

# Aurelio de la Vega's *The Magic Labyrinth:* Reminiscences of the Composer

"Your music is progressively turning into painting," exclaimed Hans Burkhardt, the Swiss-born painter who lived in Los Angeles for many decades until his death, and who in his old age received the honors, the glories and the international recognition and critical acclaim due him many years before. The times were the early 1970s, and the artist was looking through some of my scores from 1965 to 1972.

What he said was true: painting being my second artistic devotion, and having even exhibited in my youth some of my cubistlike renditions of forms and colors as I saw them in Cuba, my native land, I was well aware that my aural perceptions were being influenced by geometric designs in the placing of entries of instruments, or in the way densities were handled, or even in the manner a particular musical phrase was shaped.

In 1974 I decided to go a step further, and created (painted?) a score totally conceived from a pictorial point of view. The design consisted of a single page where several musical fragments--some totally delineated as to pitches, rhythmic configuration phrasing, and dynamics, others merely suggested as areas of improvisation, with multiple directional possibilities--created a satisfactory pictorial image, playable, but at the same time capable of projecting its own visual architecture. To complete the validity of the adventure, the score was then colored by hand. The musical rendering of the piece was of undetermined length, and the instrumental and vocal forces to be employed were also not specified. Both parameters were to be determined by the performer, or conductor, offering a different version of the work with each performance. On the other hand, standing on its own artistic merits, the score could be matted, framed, and hung on a wall to be enjoyed as a work of art, as a true visual expression, as a real rendition of shapes, colors, and forms.

I created six other scores based on the same idea between the end of 1974 and

early 1977. Thus, I achieved the transition from music to painting, and vice versa. Before returning to the "normal" writing of music, I attempted one more level of exploration. While staying on two occasions at the Cranbrook Academy of Art as composer-in-residence for visits of three weeks each, I created three silk screens, called *The Cranbrook Triptych*, which, although using various pentagrams as links between several visual elements, were not "playable" anymore. The visual had totally taken over the aural.

It was time to return home. 1977 saw the composition of *Adiós*, for large orchestra--a regular musical work of vast proportions with no more evident visual elements, no more colors and no more philosophic considerations beyond the rendition of the spectrum of pure sound.

*The Magic Labyrinth*--composed in 1975, commissioned by the sculptress and art patron Gloria Morris--is the fourth of the seven graphic scores mentioned above. It has been interpreted many times, and, as far as I know, seventeen instrumental versions of it, two vocal-instrumental ones and one purely vocal one have been played and sung. The number of instruments and vocalists involved in these versions ranged from one to eight.

I met Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer for the first time in the autumn of 1969, after two years of phone calls and correspondence. Over subsequent years our friendship grew. Hans soon asked for some of my manuscripts, letters, and musical sketches, to be included in the Moldenhauer Collection, later the Moldenhauer Archives.


The Moldenhauers were also lovers of art. Among other things, I recall an impressive oil by Hildegard Jone--Webern's ever present muse--which hung on one of the walls of the family room in their home in Spokane; and I will always remember the meticulous descriptions of the various paintings and sculptures in my own art collection which Rosaleen recited for Hans so that he could "see" them.

Comissioned by Gloria Morris  
**THE MAGIC LABYRINTH**  
 for any number of any instruments  
 and/or any number of any voices

Aurelio de la Vega  
 (1925 - )

Duration : Twelve minutes  
 Speed : Ad-Slow

Fragments of the "labyrinth" are to be read in the direction indicated by the staff. Order of things is up to the performer(s). Fragments can be repeated. However, all fragments must be played (or sung) at least once. If any one performer is involved fragments can be read without interruption or with pauses between them. In this case, the performer may change individual staffs to those that fit proper range of instrument or voice. If several performers, fragments are to be read in multi-measure simultaneous.

  
 Northridge, June 12, 1975

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In early 1978, I sent a complete hand-painted set of my seven graphic scores to Spokane. Rosaleen was particularly fond of *The Magic Labyrinth*. She loved the intricacies of this "painted composition," as she called it, and the way the shapes and colors intervened in the conceptual canvas of *this* labyrinth, and she asked me about the ways this particular work could be musically rendered. I explained how at first whoever decided to play the piece had to determine what instruments or human voices were to be employed, and how a "map" had to be prepared--which usually consisted of a series of pages depicting where the parameters of time and dynamics of fragments from the score were to be realized (and in what direction), and where areas of improvisation would appear, as well as indicating the approximate curves that the instruments or human voices should follow. The "map" pages would also contain arrows for entrances and for the gestures of the conductor, as well as for the duration of the sections and the whole piece. I told them how this type of music was in danger of becoming a mere chaotic stupidity, or at best a circus act, in the hands of an uncreative conductor, or when played by instrumentalists or sung by singers who were not respectful of the philosophy behind the aleatoric musical semantics. Finally, I also conveyed to them that in my own experience when putting together and conducting a given version of one of the seven works comprising my graphic adventure, I had observed that good musical results were obtained by using one or two instrumentalists or singers, and optimum ones when employing four to seven interpreters, but that anarchy would occur when ten or more were used. These were pieces involving form, counterpoint, vertical coincidences, and instrumental color that were to be shaped in the same manner that a sculptor contours his clay, chisels a stone, or welds metals together. Therefore, besides seriousness of purpose among those taking part in the playing of the visual forms, close communication through eye contact and through the gestures of the conductor's hands was needed among all participants--intimacy being lost when big groups attempted to interpret the graphics musically.

One year before Rosaleen's death I presented to the Moldenhauers a small monoprint with watercolor touches by Hans Burkhardt, an item which I believe has become part of the Archives. The cycle was now complete: two dear friends, both with "Hans" as a given name, witnessed the evolution of my musical graphology which produced the graphic scores of the 1970s, both were deeply interested in my music, both shared with me some world premieres of works of mine and both very much enjoyed *The Magic Labyrinth*.