices, and so much more. Paramusicology explores how these practical philosophies empower personal and artistic agency and inform the creative process in music. Paramusicology necessarily engages a comparative metaphysics, as musicians have been influenced by diverse and often multiple esoteric traditions—from the Theosophical Society and Obeah to Taoism and Seventh Day Adventism.

Conversely, across human history and cultural geography, the vibratory medium of sound and its symbolism are fundamental to metaphysical tradition itself. We see this in the "divine word" of the Christian *logos*, the "sounds of creation" which the *Zohar* equates to the Hebrew alphabet, the "sonic theology" of ancient India’s *nada Brahman*, the “sonorous light” of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the “schrack” and heavenly music of Jacob Boehme’s spiritual alchemy, the Pythagorean “music of the spheres,” and the primordial sound, *Yô*, of African Bambara cosmology. There are endless such examples.

In relation to a preeminent silence, these teachings are rooted in a clairaudient listening by which sound is corresponded to all manner of cosmic, terrestrial, and interior phenomena, as well as to the nature of consciousness itself. This sonic or vibratory language of metaphysics is often invoked to represent the origins and operations of the Universe (the macrocosm). But it is equitably representative of the operations of individual consciousness (the microcosm). Metaphysical traditions generally seek to reveal the unified center (the "Great Mystery") of these two perspectives—the macrocosmic and microcosmic—through various inspiratory methods. And it is at the nexus of art, history, science, and comparative metaphysics that the AMP seeks to ring the bell of this Mystery, which in day-to-day life remains so easily unheard.

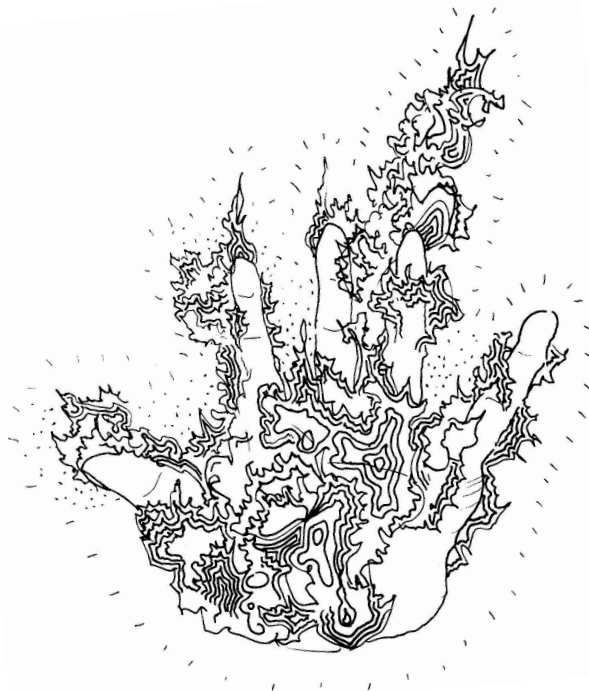


**ISSUE ONE (“Fire”)** touches on various metaphysical perspectives, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, vaudeville metaphysics and Orientalism, and the Theosophical Society. It was only after conjoining and completing the three featured essays of this issue that I realized all three figures—Nina Picton, Massard Kurzhene, and Charles Staniland Wake—had each experienced a debilitating house fire. Picton had many of her musical scores destroyed when lightning struck her home ablaze in the night; Wake lost his magnum opus, never to be fully realized again, in a major house fire; and Kurzhene tragically lost his life at the age of 82 due to arson. “Fire” is a fair theme for this initial AMP issue.

**“The Creole Soprano of the Golden Dawn”** explores the life and metaphysical writings of soprano, composer, author, and mystic Nina Picton. We discover her relationship with the the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn while savoring the sonic language of her spiritual imagination.

**“Massard’s Double Life”** tells the updated story of Lithuanian American child virtuoso violinist, bandleader, composer, and ethnic chameleon Massard Kurzhene. This essay is filled with unique information and photos from his recently discovered family archives, which reveal his alternate identity and tragic death.

**“Listening to the Vortex of C.S. Wake”** tells the untold story of anthropologist Charles Staniland Wake and his forgotten magnum opus, *Vortex Philosophy*. This essay features unprecedented biographical information, rare unpublished photographs, and a theosophical lens upon Wake’s later work. Special emphasis is given to his theory of tone-color correspondence.



# AMP NEWS



**February, 2023:** *The New Journal of the Philosophical Research Society* published the essay “The Saturnine Swing of Vincent Lopez.”

<https://www.prs.org/vincent-lopez-2.html>

**March, 2023:** *The Hidden Present* released its sixth episode, “Ancestral Sustenance,” an interview with Paige Lipari, the magus behind Brooklyn’s Sicilian food/event/bookstore gem, Archestratus.

## FORTHCOMING

### THE HIDDEN PRESENT

**May, 2023:** I’ll be sharing my interview with Nigerian Igbo artist and anthropologist, Kelechi Chinwendu Kelechi. We’ll be exploring her unique relationship to her Igbo heritage and how this informs her art practice.

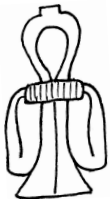
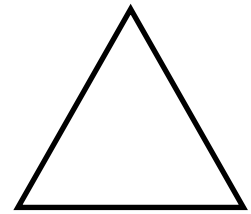
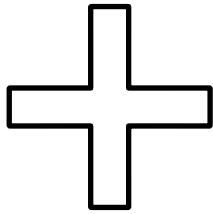
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### AMP JOURNAL: May Issue

The May issue will be a special one, including essays on Arthur Russell’s use of mantra, an exclusive excerpt from Tamra Lucid and Ronnie Pontiac’s forthcoming book, *The Magic Hymns of Orpheus: A New Translation for the Modern Mystic*, and much more... :)



# The Creole Soprano of the Golden Dawn



**“Seekers, like myself,” I exclaimed,  
“Verily, some magnet draweth us.”  
And I bent me more eagerly forward...”**



— Nina Picton

One of my favorite discoveries last year was *The Panorama of Sleep: Soul and Symbol*, hierophantic dream literature written by Creole mystic Nina Picton in 1903. It is safe to say that Picton has been entirely forgotten in our historical memory. But the deeper I dug into her life, the more I’ve wanted to share her story. Beside being an internationally lauded soprano, she was equally praised as a composer of numerous songs, operas, a morality play, and several musical comedies. Her original music explored fairy tales, science fiction, comedy, romance, and nationalist politics. As an author she published two books, numerous articles and short stories, and over 100 poems. Her books outlined a metaphysical philosophy inspired by divine dreams and supersensual visions of heavenly realms. Going deeper into her metaphysics we also discover that she was a member of a Parisian branch of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and performed as a soloist in a French mass honoring the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis.

Going by the pseudonym Laura Dearborn, Picton published her first book *At the Threshold* in 1893. Searching further I was unable to find out much information on her, but I sensed there was more. So, after digging through newspaper archives, I wasn't surprised to find that Nina Picton went by many names and was once also a successful soprano and composer. Having sung for years, Picton studied music in Paris and London at the end of the 1890s. She was quickly becoming touted as a noteworthy soprano and "one of the few successful women composers."

Picton was born in 1860 into an "old Creole family" in New Orleans. Her mother died when Picton was only 8 years old. Consequently, she spent her adolescence with her French grandmother in Mobile, Alabama. Then in 1891 she headed to New York City with the dream of becoming a writer, while also becoming a notable presence as a soprano and composer. But there was something more enigmatic than a hunger for success going on in Picton's soul. Giving herself over to writing, however, music remained her focus. In fact, writing became a form heavenly imagination and musical ecstasy.

**Miss Nina Picton, the clever musical composer, is about to bring out a new opera. It is believed that she is the first successful feminine composer of orchestrations. Miss Picton is a Southerner, with melting dark eyes and auburn hair. She is at present living in New York and is constantly surrounded by admirers.**



Now a single voice legatoad a passage in a greeting tone, then another replied, and another, until the mazy measures wound in and out, softly swelling, gradually diminishing.

A pause ensued—a pause so breathless, so solemn, that the wondrous chord of strength that followed shook me as a reed.

I laughed, shouted, cried in ecstasy. I knew the Monarch of Song then—the great Composer whose melodies had been worded to heavenly themes—whose sacredness had lifted many a storm-tossed heart as the strains arose and trembled from chancel, nave, and cathedral cloister.

“Wilt thou join my band, and lift in unison thy voice?” earnestly invited he.

“A thousand times yes!” For my pent soul could scarcely withhold its rapture.

from *At the Threshold*

Her debut book, *At the Threshold*, offers a visionary tale. It begins with the sound of “tear-less” sobbing, comforted by the supernatural hands of her husband. Supernatural hands, a symbol of divine consolation, feature heavily in much of Picton’s metaphysical writings. While Picton’s story portrays a Swedenborgian-like *mundus imaginis*, offering the reader remote viewings of heavenly vistas. Sound is often present in the form of “aerial tongues,” heavenly harp-like sounds, and “aeloian swells of rapture... from unseen hands.” This is very much in the spirit of late 19th century harmonial and spiritualist traditions—consciously seeking presence in an eternal spiritual world of peace, harmony, and super-sensual beauty, unclouded by the obstacles and sufferings of the material world. Also resonant with harmonial spiritualism, Picton writes of ascending into various “spheres” cosmically projecting her into the starry firmament.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A SPHERE OF HARMONY.

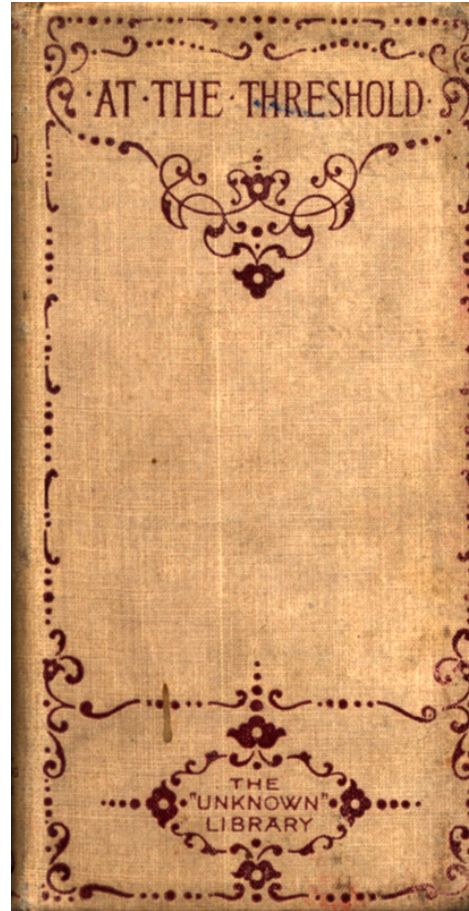
**F**ROM the distance advanced undulations of sound. Now far, now near, beguiled they the aural memory.

“What glorious harmonies are those?” rapturously inquired I, my clasped hands and wondering eyes attesting my delight.

“They proceed from a sphere to which we travel,” they explained; “to a sphere where the souls of Music, Poesy, and Art abide. The character of that population will attract thee beyond assurance; will satisfy thine inward cravings.”

The words added fleetness to

from *At the Threshold*



And in keeping with these traditions, she reaches one sphere in particular which is devoted to “music, poesy, and Art” where “the soundwaves bouyed [her] listening spirit.” This reminds me more specifically of the writings of the Longleys, poetess Mary T. Longley and her séance composer husband Chalmers Payson Longley, whom collectively wrote music, poetry, and visionary literature emphasizing visitations to a similar artistic sphere of spirits. The book ends by her ascent to a holy mountain summit. There she is surrounded by a “throng of white-robed figures” who had overcome great tribulations. With lyres, lutes, and voices, the ensemble suffuse the landscape in song, singing:

**“Thy shalt learn for thyself...  
Holy, holy, holy!”**

In Auteuil, near Paris, a curious musical affair recently took place. The performance was held at the home of Mr. MacGregor Mathers, an author well known in London, and a Scotchman. At one end of a large room there was prominently displayed a life-size marble statue of the goddess Isis, with smaller statues of Osiris, Horus and other Egyptian deities near by. At the base of the statue of Isis were tall stalks of white lilies in large vases, and upon the statue itself was the head-dress worn by her that one sees in all her pictures. Around her body—for she was sitting in a chair—was a fringed mantle, formed and painted to represent feathers. The host was the high priest Rameses, his wife, the priestess, and Miss Nina Picton, an American concert singer, *la Mime Sacre*, who did all the dances and sang all the solos, among them the "Invocation to Isis," and the many hymned verses for the unveiling of four gods. The affair was called "La Messe d'Isis," and has been done twice with great success at the Bodnier. All the music was said to have been authentic. The words were obtained from hieroglyphics on monuments and from tablets in Egypt and translated into French. The dances were "Danse des Parfums," and "Danse de Miroir." All the music was sung without accompaniment.

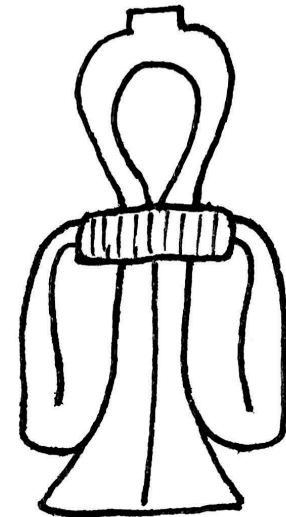
from *The Kansas City Journal*, Sunday, Aug 27, 1899

Picton begins her book *Panorama of Sleep* with a quotation from an Episcopalian priest [perhaps one of the Guthrie brothers?]: "Dreams are divine! They come from God!" Further encouraged by her husband, to whom the book is dedicated, Picton dove headlong into her own dreamwork. With this book she outlines and interconnects 16 of her own dreams, which she presents as spiritual guidance dispensed from a higher power. And in doing so, Nina herself becomes the hierophantic authoress, with the reader as her student. A year before its publication as a book, Nina had published a series of excerpts in *The Metaphysical Magazine*.

A mysterious black box, an overthrown temple, a lunar angel on a mountain top; spirits speaking in whispers, musical murmers, trumpet-notes, silvery bells, and symbolic gestures. *Panorama* is an enchanting tale of dream initiation. Picton is frequently encountering spirit guides and being summoned to spiritual vocation. Repeatedly she is beset by doubts, distractions, obstacles, and hecklers. But she moves ever onward toward a heavenly destiny to which she ultimately arrives "through the entrance, beyond which my dreams, hopes, and soul-cravings dwelt, and where a beautiful rest stole gently upon me."

