

# About Lamed Vav Vav

Back in April 2015, Composers Concordance co-director Gene Pritsker asked if I would be interested in composing a minute-long unaccompanied choral work that would be presented alongside 71 other such pieces in tandem with an exhibition of 72 panel paintings by Rainer Gross, each of which is based on one of the 72 divine names that have been enumerated in various Kaballistic texts. These names are shown in the chart below:

8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
כהת	אכא	ללה	מהש	עלם	סיט	ילי	והו	1
הקם	הרי	מבה	זל	ההע	לאו	אלד	הזי	2
ההו	מלה	ייי	נלכ	פהל	לוו	כלי	לאו	3
רשר	לכב	אום	ריי	שאה	ירת	האא	גתה	4
יז	רהע	חעם	אני	מגד	כוק	להת	יחו	5
מיה	עשל	ערי	סאל	ילה	וול	סיכ	ההה	6
פוי	מבה	גית	ננא	עמם	החש	דני	והו	7
מחי	ענו	יהה	ומב	סצר	הרת	ייל	נמם	8
מום	היי	יבמ	ראה	חבו	איע	מנק	דמב	9

Jewish mystics claim that these names—each of which has a specific numerological significance—can be discovered by performing various forward and backward manipulations on the Hebrew text of Exodus 14:19-21 and that stating them in their entirety enabled Moses to part the Red Sea. While I am not an adherent of Judaism and consider myself to be religiously non-religious, I have long been fascinated by the Hebrew alphabet and language. In fact, as a teenager I privately studied Hebrew for several years with Morris Arzt (1903-1981). I've also been obsessed for most of my life with numerical manipulations and the relationship between music, language, and visual art. So writing music that would be presented alongside numerological and linguistically inspired paintings seemed a natural project for me and I signed on. Upon seeing the 19<sup>th</sup> painting in the sequence, based on the letters Lamed Vav Vav, I immediately knew that that was the one for which I needed to create my piece of music.



**LAMED VAV VAV** by Rainer Gross © 2013 - 2014, oil and pigments on paper, 20 x 20", 51 x 51cm. Reprinted with permission.

The letters Lamed (30) and Vav (6) add up to the number 36. According to Talmudic legend, at all times in history there are always 36 hidden righteous people—the Lamed-Vav Tzadikim Nistarim—whose existence ensures that the world will not be destroyed. If any of these 36 were to die before being replaced, the world would instantly come to an end. It so happens that 36-tone equal temperament is a very useful, though largely secret, tuning system that in addition to including all of the pitches of standard 12-tone equal temperament contains an additional 24, among which are a sequence of pitches that very closely approximate the 7<sup>th</sup> overtone above each of those 12. The remaining 12 are a 7<sup>th</sup> undertone below each of the original 12—the same distance in reverse. This interval, the pure harmonic seventh, is a consonance that has mostly disappeared from Western music since it cannot be rendered in 12tET. Using it for my music here seemed an appropriate sonic metaphor for those hidden righteous people and the various intervalllic manipulations throughout were intended to mirror the processes used to derive this name and the 71 others. The music consists of the gradual utterance of all the 36 pitches in the 36-tone equal tempered scale. Once those pitches have all been sung, the piece is over—the world ends (on an extremely pungent, but almost inaudible, dissonance). This all unfolds over the course of a mere 19 measures (as per Lamed Vav Vav's position as the 19<sup>th</sup> name in the sequence) moving in common time at a rate of 72 beats per minute (acknowledging the complete set of names). It takes a total of 63 seconds (a backwards 36), just slightly over the requested length for the piece. The text for *Lamed Vav Vav* consists exclusively of the names of these Hebrew letters and the music is scored like a traditional five-part madrigal: two sopranos, alto, tenor, and bass. If no tenor is available, a second alto could easily sing the tenor part. Only the bass and one of the sopranos sing the 24 pitches that are beyond those available in 12-tone equal temperament. To facilitate keeping everyone in tune, it is suggested that the bass (all of whose notes are a sixth-tone sharp) and the soprano (all of whose notes are a sixth-tone flat) should be positioned on opposite ends separated from each other as well as from the remaining three singers, who should be in the middle. This piece could also be performed by a full chorus, with a larger soprano section to accommodate the two separate parts, provided they are able to accurately sing the intervals. This score has been edited by Trudy Chan, [Black Tea Music](#).