

Musica Dementia: Exploring Music and the Mind Through Visual Art

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***Abstract***

How does one learn what the symbols in a written piece signify? Is there a “best way” to learn? How can they mean the same to everyone who reads music? Is written music only a supplement to aural expression, or can it be an art and craft in itself? Questions like these are

useful if one is to acquire an active, nonlinear view of the study of music, and more are presented here.

This exhibition consists of a series of artworks, each done on a piece of music staff paper. Each one deconstructs and reformulates the European notation system, and is partially an expression of the processes involved in learning the “musical language.” Reading and interpreting a piece of written music involves abstract thought, and playing in groups or to an audience requires fast synthesis of multiple levels of auditory, tactile, and stylistic considerations. The expert musician can even blend the lines between performance from memory and on-the-spot composition.

The topics of each are usefully viewed in the light of the three kinds of music, as described by Deems Taylor in introducing *Fantasia*: “First, there's the kind that tells a definite story. Then there's the kind that while it has no specific plot, it does paint a series of more or less definite pictures. And then there's a third kind... that exists simply for its own sake.” Put another way, there are pieces here whose underlying concepts are at the forefront. In the second category are those which ask more questions than they answer, and the third category is self-evident. While not at all a central tenet of this collection, this division into three types is a way of stating that art serves varying social functions. Meta-cognition and pedagogy are recurrent themes in that first category, wrapped in the artist's conviction that learning is a constant process of growth, which requires attention, care and upkeep. This belief is manifested in a tendency to turn notated symbols into objects from nature.

### ***op.1: Cacaphony***

*“I'll play it first and tell you what it is later.” -Miles Davis*

Unfiltered and unprepared, this piece was completed in a single night after listening to the *Interviews with Francis Bacon*. I had decided to try his method of letting form suggest other

forms, and this was the result. At the outset, my only goal was to use the bits of the notation system to “compose” a piece of music which was not only totally unplayable, but not a piece of music as such. Ties and slurs became twisted vines, connecting each corner of this demented, jumbled overgrowth. What the ties and slurs actually do is lead the eye along, never able to settle on one aspect for long. Other attempts at a similar piece have been unable to capture that frantic, chaotic effect which was really a reflection of that time in my life: trying to balance 22 course credits with work and a social life left my mental state fragmented and feverish.

### ***op.2: Grand Staff Garden***

Upon completing *Cacaphony*, which at the time was called *Musica Dementia*, I realized that it opened an infinite number of doors for creative expression. I decided to focus on a few pieces of the notation system and expand on them, and *Grand Staff Garden* became the first piece I composed with a real intent going in. It can be likened to a composer taking a bit of a melody and crafting a piece around it. While many of my later works have abstract, higher-order thoughts attached, this is always a reminder that, to return to the composer analogy, music does not have to be so weighty and serious to be art. It can be a lilting melody, hummed as you walk through a garden. There is often so much emphasis placed on playing faster and being as technical and complex as possible that it's easy to miss the notion that learning about music should be an organic process.

### ***op.3: The Practice Tree***

*“Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity.”* -Charles Mingus

*“If it doesn't make sense, try a few thousand.”* -Phil Swanson

By the end of Music Theory IV, my head was swimming with Neapolitan chords, and augmented 6ths, and all manner of jazz voice leadings, but what really stuck was that single

sentence on practicing from Dr. Swanson from a couple semesters before. It's helpful to have a good foundation of knowledge, or "base/bass-" look at the tree's roots! That said, though, what anyone with a discipline, be it music, medicine, or machinery really needs is repetition, and the branches are repeat signs for just that reason. It took years for me to accept the necessity of practice, and now I'm trying to get others thinking about its merits.

#### ***op.4: Nightmare, in F# Minor***

This is my way of playing with the idea of a piece which is meant to elicit a particular feeling from its audience. I wondered, what would it be like if one could tell the mood of a piece from just looking at the score? *Nightmare* is my attempt at that. If the notes are read across the page, they would be diatonic to the key at first; if someone so wished, they could actually play this piece. Clearly, they would have to take liberties with the rhythm. Eventually the notes are randomized and the piece, as such, becomes "atonal," then explodes from there onward. Don't think of me as sadistic, though: the last note at the bottom is an F#, so the piece at least resolves. Think of it as waking up from the nightmare.