An outspoken seeker of inner visions, Picton found herself befriending resonant figures of the day. And in 1899 we find her playing "la mime sacre," single-handedly dancing and singing acappella French translations of Egyptian hieroglyphs in a "Mass of Isis" at the Parisian home of MacGregor and Moina Mathers, aka Mina Bergson, the sister of famous philosopher Henri Bergson. The Mathers of course were central figures in the European occult, notably within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

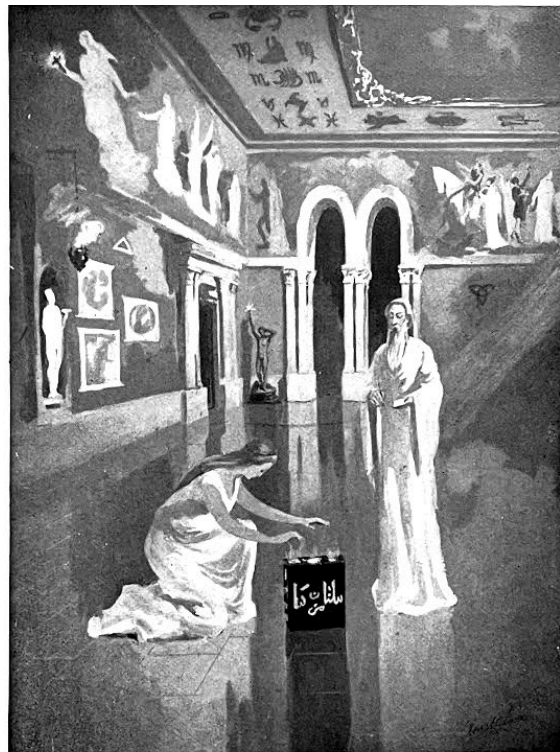
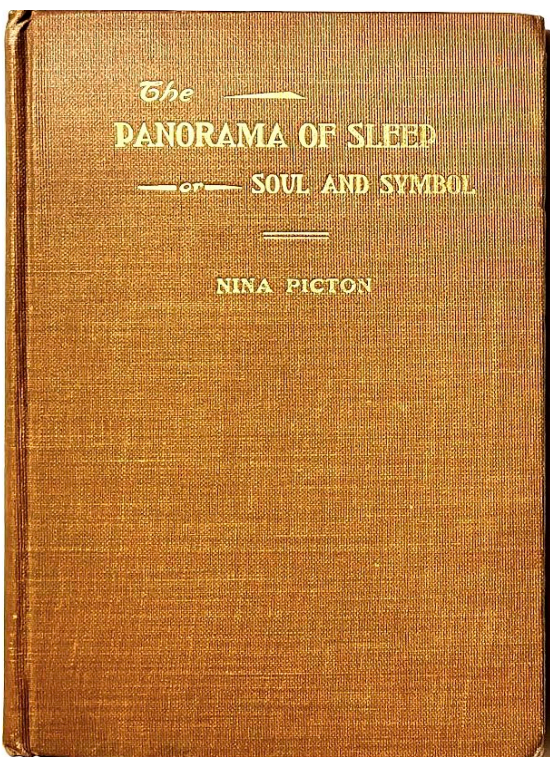
I was able to confirm that Nina was, in fact, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The Mathers' were the leaders of the Athoor Temple, which Nina joined in 1897 while she was living in Paris. Each member of the order is endowed with a motto. Picton's motto is *patientia omnia vincit*, or "Patience conquers all" (Künz, 206).



The ancient Egyptian tit ("teet") symbol, aka the "Isis knot" associated with [the blood of] Isis, illustration by Matt Marble

**“The tree-tops still waved to the dryads’ song.  
The silvered leaves yet crooned  
a midnight murmuring, and  
*something* in a room beyond,  
through an open window,  
in a familiar dwelling,  
called to me...”**

One rather stunning passage, evoking the ascended masters of Theosophy and Thelema, stands out. Picton finds herself in the presence of white-robed and bearded “Masters,” whose voices are like “a chant, as mystical as the runes of long-extinct bards” and whose language was incomprehensible. Being shown a curious light-weight black cube (or “mystic chart”), she is told to pass her hand over it in a circular motion. Upon doing so, electrical sparks shoot out from the cube, as luminous heiroglyphics appear on each of its faces. Instantaneously, the Master transcribes their message on a tablet for her edification. She is instructed that this message contains “life’s secret.” And she is warned: “All in time shall its meaning come,” the Master warns, “All in time shall its meaning come. Neglect not one of its laws!” And upon departing this scene, Picton notes “far behind me came the tinkle of the silver bell.” Let it be noted that the **sound of the silver bell** is a common symbol of clairaudience in the *Ordo Templi Orientis* tradition of ceremonial magic.



THE MYSTIC CHART

In 1912, lightning struck Nina's home in Sag Harbor. The enflamed damage destroyed many of her scores. But Nina continued composing into the 1920s. At some point she changed her name, first to Nina Picini and, following another marriage, Nina Picini-Mersereau, and Nina Leavitt Mersereau. She staged many comic operas and seemed to savor a fantastic vaudeville aesthetic. For example, she composed a three-act opera version of *The Little Mermaid* (1915). Two years later she staged a musical comedy entitled "The Merry Men of Mars."

One article writes that "before she became a master of theory and harmony she says she heard, in imagination, a full orchestra playing, an entire chorus given, and great arias sung." This no doubt refers to the heavenly music she recounts in her books. While it was following a "remarkable vision" that she composed a 4-act romantic opera, "Zitanella; or the Broken Coin"—the name being a fusion of two characters (Zita and Nella) from Puccini's opera "Gianni Schicchi." While her stage surname, "Picini," was likely a pun on this famous Italian composer.

Likely in response to the developments of World War I, Nina became more politically involved and began composing patriotic songs—like "Boys in Blue" and "Our Flag." This political inclination was perhaps reinforced by her later husband, Leavitt Merseau, who was the Brooklyn superintendent for the Bliss-Leavitt torpedo boat used by the American Navy. The last news article carrying her name

from 1920, notes Picton running as a Republican candidate in a local Sag Harbor election. Despite my research efforts, her final years remain a mystery. There is a "Nina Mersereau" who passed away on February 7, 1937 in Hempstead, NY—not far from Sag Harbor—which would have her living to age of 96. Her mysticism seems to have yielded to a socio-political vocation in her later years. While throughout her life she was a strong female public figure in an otherwise misogynistic age.

Connecting the dots between her musical career, metaphysical writings, and her membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Picton emerges as a significant figure in American paramusicology. While she joins the ranks of other musicians and composers who've hailed from the Golden Dawn lineage, including Florence Farr, Paul Foster Case, and Chic Cicero.

Nov 22 1915  
© Cl. 138508

## BOYS IN BLUE

TO THE AMERICAN NAVY

By  
NINA PICINI

### OUR FLAG.

Words by JOHN McDOWELL LEAVITT. Music by NINA PICTON MERSEREAU.

1. Wave, Flag of Beau - ty! starred on High, Our  
2. Fly, Flag of Free - dom! where a spot in  
3. Float, Flag of Prom - ise, o'er a world The  
4. Our Flag of Glo - ry, fly no more Where

fath - ers  
dark - ness  
pledge of  
mid mad t

**Miss NINA PICTON, one of the few successful women composers of orchestration, is about to bring out a new opera.**

\* Please listen to the additional audio documentary supplement which offers original audio of Kurzhene's recordings not available elsewhere.

## Massard Kurzhene's Double Life



Photos of Massard Kurzhene: Left, from *The Occult Digest*; Right, from the Estate of Aaron Kurzen


Massard Kurzhene (aka Guido Vandt) was a successful Lithuanian American bandleader, composer, and publisher of the early 20th century. A international child violin virtuoso turned American vaudeville occultist, his music was an opal of ethnicity. As a composer his film scoring for *The Silent Enemy* is historic, regarding the film's indigenous cast and cinematic zoom innovation, while Kurzhene's score was informed by his living among the Ojibwe. More broadly he became an advocate for multicultural perspectives on music and religion, both through his multi-ethnic orchestral impressions for CBS radio (*Due East*), as well as through his culturally chameleon bandleading career and vaudeville meta-physics. Through mimicry and homage, Kurzhene's life and work highlight the complexities of Orientalism and the diverse beauty of immigrant music in 20th century America. I've previously shared all the information I could find on Kurzhene in the Secret Sound podcast (E30, "Prince of Darkness"). However, his final decades had nevertheless remained a mystery. That is, until the charred remains of his archive were recently found and a second life was revealed.

I first discovered Massard Kurzhene in a 1927 issue of *The Occult Digest*, which featured his essay, "Pitch Black: The Black Art in Music." I was struck by the mythical poetics of his occult perspective and his didactic application of this to his violin playing. And for a long time, the only image I could find was the one in this periodical, which showed a mustached Kurzhene in a turban playing violin with a muted but ominous expression. The more I learned, the more intrigued I became and the more alternate names and contradictions I encountered. But before addressing Kurzhene's unique story, I want to offer some cultural context.

During the turn-of-the-century, it was not uncommon among vaudeville performers to appropriate the identities of "far away" or "primitive" ethnicities—from Native American and ancient Egyptian to African, Indian, Middle Eastern—essentially people of color and a cultural history distinct from a narrow Western ideal. We see this in séance mediums, radio psychics, actors and lecturers, musicians, hollywood icons, and metaphysical gurus. For many it was simply a way of obtaining easy attention and lending their persona a greater degree of profundity than it likely warranted. As a catchall for the "strange" or "unknown," unfamiliar yet compelling portrayals of ethnicity became like echo chambers for the Western imagination—archetypes many used to channel and heighten paranormal attention. While sincere admirers did abound, American orientalism more commonly featured the gross appropriation of cultural identity, ultimately disrespecting the cultures being impersonated, whether by xenophobic parody or romantic veneration.

But this all becomes more nuanced when the cultural mimics themselves are people of color and of non-Western heritage. For example, many African Americans at the turn of the century would embrace an Indian identity, a shift which quite practically gave them greater cultural mobility in the face of relentless anti-black bigotry and oppression. I wrote about this in my essay on African American activist, author, and meta-physical teacher Robert Tecumtha Brown (*Abraxas Journal*, Issue 6), who for many years claimed Indian descent, wore a turban, and went by the name Mulla Hanaranda. Among musicians, this is perhaps most explicitly witnessed in the mid-20th century music and persona of Korla Pandit (aka John Roland Redd), an African American organist and composer from St. Louis, MO, who claimed to be French-Indian while pioneering the musical genre of "exotica." And in John Benedict Buescher's book, *Radio Psychics*—reviewed later in this issue—one meets innumerable figures who appropriated ethnicity for paranormal allure and commercial profit during the early years of American radio.

**KORLA PANDIT**  
**IS COMING TO C.B.S.**  
**SATURDAY, Feb. 25 --12:30 pm to 5:30 pm**



**ABOUT KORLA PANDIT:**  
 Mr. Pandit, born in New Delhi, India, was a musically gifted child. His father, a member of one of India's first families, and his European mother nurtured the talent, allowing it to expand and ripen in an international atmosphere. Journeying to Europe, England, and eventually to America, the handsome prodigy continued his formal study, finishing at the University of Chicago.  
 The professional career of Korla Pandit has been a succession of impressive "firsts" in concert and television presentations, nationally as well as locally, in Hollywood and New York. He is responsible for several innovations in organ construction and interpretation, including Indian drum and percussive effects previously untried. His greatest success has been in television (Mr. Pandit gave the first all-musical TV program in Hollywood in 1949), and his one-hour weekly show in California won countless admirers and many awards. He has performed, too, in churches and temples on numerous occasions.

An ad from the *Contra Costa Times*, Wed, Feb 22, 1961



Born on March 15, 1900 in Kovno, Russia (modern day Kaunas, Lithuania), over the years Massard Kurzhene was said to have been from Egypt, Russia, Persia, Iran, or simply "the Orient." In a rare bio, Kurzhene states that his father was from Shiraz, Iran, his mother from Astrkhan, Russia, and that he hails from "Litho-Persian stock." This fusion of ethnicities would define Kurzhene's life and music, and it was something he was conscious of from a very young age. His brother taught him how to play the violin when Massard was 5yo. Quickly identified as a child virtuoso, he would graduate from the Royal Conservatory of Vilna by the age of 12. He then studied with major violin and harmony teachers throughout Europe (Auer, Glazounov, Sametini, Cherubini), as well as traveling "the Orient" as a concert violinist. Perhaps it was this early international traveling that sparked his multi-ethnic affinity. Later on, as a composer and bandleader Kurzhene would imitate the musical stylings of Persia, Kurdistan, Algeria, and Arabia, as well as Italy, Ireland, and more.

While there was clearly an entertainment value to such ethnic forgeries, Kurzhene had a sincere love for global music and also portrayed himself as a musicologist. In his self-written biography he claims that he performed "ethnomusicological research among primitive peoples on the Steppes of Asia, Middle East, Far East, Southeast Asia and among several tribes of American Indians." He cherished the melting pot of the world and its music, and in many ways offered himself as a musical ambassador for these global spirits to American audiences.



Photo of Massard Kurzhene gazing at his violin, circa late 1920s-early 1930s, from the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

Looking over the first half of his life, Kurzhene was youthfully accomplished and well traveled. Arriving in American he had a nice run as a concert violinist and vaudeville musician during the 1920s. While he worked in musical comedies and classical recitals, Kurzhene was also embracing an occult vaudeville persona, sometimes promoting himself as "Prince Massard Kurzhene." This is captured in a 1927 article of *The Occult Digest*.

"There is really a potent power in the satanic chords," Kurzhene writes, "which mark a certain few obscure and occult compositions." The article focuses on the daemonic or "diabolical" force invoked in his violin playing--the diabolical not being something to be disparaged but embraced. This is highlighted in his piece "La Caprice Diablé," which he says requires a technique that is "a little sadistic... truly terrifyingly diabolical." Another work "Chant du Sacrifice," is intended to portray a ritual of ancestral communion. Kurzhene sources the music's inspiration to the rituals of ancient Aztec priests and what Kurzhene described as "the deep sincerity and yearning on the part of those far off and forgotten people for a sense of satisfaction by propitiating their terrible and awe inspiring pagan Gods." And while there are no recordings of this music, I was fortunate to have the assistance of violinist Cleek Schrey to perform some of the pieces from this periodical on the Secret Sound episode. You can also hear these in the supplemental audio track available at the AMP subscriber page.

"Chant du Sacrifice" (fragment)

Lento

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Left and bottom right, from *The Occult Digest*, April, 1927; Top right, from *The Indiana Gazette*, Saturday, June 6, 1925

Kurzhene seemed drawn to the theatrics of spirit possession, and how that might be experienced by an American audience. He describes his own musical diablerie not as a magical practice to attain that which he desired, but in his own words, as a more general "shaking up" of one's inhibitions. He writes: "it creates a genuine distrust of one's inner sense of decorum—it is a destruction of the conventional barriers or resistance to a well defined set of ideas." Essentially, it is a culturally heretical act; "diablerie" establishes the para-normal itself.

**“[Diablarie] is a destruction of the conventional barriers or resistance to a well defined set of ideas.”**

In his article Kurzhene also waxes nostalgically of learning English at his studio in Bela, Beluchistan (modern day Palestine). An interesting place to reference in this article, for in this ancient Palestinian city off the Arabian Sea, we find the Cave Dwellings of Gondrani, or the House of the Spirits. Though it has not been confirmed, it is believed that the cave complex was designed by Buddhists in the 8th century.

ZANE GREY'S  
**THE VANISHING AMERICAN**



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ON THE STAGE:  
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Musical Entertainment Supreme

*New Castle News*, Saturday, January 30, 1926



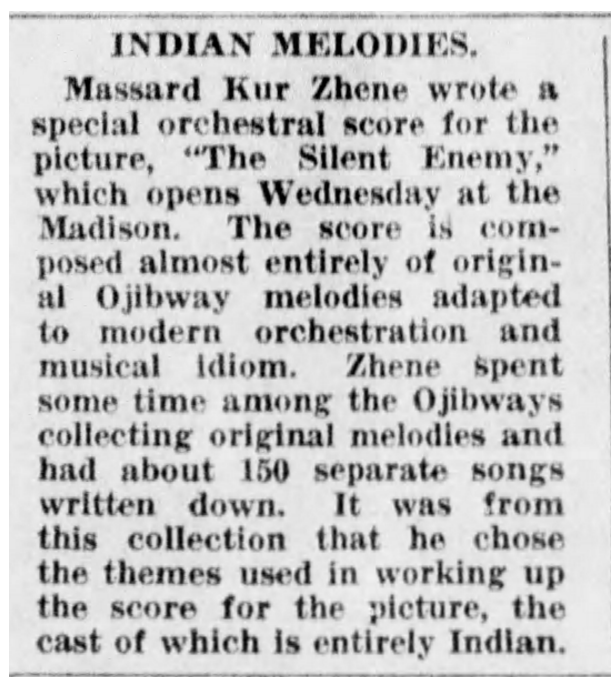
"Margaret Alexander and Mischel Kurzene photograph,"  
courtesy of the Clements Library, University of Michigan.