#### ***op.5: Teachers***

Our musical culture is so focused on the apparent "genius" of a select few, whose wisdom we view almost to be divinely inspired. What we tend to gloss over is the fact that each and every one of them has had, at some point in their lives, a great teacher who saw a spark of creativity and fanned it, connecting each of us in an unbroken line of teachers and students, masters and disciples, spanning thousands of years. Even those great teachers (represented by the brain-shaped mass at the top of the piece) had teachers of their own. More than that, though, we all learn from each other along the way.

#### ***op.6: Improvisation (Composition)***

This piece evolved over the course of about eight months, and was originally entitled *Extended Improvisation, on a Compact Disc*. That title was a pun on radio shows which always say something to the effect of "This recording is being brought to you on a compact disc" or record, or what have you. I thought "well, why not make a piece literally on a compact disc?" The outer and inner rings are those of a CD, and were the first element. Weeks would pass and I would return to it, each time adding a new element, in multiples of four; this is analogous to how some musicians begin with a single idea, a motif, and begin layering over it until their piece is complete. Over time, I began to ask- is this an improvisation, or has it become a composition? Kandinsky has several abstract paintings entitled "Composition" as though they were pieces of

music, and the current title is a nod to that. A parallel to this question of has existed for decades in the jazz world, with players and listeners alike wondering whether musicians who “improvise” actually compose on the spot.

### ***op.7: The Honeycoda***

Some of these program notes are wordy and philosophical; this piece is based on a pun. It's nice to give your mind a break sometimes, isn't it?

### ***op.8: The Line***

From what I have gathered of the history of Western European tonality, it has been a process of expansion- of scale forms, of the size of orchestras, and of the range of possibilities for sonic combinations. Read left to right (with the thicker line at the bottom), this piece is a representation of that history. Monophony gives way to the triad, the dominant-tonic relation is established, and expanded upon even further until all twelve pitches are serialized. Then, a reversion occurs and experimental musicians take up the “drone” again, while the idea of the band takes over and electricity allows for louder and louder performances. The tops of each spike have one, three, five, seven, twelve, and one node, respectively, as representation. You can also see that there are two lines- one thin (treble, melody) and one thick (bass, harmony) converging on and, eventually, crossing between the middle line.

### ***op.9: Solo***

In recent years, the “singer-songwriter” has taken the mantle in popular musical culture and they have become the central figures, paragons of skill and talent. But, is individualising always a force for good? Are we truly perfecting individual expression, or is the “singer-songwriter” an outgrowth of our self-isolatory tendencies, as the Internet allows “the band” to become unnecessary, even outdated? How much narcissism is involved in the act of taking music-making, to most a social activity, and turning it inward?

### ***op.10: Gestalt***

Dr. Swanson told us once of a type of musical analysis, more common in the classical style, which asserts that each note in a piece must be accounted for in relation to every other

note. Any complete understanding or perfect performance of the piece is impossible if any notes are left out or thought of as less important than any other- the whole, this type of analysis states, *can only ever be the sum of its parts*. This idea was a source of frustration to us, as musicians since the jazz age have tended to be more flexible and free in performance, and are less rigid and exacting than in past eras. Immediately, this reversal of thought brought to mind the “gestalt” theory in psychology which, much like the cultural acceptance of improvisation, surfaced at the turn of the last century. It emphasizes that we perceive objects in the world as the whole object, before and separate from our perception of the characteristics of the objects themselves. That is, the whole *“is other than the sum of its parts,”* to quote Kurt Koffka. This piece, to mirror that strain of thought, is composed of countless notes, each one able to be connected to each other; the total visual effect of their combination, though, is far more important than each individual part.

***op. 11: Lighthouse, in the key of Sea***

The coda is a recurring thematic element in my work: in musical terminology, it is a device used for grabbing the performer’s attention and saying “go to this specific part of the piece.” A lighthouse is associated with safety, long journeys away from home, and often the return from those long journeys. When you are out on your own, trying to make your way in the world, what music do you continually return to? What music makes you feel at home, even when you are an ocean away?

***op.12: Mandala***

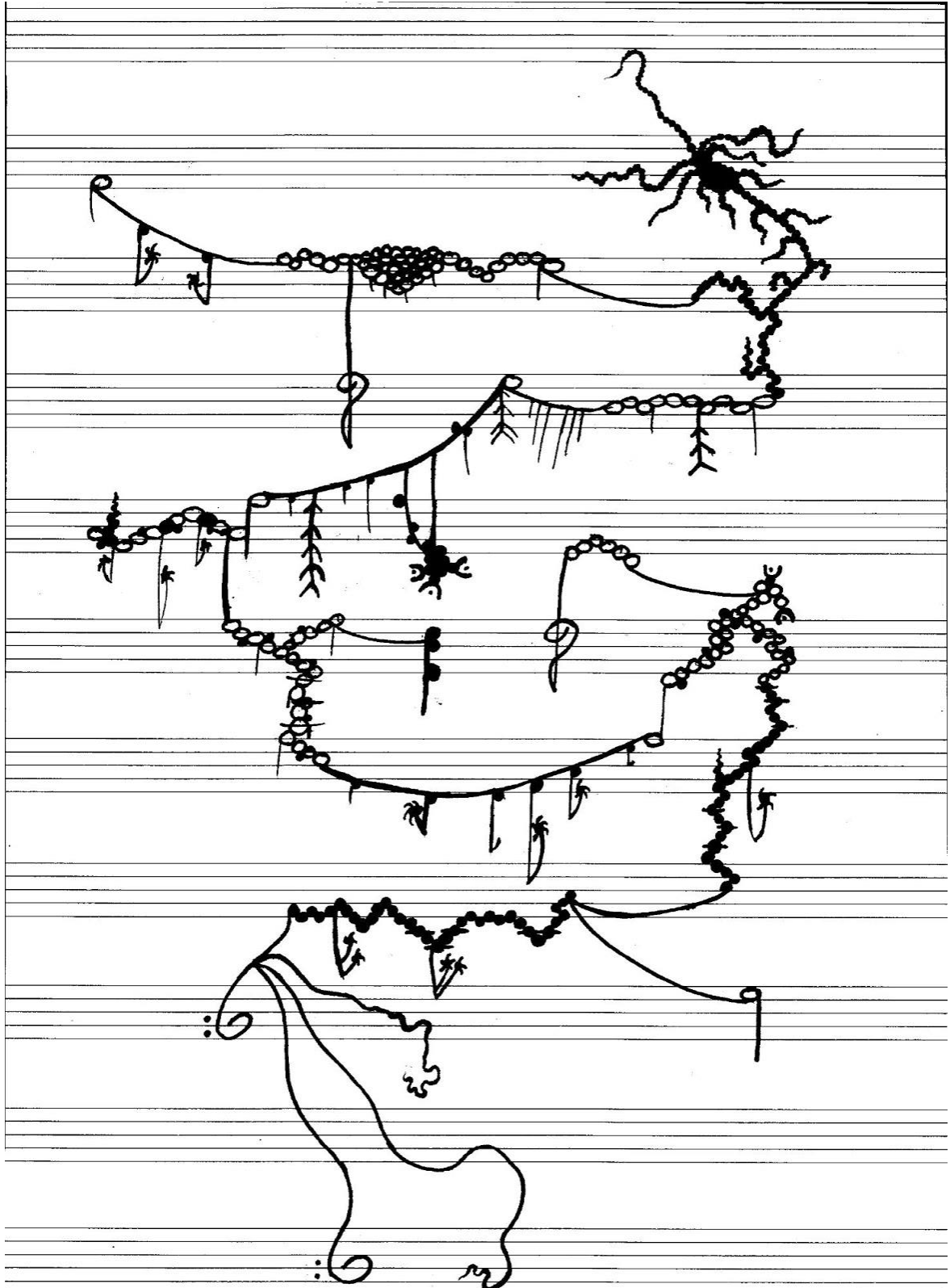
*“Music is a higher revelation than philosophy.”* -Ludwig von Beethoven