And over time, local legends took root within these caves. One legend states that flesh-eating demons emerged from the caves and terrified the nearby townsfolk of Gondrani. It was believed that a holy woman sacrificed her own life in order to kill the demons and save the townsfolk. Still today her remains are allegedly buried there, enshrined in the caves.

However, this explicitly occult persona seems to have been somewhat shortlived, though he would return to various cultural spiritual traditions numerous times throughout his life. During the 1920s and 30s, Kurzhene found an enduring collaborator with former child prodigy Vonya Grouleff, who was born Margaret June Alexander. And though she mimicked being Russian, she once notably described herself as "a purely American production." Alexander and Kurzhene were married for some time between 1930 and 1940. Throughout this period, Kurzhene was known for the intensity of his playing, being called "a bear on the violin"—referring us back to the "diabolical" technique of his occult writings. While he was being promoted as "one of the greatest violinists in the world."

It was during the 1930s that Kurzhene really hit his stride. This is when he began composing orchestral music for films, which would lead to more lasting industry connections. The alleged all Ojibwe-cast film, H.P. Carver's *The Silent Enemy*, is his most notable filmscoring work. I say alleged as the film's ethnicity has been questioned over the years. The film was produced by W. Douglas Burden, whose expedition to the Komodo Island and consultation with the indigenous dragon helped inspire *King Kong* three years later. *The Silent Enemy* was undeniably progressive for including indigenous cast-members, including Chief Yellow Robe, Molly Spotted Elk, Chief Awakanush, and others. But the lead role is played by Buffalo Child Long Lance (aka Sylvester Clark Long of Winston Salem, NC), a complicated and tragic figure of contraversial ethnicity. Rumors travelled after the film's release that Long Lance's indian heritage was a ruse. It was claimed instead that he was of mixed black and white descent, for which he was then persecuted for being both a fraud as well as for being part black. Likely due to the abandonment and racism he experienced following these accusations, Long committed suicide at the ranch of Anita Baldwin on March 20, 1932. Recently, however, scholars like Karina Vernon are claiming that in addition to mixed white and black heritage, Long did also have Native American ancestry on both sides of his family. I call attention to Long Lance to underscores the complexities of American ethnicity and bigotry, as Massard's story is prone to amplify in many ways.

Incidentally, *The Silent Enemy* was the last silent film to be distributed in the U.S. as "talkies" took over, which is why they brought on Kurzhene and added voice-overs. It was also one of the earliest uses of the zoom effect in cinema history--zooming in on a shaman no less! A few years prior, Kurzhene also scored music with Vonya Alexander for a theatrical production called *The Vanishing American*, which claimed to tell of the rise and fall of the American Indian. Following this work, Kurzhene's compositions were also featured in Carl Dreyer's masterpiece *Joan d'Arc*, as well as *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Through the Centuries*, as well as many features and documentary films.



Left, sheet music from *The Silent Enemy*, feat. Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance; Right, an ad from *The Detroit Free Press*, December 24, 1930



MASSARD KUR-ZHENE  
 به لودی کوردی و آلبانیایی  
 AND HIS ROYAL PERSIANS

Zelli's has many surprises to offer in the way of its musical program. Massard Kur-Zhene is not satisfied to play compositions of others, but constantly works out new themes himself from Persian, Arabian, Kurdish and Algerian motifs.



Bottom left, from *The Palm Beach Post*, Saturday, March 7, 1936; images of the Royal Persians from the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

During this time Kurzhene also served as bandleader for a popular nightclub, Zelli's, in Palm Springs, Florida, where he composed, arranged, conducted, and performed all manner of ethnic themed musics with his 20-person mixed-race orchestra "The Royal Persians"—a similar ensemble playing Italian music would change the name to "The Royal Neopolitans." He'd also founded and directed his own production company (Seven Productions, Ltd), producing at least one Christmas play. And he co-wrote a hit single with jazz lyricist Enoch Light called "Be Gone," about overcoming suffering through positive thinking and angelic visitations in dreams. Then there's the Christmas tune ("When Christmas Comes to Our House"), a popular song which children of that era might recall today. By the 1940s he'd begun composing orchestral suites of various ethnic musics for CBS radio and would work with the company in various capacities over the years.

Subsequent CBS recordings were made in 1940, when he made arrangements for violin and piano, likely in the "Due East" series, featuring more ceremonial musics: the Bokhara of Uzbekistan, the Caucasia of Russia, the Angkor Wat of Cambodian Buddhism, the pharisees of Judaism, and the Kashgar of Western China. After several attempts, I was unable to locate these recordings, despite their being listed in the CBS archives.



Kurzhene conducting an orchestra, circa 1960s, the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

However, almost a year after having released the Secret Sound episode, within one month I was contacted by a friend of Kurzhene's family, as well as by a man named David Brown. David had found some original vinyl of Kurzhene's at a flea market in Mamaroneck, New York. The flea market find was wonderful—it included the polyethnic recordings, *Due East*, that Kurzhene had made for CBS radio in late 1937, originally recorded with the Orquesta Nacional de España at the famous Harry Smith Studios.

These feature orchestrations of Kurdish, Persian, Moorish, and Tartar traditions and they are only a few selections from a larger collection of "24 original impressions of the Orient - Near and Far" which Kurzhene made for CBS. Based on the newly found bio, Kurzhene claims he worked rather extensively with CBS as "musicologist, composer, arranger, conductor, writer, live and transcription shows for radio."

David Brown's flea market discovery offers a glimpse of this work, and he was gracious enough to digitize and share some of the audio. Though the vinyl is of poor quality, I present some excerpts of this music in the audio supplement located at the AMP subscriber's page. To be able to have heard music otherwise thought lost was wonderful. But it was the family connection that revealed something totally unexpected. The reason I wasn't able to find any information on Kurzhene after the 1940s was because he'd changed identity. Throughout his life, Kurzhene changed his name numerous times. He was Mischel or Michel Kurzhene or Kurzene, or Prince Massard Kurzhene. He also used the more Americanized version of "Michael Kurzen"—I found a few instructional violin essays under this name from 1916-1919. At some point in the 1940s, and for reasons unknown, Kurzhene changed his name to the very Italian monicker: "Guido Vandt." Ultimately he reduced his birth name to preceding initials, e.g. "M.K. Guido Vandt," though he generally went by "Guido Vandt" or "Mr. Vandt" for the remainder of his life. Why this more drastic change of identity, and why then?



a charred orchestral part from the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

One can only speculate. He could have been morphing his ethnicity to best commercially serve his career. Or perhaps he was channeling some deeply meaningful personal experiences he had in Italy during his travels? Or maybe Joe Zelli slipped him the idea, and it struck a chord. In any case, by 1950 Guido Vandt was working as the musical director, composer, arranger, and conductor for Ford TV Theatre, a major radio and television anthology, often featuring Broadway performers. It seems he worked for several theatre companies during this time. In the 1950s he'd also begun collaborating with folks like Helen Steele and Thomas del Vecchio on theatre projects, including a musical entitled *Brooklyn Bridge*. As a lyricist, he co-authored several songs for composer Helen Steele ("The Scissors Grinder," "Blue Tears," "May Our Love Today Live Tomorrow") and others. From his brownstone apartment, Kurzhene (as Vandt) also ran Due East Publishers, Inc.

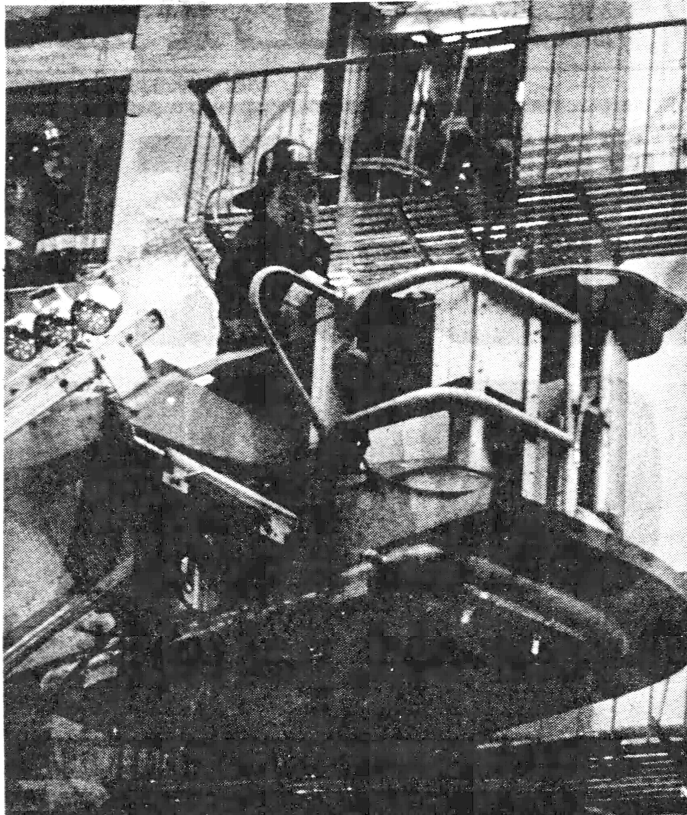
I also learned that the artistic gene had continued in Kurzhene's family across generations. When I was contacted by painter Ellen Altfest, I discovered Massard's niece, Estelle Kurzen, was a child violin prodigy. I also discovered Ellen's art teacher, Aaron Kurzen, Massard's nephew. Aaron was a remarkable surrealist painter and sculptor of found materials and an influential arts educator. Aaron was Massard's closest relative, and when Massard died his belongings came into Aaron's possession. When Aaron died recently, at the age of 101, Ellen and her family, who were also friendly with "Mr. Vandt," began assessing Aaron's estate, which included Massard's extant archive. They are currently seeking a home for this archive, which is filled with rare recordings, musical scores, writings and unpublished books, artworks, photographs, and personal effects. It is a special archive which I hope can find preservation in a proper archival setting.

Massard left behind numerous reel-to-reel and vinyl recordings. From *The Silent Enemy*, we find not only scores, but symbolic drawings and musical interpretations of Ojibwe stories. There is also a collection of writings, including children's stories, a novel, and a retrospective of his international travels. Beyond the standard weathering of time, some of the items in the archive reveal the ominous markings of soot and fire damage...



Kurzhene's Passport photo, 1962,  
the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

## Blaze kills composer, 82



**FIREMEN REMOVE** body of composer Guido Vandt, 82, from brownstone at Lexington Ave. and 29th St. He lived there nearly 50 years and died in fire that officials said was set. See p. 23

JACK SMITH DAILY NEWS

Kurzhe's death was a tragic one. And while Ellen conveyed the story behind the soot, it was only after learning of Kurzhe's "Guido Vandt" identity that I was able to find the death notice in the papers. He'd lived in the same brownstone apartment on Lexington Avenue for 48 years. Notably, it seems he moved into this building around the same time he'd changed his name to Guido Vandt. Due to the arson of an unknown individual, the building was set ablaze. Heard screaming for help by neighbors before the fire department arrived, Kurzhe was burned alive under the rubble of his crumbling apartment. When the *Palm Beach Post* covered the 1986 fire, they reported the loss of an 82yo composer named Guido Vandt. The photo in the paper was literally taken as the firemen removed Kurzhe's body from the building. A neighbor is quoted as describing her deceased neighbor as "a native of Shiraz, Iran, [who] had studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in Russia, then fled to China with a camel caravan, which inspired his 'Due East' suite."

## Composer, 82, killed in blaze

By DANIEL HAYS

Daily News Staff Writer

An elderly composer was killed early yesterday when an arsonist torched the Lexington Ave. brownstone where he had lived for nearly half a century.

Three people were injured in the blaze, including a woman who escaped by sliding down telephone wires, as choking smoke from the three-alarm blaze billowed into her apartment in an adjacent building.

The badly burned body of Guido Vandt, 82, was found buried under rubble of the collapsed bathroom ceiling in his top-floor apartment at 124 Lexington Ave. at 29th St.

Vandt, a classical composer who also wrote pop tunes and was said to have written arrangements for bandleader Enoch Light, had lived in the building 48 years.

Fire Battalion Chief Charles Blaich said firefighters who answered the first alarm at 5:45 a.m. smelled gasoline in the building's foyer, where the blaze erupted. The fire was fought by 70 firefighters and 18 companies. It was brought under control an hour later. Fire marshals ruled the fire arson.

Denise Lewis, a 28-year-old accounting supervisor for an advertising firm, was roused from sleep in her fourth-floor apartment at 122 Lexington Ave. by a man screaming, "Help me!"

She opened her door to blackness and smoke. Searching frantically for a way to escape, Lewis saw a bunch of skinny black wires trailing past her window, down the side of the building.

"First I tested them," she said. She started to slide down, but the wires sliced her hands. Lewis let go and dropped to the third floor, where her legs became tangled in the wires and caught her. She dangled upside down and then grabbed her lifeline and let herself down.

One firefighter termed her heroics "a Tarzan act." But Lewis made light of the feat. Treated at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, she sat on her couch yesterday with heavily bandaged hands. "The wire seemed strong enough," she said.

One firefighter suffered a sprained back, and Alfredo Ordena, of 126 Lexington, was treated for smoke inhalation.

Dorothy Mongon, 92, a neighbor who knew Vandt for 21 years, said he was a man with "a lot of personality." She explained that because her eyesight is failing, Vandt read books, magazines and her mail aloud to her.

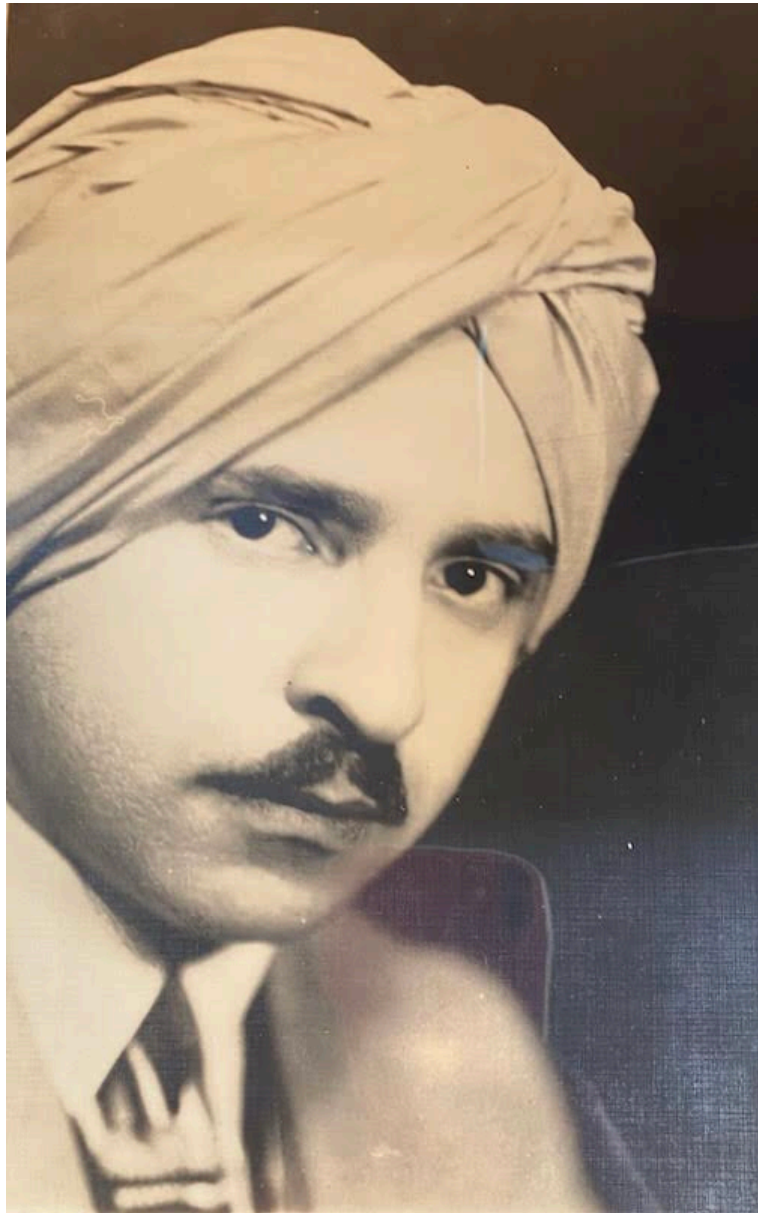
She said Vandt, a native of Shiraz, Iran, had studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in Russia, then fled to China with a camel caravan, which inspired his "Due East Suite." He also wrote a number of pop tunes, among them "Polina Lina," and did arrangements for bandleader Light.