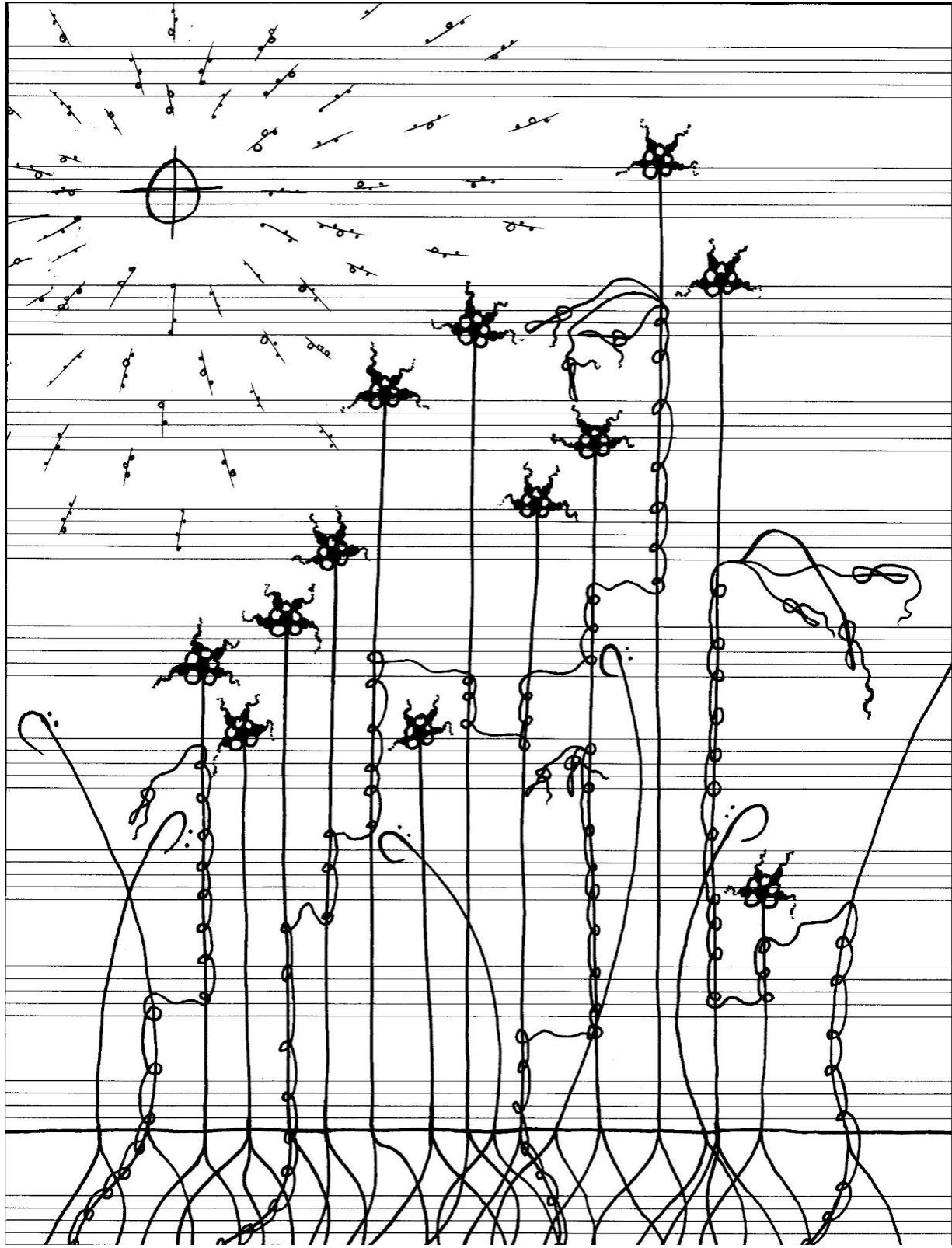
*“Today, like every other day, we wake up empty*