Kurzhe's Death notice from *The Daily News*, Tuesday, January 17, 1989.



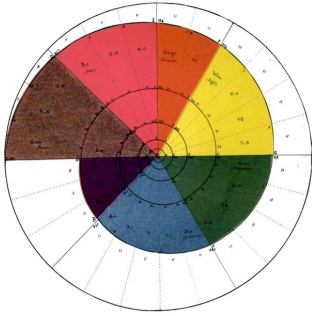
To many, Kurzhene's art may appear to be a novelty, Orientalist kitsch. But greater meaning is found in his musicological perspective, as well as the paranormal lens through which he channelled the spirit of cultural myth and music. I'll end this essay as I ended the podcast, with these metaphysical musings from Kurzhene's essay "Pitch Black: The Black Art in Music":

"[I]t is the vibration which causes an answering vibration in the human organism, as a bit of wood thrills to the sound of a strong drawn bow; a glass trembles when its tone is sung or played into it; a tuning fork re-echoes with mysterious rapture when certain notes are struck; or the piano string trembles ecstatically or demoniacally, when the violin compells the same sort of response. All nature vibrates in varying physical degrees. And that is the simple principle underlying those modulations of voice, employed by the lover in his wooing, the singer in his song, or the musician in his composition."

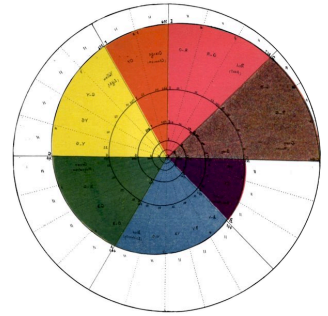


Left, one of Kurzhene's musical scores; Right, a photo of Kurzhene, circa late 1920s; both via the Estate of Aaron Kurzen

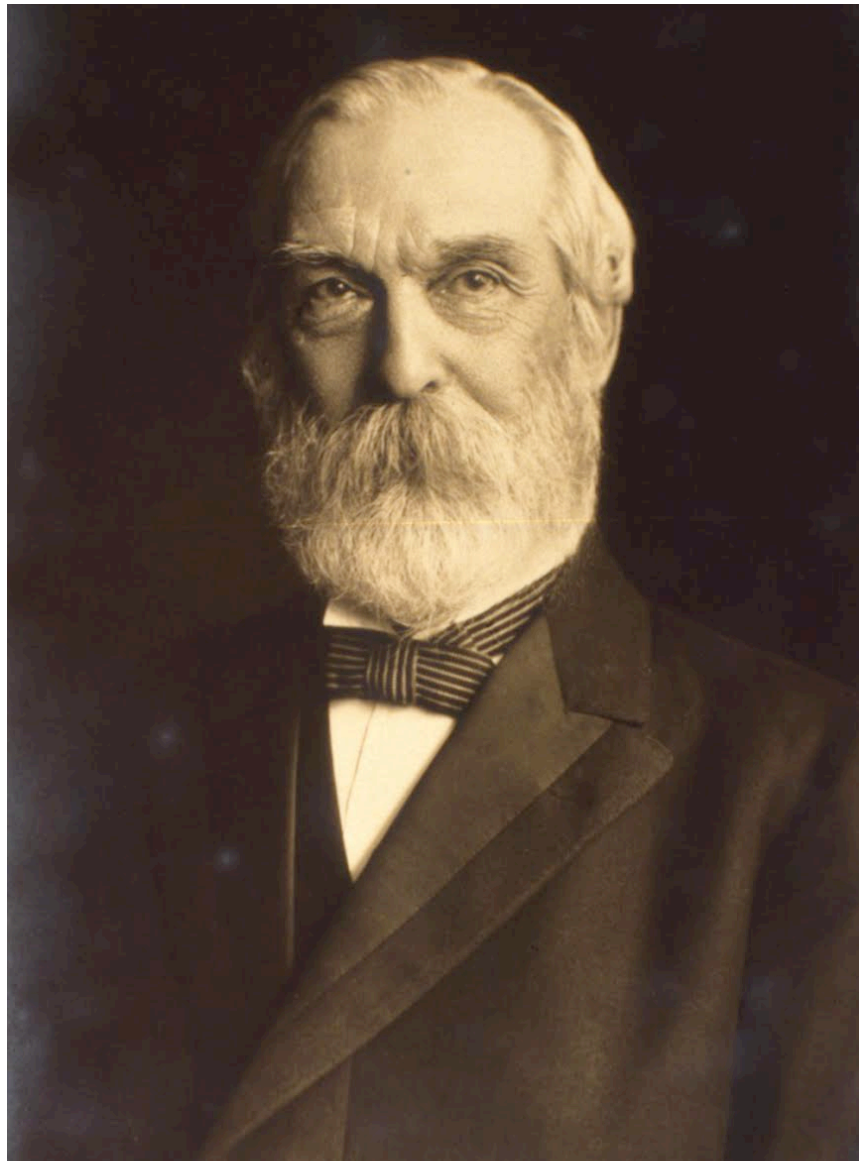
# Listening to the Vortex of C.S. Wake



“Being of a higher spirit than he knows,  
When he comes to know... [Man] shall be  
What at last he knows himself to be:  
From nothing to nothing to nothing  
to nothing beyond  
He activates the spiral way”



from “The Spiral Way” by Sun Ra



+

A rare photo of C.S. Wake (c. 1905-1908); Courtesy, Field Museum. GN92796.

Sound and Light have long been suspected of being masks for a singular and more fundamental energetic medium. It's gone by many names—ether, animal magnetism, odic force, *mana*, *prana*, *qi*, and more. Scientists, metaphysicians, artists, and inventors have spent centuries speculating on what connects these two fundamental sensations in the human experience, as well as the waves and particles by which pretend to know them. This essay does not pretend to resolve the inquiry. Rather it tells the story of how one man was drawn into the spiral of illuminated sound. But, first, let me offer some context.

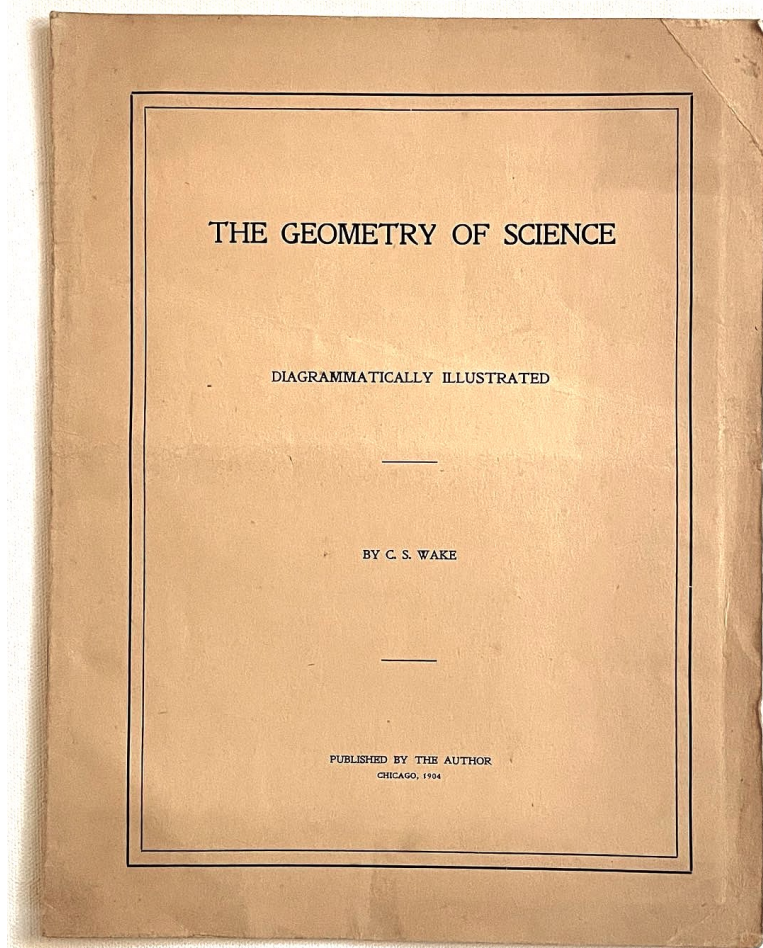
Energy, force, and matter were the talk of the town among nineteenth century physicists. Scientists had continued inquiring into Isaac Newton's "imponderable ether" while exploring the emerging phenomena of electromagnetism, telegraphic communication, phonographic sound reproduction, and the electric lightbulb. Meanwhile, Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories were inspiring a new sense of humanity's role in Nature. And at the turn of the century we meet Freud's theory of the unconscious and Einstein's theory of relativity, expanding our cultural awareness into both consciousness and cosmos.

With this explosion of theoretical and technological activity, many philosophers—both professional and armchair—dove headlong into all encompassing metaphysical speculations on universal ideas of light and vibration. And it's through such impassioned developments that the Western spiritual imagination devised alternative concepts, such as Mesmer's "animal magnetism" or Reichenbach's "Odic force." The term "ether" has metaphysical precedence in Neoplatonism and Kabbalah. While professional scientists, via Newton's occult studies, incorporated "ether" or "luminiferous ether" as a theoretical concept describing a universal medium for electromagnetic waves. This scientific theory was ultimately disproved by Einstein.

However, this focus on an invisible force had been in the air of American metaphysics for some time, and notably so since Andrew Jackson Davis spread his cosmic harmonial philosophy in the 1840s. Harmonialism—along with its telegraphic and electromagnetic language—laid the philosophical ground for the spiritualist movement and séance practice, which flourished from the 1840s into the 20th century. Also across this period the Theosophical Society and the New Thought movement fused ancient occult theories of vibration with the discoveries of electromagnetism to form an American metaphysics of quasi-scientific language, universal principles, and symbolic correspondences. Theosophy, in particular, appealed to diverse scientists, scholars, and professionals due to its intellectual leanings and "scientific" claims.

## **“Everything in nature is vortical in operation...”**

And it's somewhere in the midst of all of this that a stock broker's anti-war semiology spiraled into the theosophical science of a remarkable anthropologist at the end of the 19th century. Charles Staniland Wake (1835-1910) is largely known today by anthropology students as a pioneering figure in the study of human kinship, represented in his work *The Development of Marriage and Kinship* (1889). Wake is also known today by various anthropologists and occultists as an eminent scholar of ancient symbolism (*Serpent Worship*, *The Origin and Significance of the Great Pyramid*, *Ancient Symbol Worship*). I fell in the rabbit hole after discovering one of his last works, a curious metaphysical treatise, entitled *Vortex Philosophy, or the Geometry of Science* (1907).



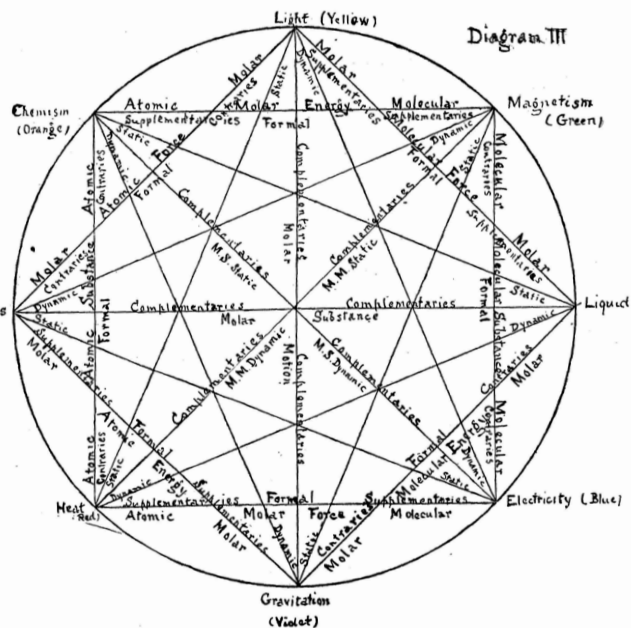
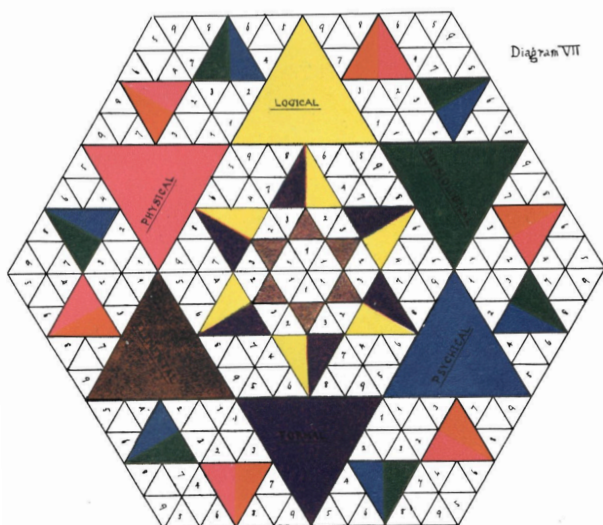
The cover of C.S. Wake's privately published *The Geometry of Science* (1904), from the AMP archive

I then began researching more into Wake's later perspective, but as the Oxford Reference noted, "little seems to be known about his life." On the life and relationship of Nostrand and Wake, there are two principle papers documenting such information: Rodney Needham's "Biographical Record" (1975) and Shea Zellweger's "John James Van Nostrand and Sematology" (1990). Little interest has since been shown towards either individual, practically none in the 21st century. Through consulting with family members, periodical archives, and comparative literature, this essay offers new information regarding Wake, the influences behind his later life and work, and the impact of his tone-color philosophy.

Following decades of success as an anthropologist in England, which is well documented by his prolific writings, Wake's life took a turn in the 1880s. It all began in 1885, when his first wife, Fannie Morley, died. What has been lost to history until now, and which I discovered via newspaper archives, is that Wake was arrested a few years later for bankruptcy following a court evasion in 1889; he was

also being suspected of fraud. It was this chain of events that lead him to leave his daughter, Hilda, with a distant relative in the UK and immigrate to the US that same year. Perhaps not surprising Wake's career and research were also impacted by these life changes. However, he quickly procured a stable position at the Field Museum in Chicago in 1902, a position which he held until his death 8 years later. From the 1890s onward, however, Wake's study of ancient symbolism was moving into metaphysical perspectives on science which would preoccupy him for the last two decades of his life in America.

This seems to have been catalyzed when, in 1892, Wake came under the influence of a man named John James Van Nostrand, Sr. (1844-1925). J.J. Van Nostrand worked as a stock broker with the Chicago Board of Trade, but in his free time he indulged in a speculative philosophy he called "sematology," or the science of signs. Over the next year, having become deeply invested in Nostrand's philosophy, Wake subsequently illustrated his teachings in complex designs of symbol-laden spirals, triangles, and squares. In fact for several years Wake assisted Nostrand in developing his sematology, even providing a lengthy "explanation" in Nostrand's *The Primary Laws of Thought* (1891). And in 1904 Wake privately published two compilations of these illustrations, the first featuring four primary diagrams and the second featuring 13 additional diagrams, both titled *The Geometry of Science*. I managed to acquire an original publication of the former in 2022. And I subsequently fell into the gravity of Wake's spiral.



Diagrams VII and III from C.S. Wake's *Vortex Philosophy* (1907)

## THE VORTEX

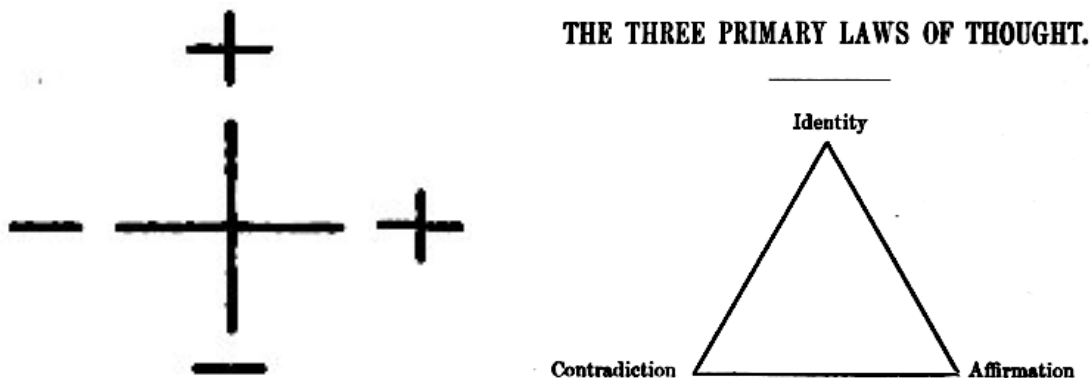
Across metaphysical traditions the spiral is given symbolic importance, often with reference to serpentine symbolism—the caduceus, or serpents entwined around the staff, of ancient Greco-Egyptian magus Hermes or the kundalini ("coiled snake") of Hindu yoga. In Christian theosophy of 16th century Germany, mystic Jacob Boehme emphasized the threefold life of man and a septenary philosophy that would inspire the foundations of Newtonian physics, German idealism, Psychoanalysis, and the Theosophical Society. William Law describes Boehme's spiral thought in his *Spirit of Love* (1752): "All outward Nature, all inward Life, is what it is, and works as it works, from this unceasing powerful Attraction, Resistance, and *Whirling*" [my italics]. While even the reasonable René Descartes promoted a triadic "vortex theory" of the Universe. Over two centuries later, Helena Blavatsky came to America citing the primordial source of occult knowledge, via Ophite beliefs, in her *Isis Unveiled*. "[From] the unfathomable Depth," Blavatsky writes, "issues forth a circle formed of spirals; which, in the language of symbolism, means a grand cycle, composed of smaller ones. Coiled within, so as to follow the spirals, lies the serpent—emblem of wisdom and eternity—the Dual Androgyne..."

This all echoes the fundamental significance of the spiral we encounter in the Natural world, from spiral galaxies and the shell-like arrangement of frequencies along the cochlea of our inner ear to the helical structure of our DNA and the formation of leaves on a plant. It's in this vortex [etymologically, "eddy or whirlpool"] that we meet so much of Nature's manner of operation, largely based on cyclical archetypes of rhythmically harmonized polarities. This perspective is metaphysically well-represented in the Taoist symbol of the Yin and Yang, as mutually reflective opposites spin around a shared center. While the spiral features heavily in the mediumistic art of Hilma af Klint, the cosmic poetics of Sun Ra, and many other metaphysically inspired artists. One of the most popular author's on the cultural history of the spiral, Jill Purce (*The Mystic Spiral*, 1974), was herself an influential collaborator with composer Karlheinz Stockhausen, who composed his composition *Spiral* in 1968.

Having long studied the symbolism of ancient cultures as an anthropologist, by the end of the 19th century C.S. Wake began to view the universe through spiral eyes. This was amplified through his studies with J.J. Van Nostrand, who viewed the spiral as a rhythmizing figure which synthesizes polarities "probably belong[ing] to an advanced geometrical process." Van Nostrand described his work as a mathematical "philosophy of atheism." More like a metaphysical absolutism, his semiotics or "sematology," as he called it, is uniquely informed by Hinduism, neo-Pythagoreanism, and the American Transcendentalists. His writings are jam-packed with quotes, which include Ralph Waldo Emerson, as a "great prophet," and Max Müller, renowned Orientalist and founder of modern Indology and religious studies. Regarding the term "sematology," Van Nostrand had notably consulted with eminent semiologist Charles Pierce, who is also responsible for placing the term "sematology" in the dictionary at that time.

"The greatest power... for Mind in man to comprehend is the changeless omnipresent point or place. It is the very essence of the truth, i.e., its essential property." Mystical statements like these pepper Van Nostrand's densely calculated presentation. As Goethe sought the archetype (*urpflanze*) of plant morphology, Van Nostrand sought the archetype defining the nature of the mind and conversely the mind of nature—and he claims to have found it in the "sematical unit."

Van Nostrand viewed the laws of thought as playing out in three integrated planes of unification. The **physical** (atom, molecule, and ether), the **psychical** (plasm, cell, and fibre), and the **sematical** (meaning, thought, truth). Van Nostrand also proposed a "fourth step" of union whereby "pure ultimateness" or the Mind of Nature is arrived at. As an archetype of the unity operating across these planes of reality, Van Nostrand proposed his geometric "**sematical unit**," which uniquely "carries [gestant] ideas in the form of a proposition." He represents this idea by the cruciform sign on the left, below.



While the nature of mind remains a fourth term comprehending all polarities, Van Nostrand's philosophy is largely presented through a fractal echo chamber of triads, rooted in the principle trinity of **Negation**, **Position**, and **Equation**. Or, as Wake explained it, "the rhythmic interaction of energy and force." In an 1897 article in *Intelligence* magazine, Wake comments on Van Nostrand's triadic philosophy with Christian overtones: "We can now see what is to be understood by the statement that the trinity which constitutes the human organism, consists of body, soul, and spirit." But he adds, "Man is more than a simple triad. Not only is he physical body, psychical soul, and sematical spirit, but each of these has a threefold nature, so that he is a triad of triads" (6-8). The vast illustrations and conceptual inter-connections presented in this philosophy are too much to go into here. To even engage the details of Van Nostrand's work is to enter into a mandala-like maze of contemplative practice. Ultimately, as I understand it, Van Nostrand and Wake were seeking to trace the triadic nature of the world to its unifying root—the changeless point.

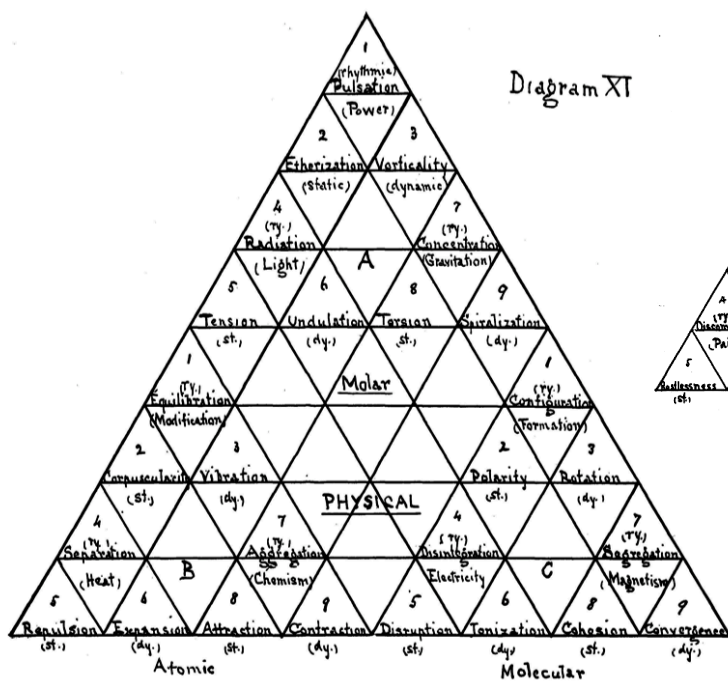


Diagram XI

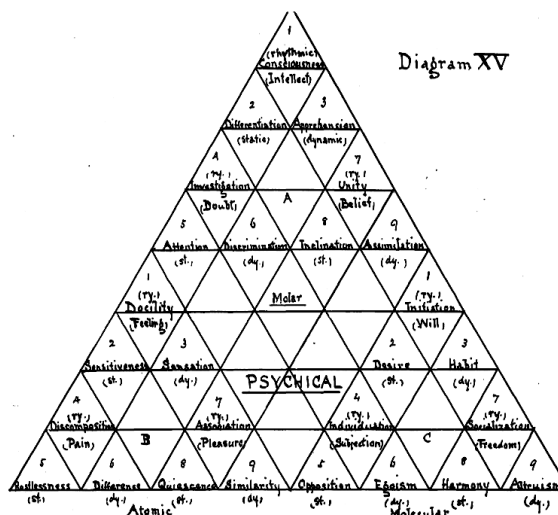
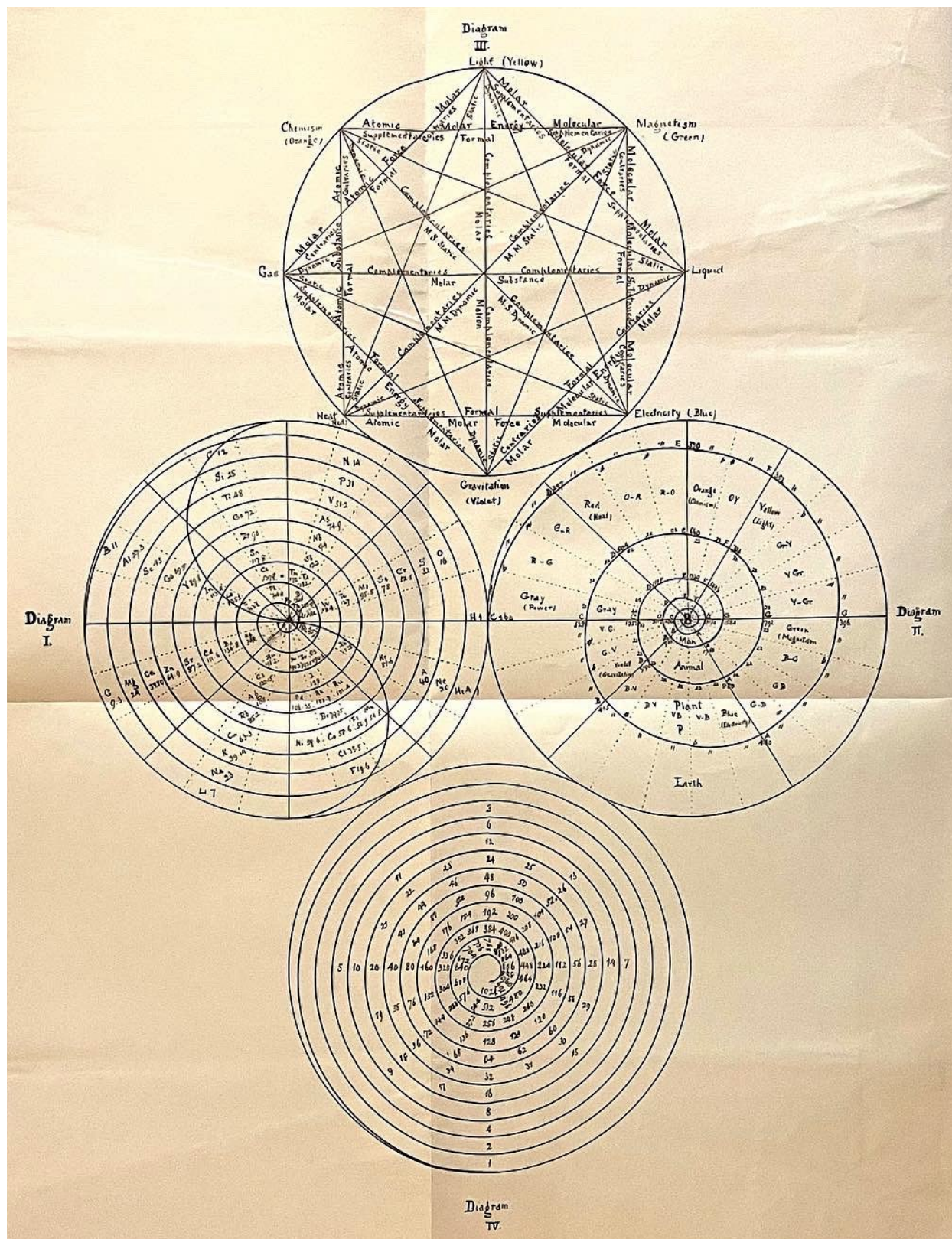


Diagram XV

Diagrams inspired by Van Nostrand's sematology as presented in C.S. Wake's *Vortex Philosophy* (1907)

Wake's inspired illustrations of Van Nostrand's philosophy are geometric gardens of complexity, colorful and crystalline thought structures, beautiful in themselves. Expanding upon Van Nostrand's sematology, Wake had developed his own philosophy into a 600 page treatise, dense with illustrations and a detailed scientific description of this philosophy. However, these materials representing a decade of his work were "accidentally burned and destroyed" in a fire of unknown origin at his Chicago home ("The Rosalie," 248 East 57th St.). Gathering and re-illustrating what he felt were the most important ingredients, Wake privately published the *Geometry of Science* in 1904, featuring only a two and half page explanation, first with four and then with thirteen additional diagrams. In 1907, Wake rewrote a much shorter illustrated manuscript, entitled *Vortex Philosophy*, which included 16 diagrams (three in color) and 27 pages of explanatory text. Due to the work's complexity and lack of scientific data, whose extensive details were lost in the house fire, Wake was explicit that he was offering this work to professional scientists and not the layman.

While Van Nostrand's sematology offered a mathematical ethics aimed at ceasing warfare, Wake was heading down a different path. Proposing his vortex philosophy as a "systemization of physical and organic phenomena," he embraced a more explicitly metaphysical model, which took inspiration from the Theosophical Society. Ultimately, his efforts were to articulate the macrocosm in nature and facilitate a "cosmic intuition" in the microcosm of man. Wake viewed the Universe as being directed by an invisible ether and pervasively sustained by "the rhythmical co-operation of two primeval factors: matter [energy] and motion [force]." The variety of elements and lifeforms in the Universe are due to emergent predominances of matter or motion. This *organizing undulation* becomes a third factor, described by Wake as "the special representative of cosmic activity" (18). Van Nostrand's fractal triads inspired Wake's view that every "whole" within nature is composed of three parts, each part of three elements, each element of three factors. Beyond Van Nostrand's influence, this triadic foundation was also inspired by Hegel's dialectical synthesis (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), which in turn finds its origin in the spiritual alchemy of Jacob Boehme.



The original fold-out diagram from C.S. Wake's privately published manuscript, *The Geometry of Science: Diagrammatically Illustrated* (1904), from the AMP Archive



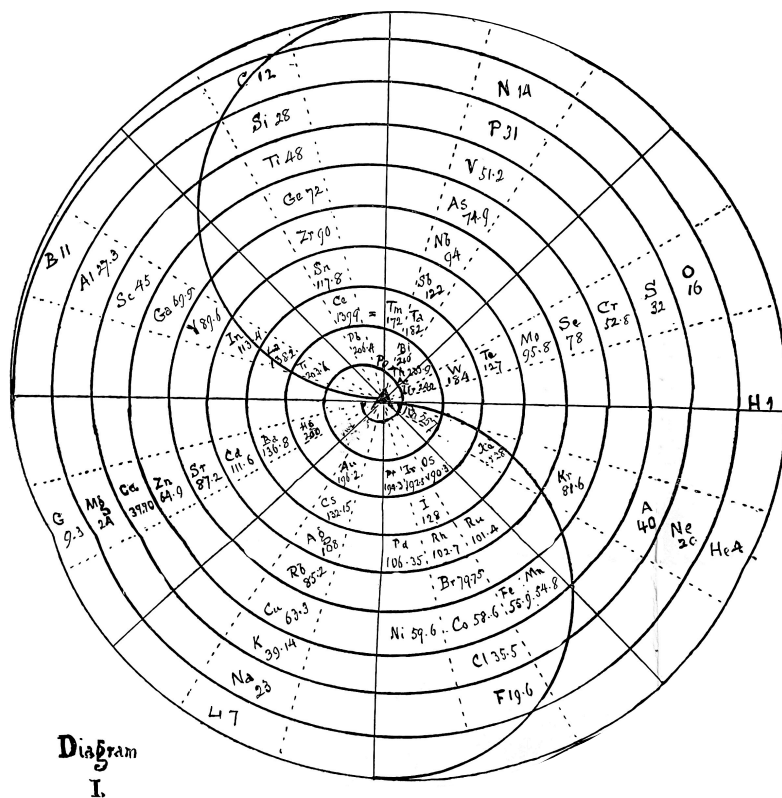
I'll do my best to offer a summary of the diagram from Wake's *Geometry of Science* (1904), shown on the previous page, which illustrates the core principles of his vortex philosophy. Embracing a cosmic imagination, the four circles shown here collectively represent a "nebulous sphere." One might imagine the poles of Van Nostrand's sematical unit coordinating these discs around a shared center. **Diagram I** and **II** show the sphere's two end poles (conjoining A and B). Through this diagram, Wake depicts a key to the elements and creative processes at play in the mind of nature. In this cosmic dance, he includes atomic weights, musical pitches, spectral colors, and a geometric array of fundamental phenomena (e.g. molar, molecular, atomic). As shown, this is all based on spiraling undulations of energy and force.

Claiming that energy radiates from the center of the sphere, Wake says it then externalizes and spirals around Pole A (left, **Diagram I**). Pole A represents **Energy** or externalizing and radiative differentiation (aka "segmentation"). In this diagram Wake applies the atomic weights of the Elements to a spiral numeration. As energy passes through the radiative and concentrative forces along the pole of the sphere, elements are formed of positive and negative qualities with greater elemental weights accumulating at the center of the spiral.

Energy then moves, in pendular motion, to Pole B (right, **Diagram II**), which represents the concentrative integration and internalizing nature of **Force**. Here we meet the creative generation of living entities, culminating in human consciousness; the elements are combined, giving rise to the variety of worldly forms, from vapor, fluid, and mineral to plant, animal, and human. Wake has depicted this evolutionary development centripetally, with the outer fold of the spiral corresponding to primeval terrestrial phenomena, "Earth," moving towards a "positive" center, where we find "Man." We'll examine this diagram more later.

**Diagram III** is a geometric synthesis of the broader philosophy, integrating the color correspondence of Diagram II and interconnecting the larger forces at play in this nebulous sphere. **Diagram IV** maps the polar opposite numbers of **Diagram I** and represents the radial octaves of the elements in Diagram I according to spiral periodicity.

Most interesting to me, however, is **Diagram II**, in which Wake corresponds musical pitches with spectral colors and evolutionary forms of inorganic and organic matter. Wake arrays sound frequencies and their musical pitches in a spiral form. This shape mimics the spiral shell of the cochlea in our inner ear.



However, inverse to the cochlear array, Wake maps the frequencies along his spiral with the highest at the apex and lowest at the base. Furthermore he divides the spiraled circle into seven sectors, each associated with a different color from the visible spectrum. What have musical pitches and colored lights got to do with the evolution of Nature and human consciousness? We'll explore this shortly in the "Sound & Light" portion of this essay. But Wake makes clear that he views sound as a mode of force and light as a mode of energy.

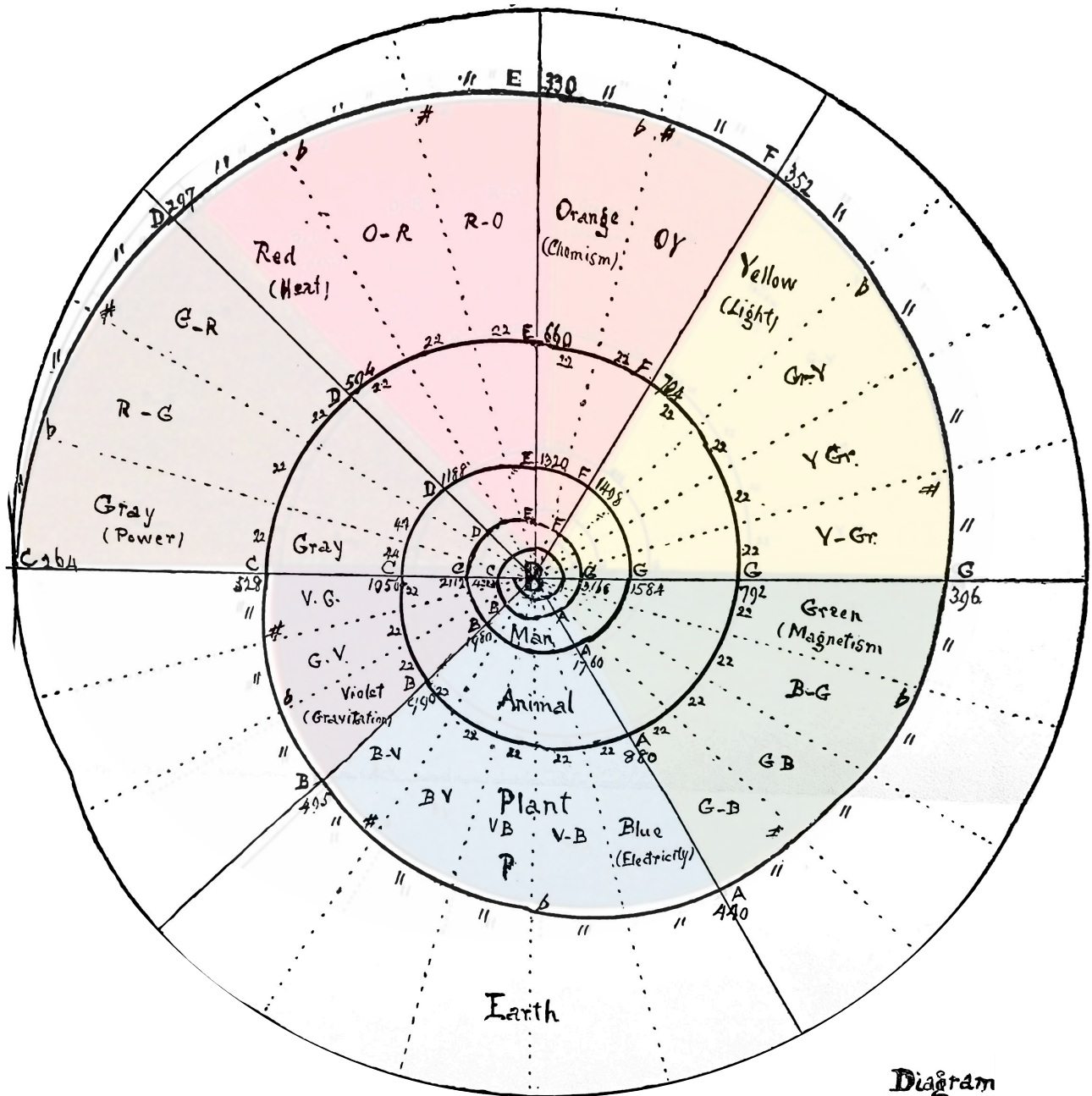
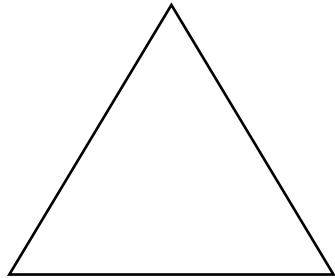


Diagram II.

Everything in his philosophy is grounded in this dualism of Energy (**Motion**) and Force (**Matter**), which find vibratory synthesis (**Power**). Based on the characteristics across Wake's text, I have broken down the characteristics of the codependent polarity of natural mind at the heart of his philosophy:

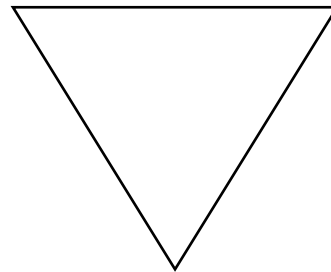
### Energy : Motion

Male  
numerically odd  
negatively charged  
concentrative integration, interiorization  
Light, Electricity, Heat

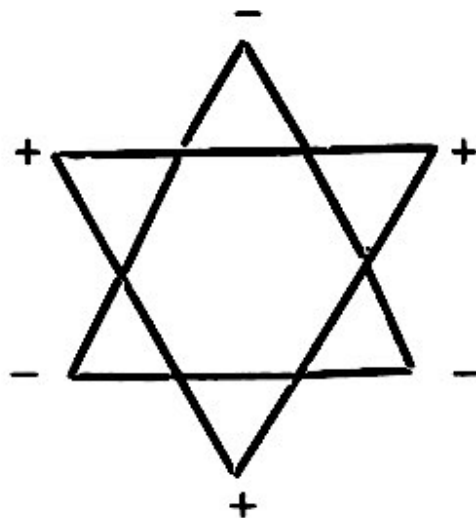


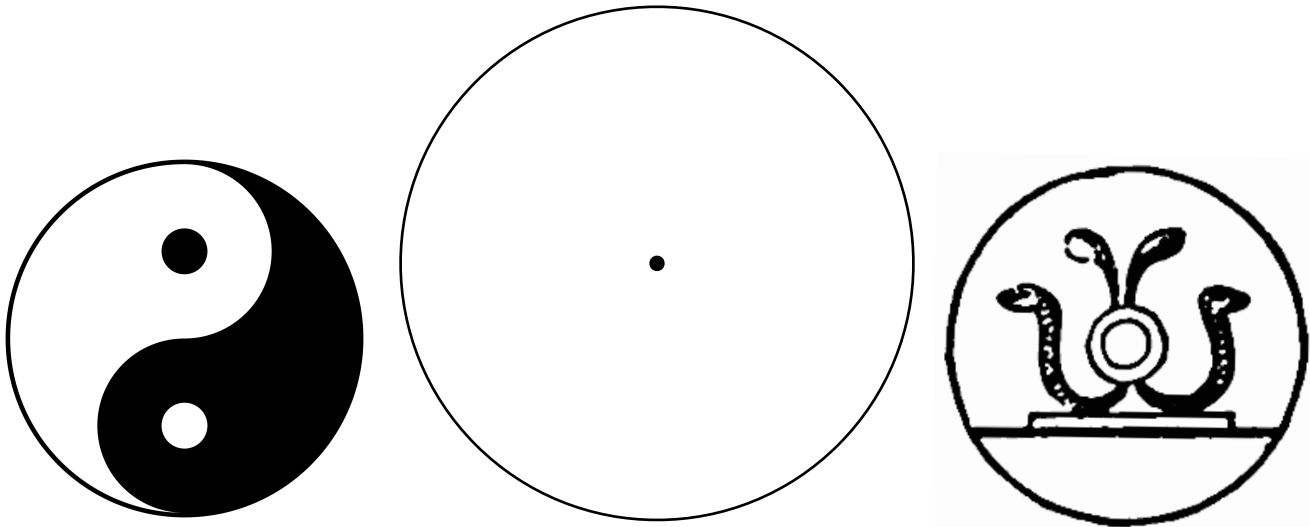
### Force : Matter

Female  
numerically even  
positively charged  
radiative differentiation, externalizing  
Gravitation, Magnetism, and Chemism



Wake explicitly equates this polar codependence to the ancient Chinese Taoist symbol of the Yin and Yang. Beyond Taoism, we see this complimentary polarity at play in diverse metaphysical traditions, from the divine energies of Shiva and Shakti in ancient India, represented by the *shatkona* figure, to the alchemical light/dark fires of Jacob Boehme's theosophy and the Solomonic seal of Jewish mysticism and Islamic magic. In every instance this is a union or harmonization of opposites. And this polarity is often portrayed as two interpenetrating triangles, essentially representing the union of spirit (from above) and matter (from below). As a whole the hexagram represents the **macrocosm**, which concerns the infinite (re)generative or creative force of the cosmos. The pentagram is sometimes used to symbolize the human (and its five extremities) as the **microcosm**, or the manifestation of infinite power in limited materiality. So it is not surprising to find, in *The Primary Laws of Thought* (1891), that Van Nostrand had represented his philosophy of polar union and triadic interconnections using the following symbol.





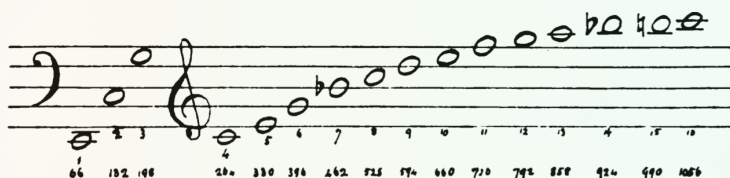
In his study of the relationship between sound and light, Wake traced the common root of these phenomena to a hidden center, or what Van Nostrand called a "polarized point" arrived at by abstraction. In the diagrams shown here, this would be the center of the sphere or the hexagram. Reminiscent of Dionysius Andreas Freher, Van Nostrand's definition of a "point" was unequivocally metaphysical: "that which has place, or position in space without occupying any part of it." And it is by spiraling around this hidden point that we begin to sense a comprehensive consciousness as well as the generation of organic forms, which carry "ideas gestant" (1901, 4). This is not unlike what is sought in mandala contemplation.

As we'll see shortly, Wake described tone-color relationships as not bearing an "actual identity," yet nevertheless a meaningful correspondence. This equally applies to Wake's geometrization of scientific knowledge. Though modern science may dismiss the logical legitimacy of the correlations Wake proposes; nevertheless, there is a meaningful correspondence to bear witness to—if only sematical or symbolic.

A purely rationalist or materialistic perspective will likely be disappointed by Wake's later work. Symbolically, however, there remains much to reflect upon here. For the power of such symbolism lies in its "gestant ideas." And by abstract contemplation, these nascent ideas can plant themselves in the center of our awareness, where they may naturally arise as flashes of insight. Wake's philosophy then effectively portrays the creative forces at play in the cosmos, as well as in the creative mind of the individual—if only in an idealized form. Nevertheless, amidst the unified play of signs in the nebulous sphere, the Mind of Nature resounds in the center.

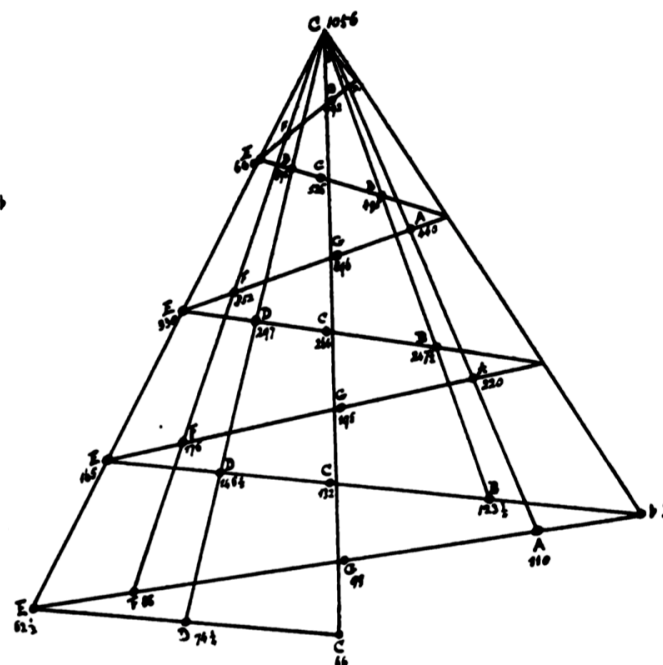
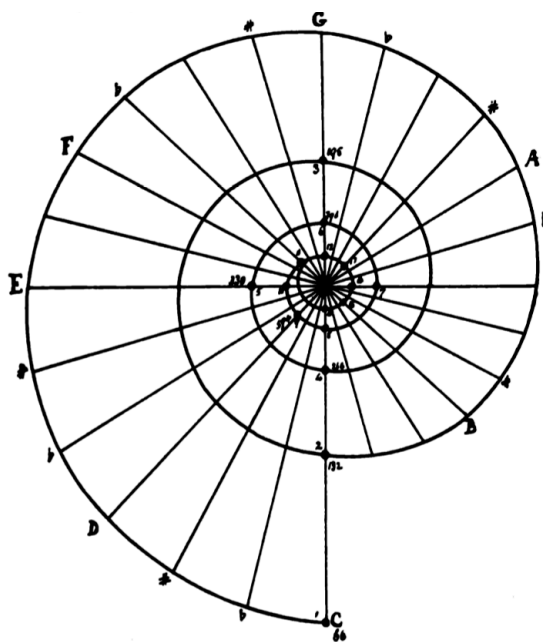
Out of this array of forces and energies, Wake writes, "emerges the Personality which, as distinctive of Man, is the Redefined Expression of the highest phase of Radiative action, and reflects on the Individuality and through it modifies the Environment." His guiding message is that individual self-awareness [of the broadest and deepest union] inspires greatness among humanity and positively influences the environment as a whole. This is a general premise for many metaphysical philosophers, notably agreeing with the views of the Theosophical Society. Blavatsky offers extensive commentary on evolution, while she notes in *The Secret Doctrine*, "before we can approach the evolution of Physical and Divine Man, we have first to master the idea of Cyclic Evolution." Indirectly, Wake's teachings find a resonant and more epic illustration in the New Thought teachings of Walter Russell beginning in the 1920s, as epitomized in his book *The Universal One* (1926). Like Russell and many other metaphysicians, Wake was especially drawn to the shared energetic origin of sound and light.

## SOUND & LIGHT



Tone-color theories abounded at the turn of the century. Charles Darwin's grandniece, F.J. Hughes, wrote at length on the mutual evolution of tones and colors according to a shared law which she traced to the Bible. Developing mnemonic tone-color musics, D.D. James invented "Colour-music" and Edward Maryon his "Marcotone"—I previously wrote about Maryon's work in my essay "The Colorful Life of Daulby" (*Desert Suprematism*, 2016). In his undervalued 1875 essay, "What Is Music?" Industry maverick and chess master Isaac L. Rice offered a "cosmic theory of music" in which he states what many were intuiting: "*Tones and colors* are essentially the *same* things" [his italics]. While Helena Blavatsky and other occult teachers inspired numerous philosophers and artists to explore tone-color art, experimental technology, meditation and healing practices. This all found significant momentum during the 1880s and would continue into the 20th century, as color organs, musical paintings, and alternative healing flowered. C.S. Wake was there at the beginning, inspired, it seems, by his affinities for the spiral and his deepening acquaintance with theosophy.

Wake had long shown a curiosity regarding the relationship between musical tone and the colors of the visible spectrum. As early as 1868, in his book *Chapters on Man*, we encounter this quote by Max Müller, "We have not five senses, but only one sense, the sense of feeling. There may be no connection between a sound and a colour, but since both the sound and the colour are but states produced in a thinking subject, the brain which is affected by the sound can use sound as a means of expressing the effect of the colour also." Wake responds to Müller agreeably: "sound has no more reality to the mind than colour itself, both of them being mere subjective impressions" (37-38).



Diagrams from Wake's essay, "Musical Tone and Color," from *Music* magazine, 1896

Vortex operation is separative and at the same time refining.

But it seems by the late 1890s, Wake was becoming deeply interested in this tone-color relationship and increasingly from a metaphysical perspective. In an 1896 edition of *Music* magazine, he published an article called "Musical Tone and Color." And it's here we first see him using the spiral figure to organize his ideas on this subject. Wake proposes sound frequencies and spectral colors to be vibrationally correspondent expressions of solar (luminous) and logocic (sonorous) Power according to principles of vortex motion. Tone and color are "manifestations of the divine harmony of Nature," he writes, "which, as taught by Pythagoras, has a rational basis." Wake clearly aligns his thinking with a Neopythagorean *musica universalis* or "music of the spheres." And in keeping with Pythagorean tradition, his philosophy abounds with principled pairs of opposites underlying tone-color phenomena—contrast and symmetry, radiative energy and concentrative force, etc—and their triangulated synthesis. Ultimately, Wake viewed sound and light phenomena to be "merely different phases of the vortex motion which furnishes the key to the operations of Nature" (181).

A year later (1897) Wake writes in his essay "Man and Nature" that the "purest physical expression of the divine existence is to be found in the beam of light." He continues, "the six simple color-rays composing which form a dual triad, one representative of energy and the other of force, combined and co-ordinated into the pure light of day" (10).

More than Van Nostrand, Wake's language leans into the language of the Hermeticists, Rosicrucians, and Theosophers. This is especially true when he writes about sound and light, which echoes the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky. As Blavatsky outlines in her theosophical writings, the seven prismatic colors and pitches of the musical scale manifest out of an original transparency/silence (a.k.a. Amitabha). While each individual tone-color contains all the other tone-colors. The theosophical septenary is often broken down into two triads. This also reflects the nested fractalization of Van Nostrand and Wake's sematic triads—notice too how Wake groups the color spectrum into two triads.

Wake invokes the then scientifically theoretical "ether" at work in Van Nostrand's philosophy. "In Mr. Van Nostrand's *Theory of the Mental Constitution*," he notes, "the ether is the organizing factor... a view which is agreeable to modern scientific opinion" (8-9). From the theosophical perspective, ether is equitably valued so. A year before Wake's *Geometry of Science* is published, Charles Leadbeater writes in *Man Visible and Invisible* of the "etheric double" (aka *Linga Sharira*), the invisible aspect of our physical body which bridges the subtle and the material. "It is clearly visible to the clairvoyant," he writes of aura perception, "as a mass of faintly-luminous violet-grey mist."



A rare photo of a young C.S. Wake, circa 1860s, used with permission from the family archive of Greg Hardey

This is interesting. For when Wake outlines his theory of tone-color the year prior, he specifies that the "opening note of the scale" (C natural) "answers to the invisible rays which exist between the red and violet ends of the spectrum, and therefore should be represented by the mixed color of Grey." The spiral of **Diagram II** from the *Geometry of Science* then starts from the center, beginning with C natural / Grey, and spirals outward through the six remaining colors/pitches, spanning six octaves. According to evolutionary cycles, the Mind of Nature would ultimately "arrive" at the grey apex of Wake's spiral. Blavatsky only ever described the etheric double as violet. Through Wake's theosophical relations, could his research have inspired Leadbeater's color choice?

As noted, Wake was only one of many--among esteemed scientists, inspiring metaphysicians, fraudulent peddlers, and folk synaesthetes--to correspond musical pitch and the colors of the visible spectrum. To be clear, there is no rationally known correspondence between the two. This is reinforced by the incongruous correspondences that have been claimed over the centuries. Until we know more, it remains a subjective or symbolic affair. But the latter are not to be dismissed. Wake was quick to claim in the first sentence of his essay "Musical Tone and Color" that between sound and color phenomena we should expect to find "not an actual identity, but at least a correspondence." This is a significant statement which underscores the symbolic nature of much of Wake's philosophy. Regardless, Wake's writing and lecturing on tone-color correspondence would find a surprising application... in child education.

**SCHOOLTEACHERS AND KINDERGARTEN-  
ers—Scientific system of musical tone and color,  
as used by the Chicago Piano College, taught dia-  
grammatically by the author, C. S. WAKE, 248 E.  
57th-st., Chicago.**

Miss Evangeline Wallace from the Chicago Piano Music College will give a course of instruction in the Wallace color music method in Burlington during the month of July. Lessons also in voice and piano. Address 26 Converse court, Burlington.

Miss Wallace uses the color system established by Mr. C. S. Wake, of the Field Museum of Chicago, whereby the true relationship between tone and color has been discovered. This Miss Wallace has applied to a series of games, stories, etc., each containing some vital musical principle which appeals at once to the child mind. So simply, in fact, is it put that a child as young as 4 years can understand it.



Top, *The Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, September 9th, 1900;  
Middle, *The Burlington Free Press*, Saturday, June 27, 1903;  
Bottom, *The Chattanooga News*, Thursday, June 13, 1901.

Right, Evangeline Wallace, from the *Official Directory of the Women's Clubs of Chicago*, 1902

While we have compared Wake's views with Blavatsky's, his relationship with the Theosophical Society goes much deeper. In 1888 Wake references Henry Olcott's writings in his book *Serpent-Worship* (245). The Field Museum holds a tiny Sikh text which was gifted to Wake from Olcott—incidentally, the archivist I communicated with mentioned archival lore claiming that this text "contains a curse, or is cursed." We see in an 1891 article in the *The Theosophist* magazine that Wake is the "excellent friend" of Alexander Wilder, a physician and Neoplatonic scholar who helped Blavatsky complete her book *Isis Unveiled* (87). In 1901 Wake is critically praising the views of the Theosophical Society and of Col. Olcott in the newspapers. After criticizing an anthropocentric view regarding reincarnation, Wake offers his respect to the theosophical movement, though with a spoonful of racism:

As a general system [Theosophy] contains valuable truths, which will be recognized by science when they are put into plain language and freed from the exaggeration and imaginative speculation in which the Oriental mind is apt to indulge.

Shortly after Wake's theosophical comments were published in *The Sunday Record-Herald* that year, the elder anthropologist is said to have become a member of Theosophical Society. This was noted in an issue of *The Theosophist*, see below. However, upon consulting the archivist for the Theosophical Society, no membership for Wake has been recorded. Though she respectfully quotes Wake's work, Blavatsky also points out rather chidingly, "Had Mr. Staniland Wake been a theosophist, he might have... [insert: occult details regarding the Great Pyramid]" (SDI, 318). While Wake's anthropological studies are referenced numerous times by Blavatsky in her influential tome, *The Secret Doctrine*.

Though unconfirmed, it seems highly likely that Wake was drawing much of his perspective from Blavatsky's teachings. It's worth noting that the tone-color-number relationship, which Wake studied for over a decade, is central to the esoteric teachings of Helena Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888, the year before Wake's life went awry. With the work of Van Nostrand and Wake in mind, read this excerpt from Blavatsky's "Esoteric Instruction No. 1," first printed in 1889:

"Let the student remember that number underlies form, and number guides sound. Number lies at the root of the manifested Universe [...]"

Know the corresponding numbers of the fundamental principle of every element and its sub-elements, learn their interaction and behavior on the occult side of manifesting nature, and the law of correspondences will lead you to the discovery of the greatest mysteries of macrocosmic life. But to arrive at the macrocosmic man, you must begin by the microcosmic [...]"

We must never lose sight of the Platonic method, which starts with one general view of all, and descends from the universal to the individual. This is the method adopted in Mathematics—the only exact science that exists in our day" (517).

♦♦♦

*An opinion adverse to Reincarnation.* Mr. C. Staniland Wake, of Chicago, writes to *The Sunday Record-Herald* of that city, complimenting Col. Olcott for "his excellent outline of the main doctrines of Theosophy." Still he thinks "Many arguments could be advanced in opposition to the doctrine of reincarnation," which he considers superfluous. He says :

The main aim of evolution is the perfect development of the cosmos as an organized entity and not that of man, who partakes of the general progress, however, in being a part of the whole. Now, as the perfection of man is relative to that of the cosmos of which he forms a part, there is no occasion for the reincarnation of particular individuals, if this were actually possible. They are indeed mere cells in the cosmic organs constituted by particular classes of human beings or by the human race as a totality.

He thinks "terrestrial reincarnation is not required," because "Man can go on toward such a state of perfection as is necessary for him, elsewhere, beyond the confines of earth."

He closes as follows :

Notwithstanding the defects above referred to, Theosophy as a general system contains valuable truths, which will be recognized by science when they are put into plain language and freed from the exaggeration and imaginative speculation in which the Oriental mind is apt to indulge. Particularly good is its insistence on the doctrine of the divine trinity, the mystery which furnishes the key to all other mysteries of the cosmos, including that of man himself.

We understand that, since the publication of Mr. Wake's letter from which we have quoted, he has become a member of the Theosophical Society.

from *The Theosophist*, Vol. xxii, No. 12, September, 1901



It was only a few years after allegedly joining the Theosophical Society that Wake began interconnecting the numerical analyses of atomic weights and sound frequencies inspired by Van Nostrand's mathematical model. Meanwhile, the "omnipresent point," which guided Van Nostrand and Wake's work, was uniquely emphasized in the theosophy he seemed surrounded by. Channeling Plato ("God geometrizes") and Pythagoras, Blavatsky writes in *Isis Unveiled*, "Preceding from the indivisible unity, [Plato] found emanating from it two contrary forces, each acting through the other and producing equilibrium, and the three were but one, the Pythagorean Eternal Monad. The primordial point..." (507). By way of these theosophical interjections I make no direct identification between Blavatsky and Wake, but rather a meaningful correspondence, if you will.

By the time we meet Wake's vortex philosophy in 1907, it seems that his earlier beliefs on human evolution and reincarnation had evolved, perhaps influenced by his interactions with theosophy. He ends his magnum opus with the following paragraph.

Here cosmic being realizes itself, finally becoming self-conscious through man and thus fulfilling the aim of evolution. Out of the formless, unconscious individuality of nature has been developed, perhaps through many eons of evolution, the formal, conscious personality to which the term "God" is applied; clothed with the ethereal garment woven throughout the ages by the experiences of all organic existences, and transformed by the mental, moral and spiritual activity of mankind, whose reason as the intelligence of radiative thought has become the concentrated intelligence of cosmic intuition.

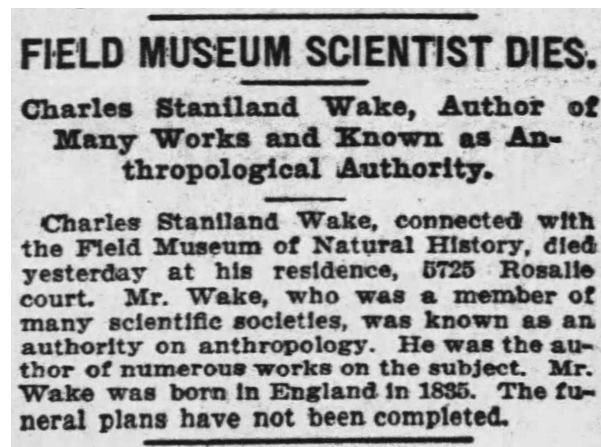
He no longer views humanity as "mere cells in the cosmic organs," as he wrote in 1868, but rather points to human consciousness as the fruit of evolutionary destiny—the apex of the spiral. Towards the end of his life Wake seemed to redefine his mission as a bridge between the rational and occult sciences. Though he leaned increasingly towards the latter as he aged. And perhaps it was this embrace of the occult that played into his final years of poverty, which he known to have struggled with. At any rate, he certainly experienced some dismissal from the more stream-lined anthropological and scientific communities. For example, a 1907 review of his book in *Nature* magazine unforgivingly reads,

Mr. Wake has an extensive vocabulary, and a fund of unconscious humour. His pamphlet has no scientific value, but is amusing in its way as an attempt to classify all human knowledge on principles ostensibly scientific and logical, but really vague and aesthetic. Even from this point of the view the coloured diagrams vii. and xii. are unsatisfactory.

Meanwhile, his only prior biographer, Rodney Needham, has noted that his pioneering research was significantly appropriated and overshadowed by emergent researchers who borrowed Wake's work while diminishing the credit he was due. Despite Wake's lukewarm reception, a letter from his archives reveals that he was not at all lacking in confidence

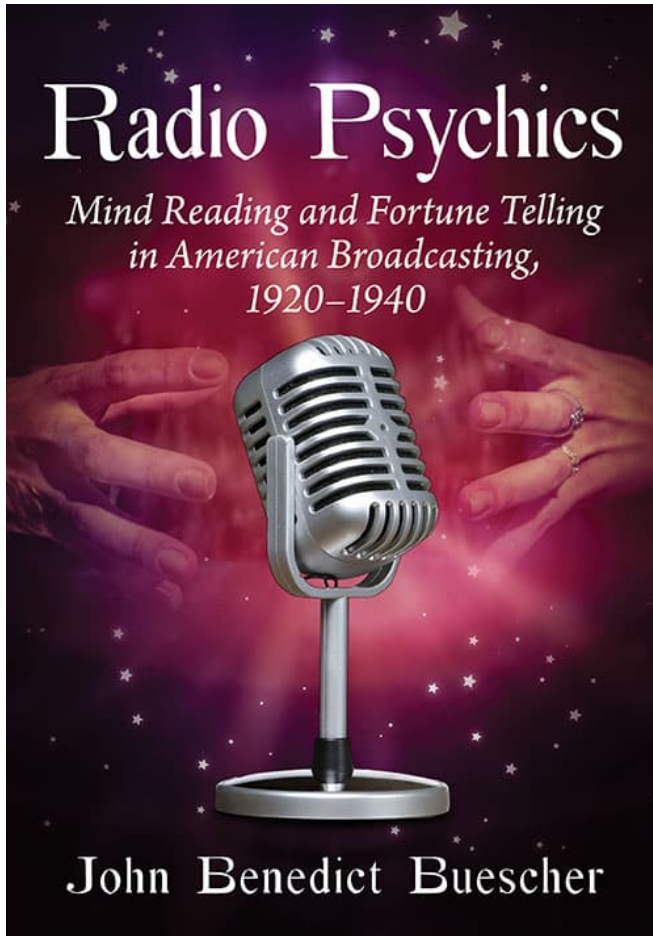
of this later work. Apparently he'd written the Nobel Prize Committee requesting that *Vortex Philosophy* be considered for the coveted award.

The ultimate aims of both Van Nostrand and Wake were to provide a philosophical ground, upon which to improve the wellbeing of society and put an end to war. Exactly how they saw this practically playing out is hard to assess. Regardless, theirs was a noble aim and a beautiful effort. And while the sematic point has long been missed, it nevertheless remains accessible to anyone who seeks what Van Nostrand called that "changeless place."



from *The Chicago Tribune*, Thursday, June 23rd, 1910

# BOOK REVIEW



## *Radio Psychics:*

*Mind Reading and Fortune Telling  
in American Broadcasting, 1920-1940*

**by John Benedict Buescher**

"All performances of truth are imitations." This phrase from the preface of John Benedict Buescher's *Radio Psychics* runs like a thread through the entire book. And along this insightful sinew wages historical contestations of legitimacy and fraud, entertainment and religion, good intentions and criminal deception. "Yet... there are performances that lead one toward the truth," the author continues, "and there are those that lead one away from it. Radio is an instrument for bringing either sort to anyone anywhere in the world." And with that we are offered a neutral view of the true medium at the center of this book: the radio itself. And Buescher's most recent book offers a fascinating and masterfully researched history of the radio's most enigmatic and cattywompous years.

As I described it to one friend, this book is "deliciously specific." Tuning into a narrow band of American history, *Radio Psychics* parts the curtain on the paranormal presence that pervaded the first two decades of American radio. The period begins with the emergence of commercial radio, and it ends with the founding and subsequent impact of the FCC control over radio practice. Radio psychics, mentalists, astrologers, numerologists, and fortune-tellers were effectively removed from the airwaves by the 1940s, while corporate commercials emerged as the lucrative sideshow of the mass radio experience.

In the previous century, the telegraph machine had inspired a magical thinking which helped bolster the spiritualist movement in America. Psychics and mediums considered themselves akin to the telegraphic machine, connecting the living with inspired messages from beyond. One of the most popular among spiritualist and occult periodicals honored the magical aura of this technology in its name: the *Spiritual Telegraph*. For many, the existence of such technology was proof that spirit communication was possible, if not actual. And though spiritualism would be raked through the coals in the media for countless cases of hoaxes and frauds, Americans remained (and remain) thirsty for the medium's performative truth. And the new technology of radio offered a cornucopia of promise.

When commercial radio first came on the American scene in the Winter of 1920, it was surrounded with a magical aura as its technological predecessor, the telegraph. Immediately, preachers, psychics, artists, gurus, and entertainers began using the language of radio to describe themselves and the medium of their inspiration. Suddenly, everyone was "tuning in" to something—spiritual entities, universal mind, Christ consciousness, or other people's thoughts. Despite the fraud that had become associated with claims of mediumship and mental science, vaudeville entertainers nevertheless continued commercializing the paranormal to great success. In this way they were primed to capitalize on the promotional capabilities of radio technology. And, as *Radio Psychics* so thoroughly documents, they did just that.

And you should now know how ideal an author we have for this work in John Benedict Buescher. As the former chief of the Tibetan Broadcast Service of the Voice of America, Buescher was responsible for helping provide accessible radio communications to Tibetans who were being persecuted and denied those resources by the People's Republic of China. So Buescher knows firsthand the value and vulnerability of the airwaves.

In addition to Buescher's radio career, he is a retired academic and a longstanding author of Buddhism and 19th century American spiritualist history, with several books in print. He is also the co-director of the *International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals*, IAPSOP. And it is the latter archive—an unsung jewel among contemporary digital archives—which provides some of the source material and imagery for *Radio Psychics*. In sum, there is no one more qualified to speak on the relationship between metaphysics and radio technology in American history. And, not surprisingly, Buescher knocks it out of the park.

## **"All performances of truth are imitations."**

*Radio Psychics* walks us through early American radio during a time in which cash-loving mystics held the microphone and swindled the masses. Buescher begins by offering an informed and articulate introduction to the magical, medial, and mentalist zeitgeist of 19th century America. Noting the influences of metaphysical philosophies and movements—mesmerism and hypnotism, the harmonialism of Andrew Jackson Davis, the spiritualism of the Fox Sisters—Buescher connects these philosophies to their commercialization via the supernatural entertainments of vaudeville psychics and stage magicians. And it was in radio technology that these commercial enterprises found the easiest way to promote their stage acts to the masses while also hawking other wares, like mail order literature, lessons, and personal readings.

On the airwaves itself one of the most common ways of profiting off the audience was to offer Question and Answer opportunities. Home listeners would be solicited to send in a personal concern hoping the DJ could assist them with a metaphysical insight in response. Topics ranged from a cheating partner, career troubles, or a loved one's illness, to who might win the world series. The radio psychic would then answer their query online, but only if they included a payment with their letter. This practice generated huge sums for most who engaged in it. Early on, however, advertising was banned from the radio; and the Q+A format was seen as self-promotion.

Our journey proper then begins as a series of biographies. Moving from one individual to the next, he narrates these figures from birth to burial. In doing so he shows us what life circumstances lead to their embrace of metaphysical entertainment as well as how they adapted their identity and practice as culture and the law changed over time. While these figures typically have wildly unique personalities and biographies, it's interesting to note the similar courses their lives tended to take. This is especially true in regard to the effects of the FCC's crackdown on mentalism. Many of the individuals in this history either ended up in jail, or they disappeared into obscurity.

One of the more interesting aspects of this history is how mentalists worked around these laws, often heading south of the border to tap into the airwaves providing "unregulated entertainment." It was on RXXR that *Zandra's Mystic Hour* broadcast astrology to the masses off a speakeasy steamship called "Panama."

The mentalist couple, “Koran” and “Rose Dawn,” offered fortune and clairvoyance via Brinkley’s XER border-radio. With no ties to Mayan tradition, they founded The Mayan Order, a mail-order mystery teaching they sold on the radio. It was all made up and a profitable ruse, one which posthumously endured until 2008. At the same time before “Koran” passed, he helped fund actual Mayan archeology, assisting Frans Blum to discover a collection of pottery and "ceramic burial urns containing the skeletons of Mayan nobles."

Anyone who has studied the history of American metaphysics knows that the folks involved tend to have unusual and interesting lives. That certainly bears out with the individuals introduced in this paranormal talent show. After all these are people who would drive cars blindfolded and bury themselves for fun. One theme among many of these figures is the mixed nature of their aims. Sincere belief fuses with mental manipulation and commercial profit. As Buescher describes radio mentalist “Mel-Roy”: "He was a believer in belief, even if induced by theatrical pretense, and, according to him, a giver of hope in a better future. If he could make money from it all the better. The ancient conductors of the mysteries at Eluesis probably felt the same way."

Even more common was the appropriation of various ethnicities as an effective form of Orientalist misdirection. Italian American brothers Naldino Bambaci and Federigo Gemmi claimed to be Egyptian fakirs, “Hamid and Rahman Bey.” African American Clarence Downing read minds as East Indian “Joveddah De Rajah.” And French-Irish American Loretta Navarre claimed to be a Native American fortuneteller named “Princess Wahletka.” Faux ethnicity was pervasive in this industry, and the invisibility of the radio only helped fuel the imagination of the listener.

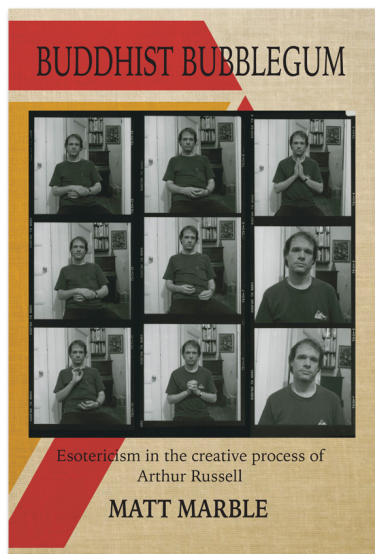
Buescher does an incredible job of distilling the contradictions and complexities of this history, which for many is all too easily dismissed as woo-woo trickery + a gullible audience. Buescher reveals the tricks of the radio mentalist trade and the unique ways in which radio technology played into or helped evolve popular paranormal careers. He shows how the illusion of the paranormal can be both harmfully manipulative and consciously cathartic. “The act of directing and misdirecting an audience’s attention,” he writes, “affects their beliefs as well as their perceptions... something essentially real is what the audience hopes to take away from the experience, not something

unreal. They ‘escape’ into what may bring joy, delight, and beauty. Those things are tied to truth. The ‘unreal’ is far too large a category to be useful here.” Anyone interested in the history of radio or the paranormal, the psychology (and commercialism) of illusion, and the power of spiritual imagination should tune-in to Buescher’s deliciously specific time capsule.

Right, Related radio ephemera, including astrologers Zolar and Evangeline Adams, and numerologist Lorna Fantin, from the AMP archive



# AMP WARES



**Buddhist Bubblegum** explores how genre-blurring “downtown” cellist and composer Arthur Russell applied Vajrayana Buddhism to his creative process. The book offers indepth exposure to the teachings of Shingon Buddhism, Tibetan Vajrayana, and the sonic theology of Indian raga. And it reveals how Russell employed mantra, meditation, and Buddhist symbolism, as well as numerology and astrology in his music. BB also features numerous documents from Russell’s estate archive, including rare scores, notebook writings, and photographs.

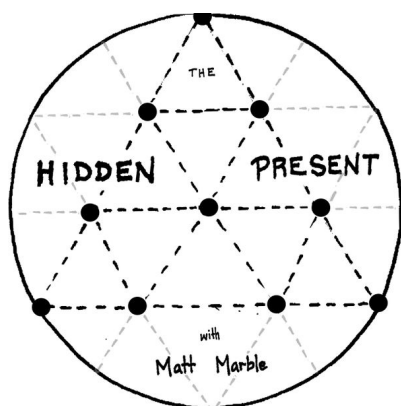
**\$20**

<https://coolgrove.com/books/arthur-russell-biography/>



**Secret Sound** is a podcast that presents over 40 spiritual biopics featuring forgotten visionaries from American music history. Each episode is a deeply researched and sonically rich exploration of the life, influences, and creative processes of the artists featured. Along the way the listener gets acquainted with diverse traditions of esotericism, from the Theosophical Society and Obeah to Swedenborgianism, Transcendental Meditation, and many others. The podcast is free w/AMP Journal subscription.

**Subscription Only**



**The Hidden Present** offers seven audio interviews, each with an extraordinary individual from various fields of life. The focus of our discussion speaks around the topic of intuition and spiritual imagination.

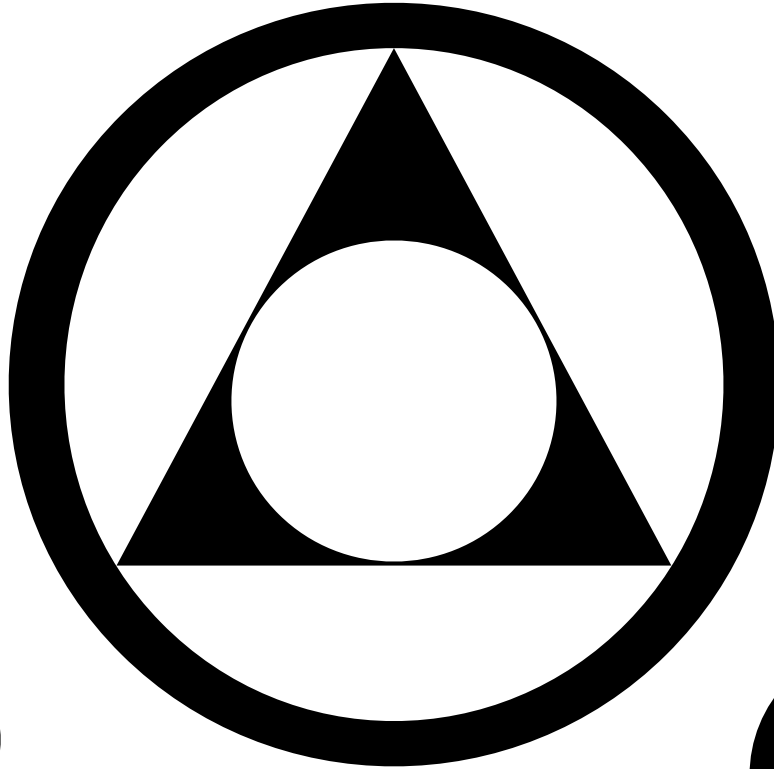
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<https://mattmarble.net/the-hidden-present>

April 6, 2023

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What  
do  
you  
see  
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What  
do  
you  
hear  
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