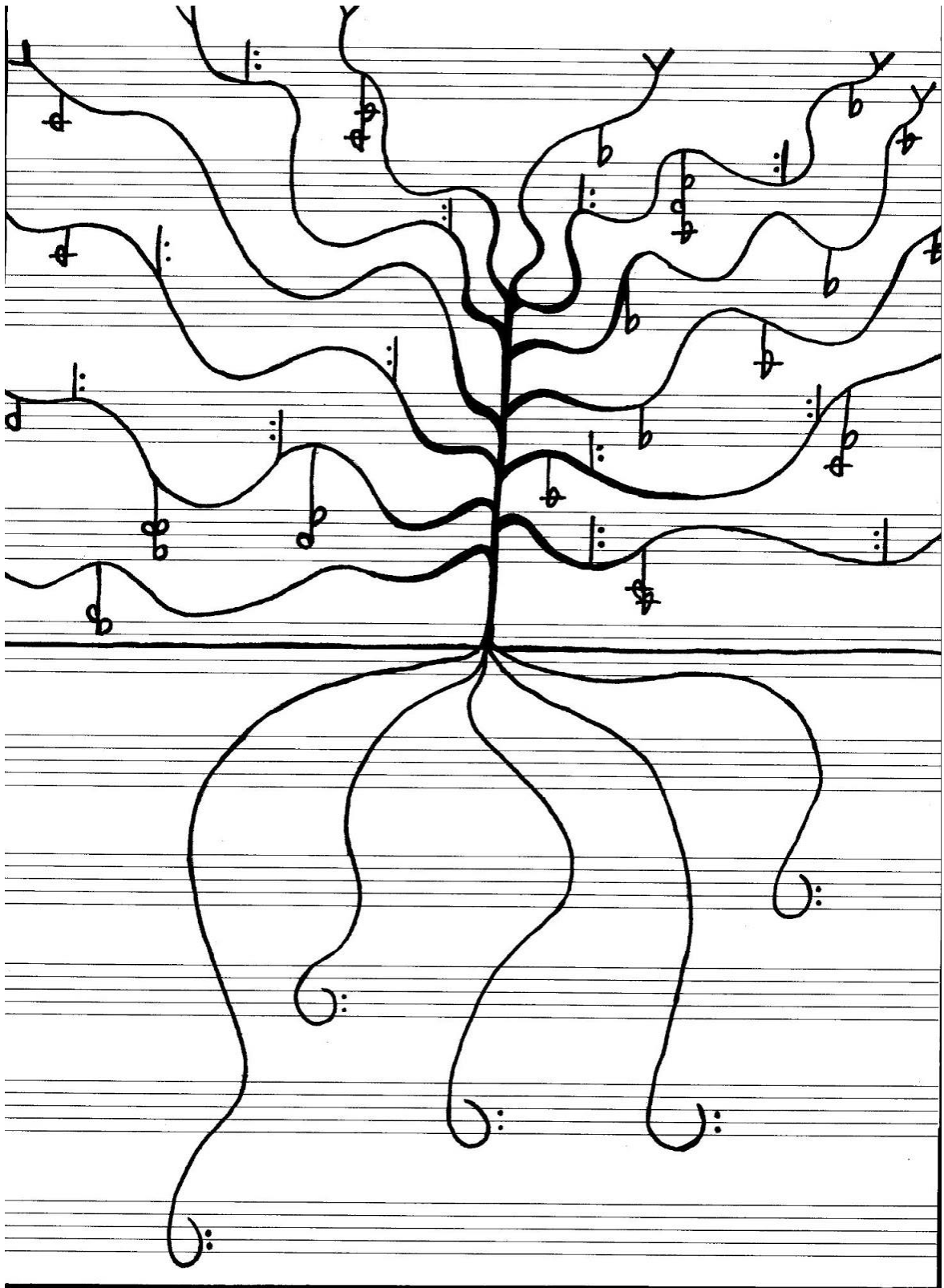
*and frightened. Don't open the door to the study  
and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.*

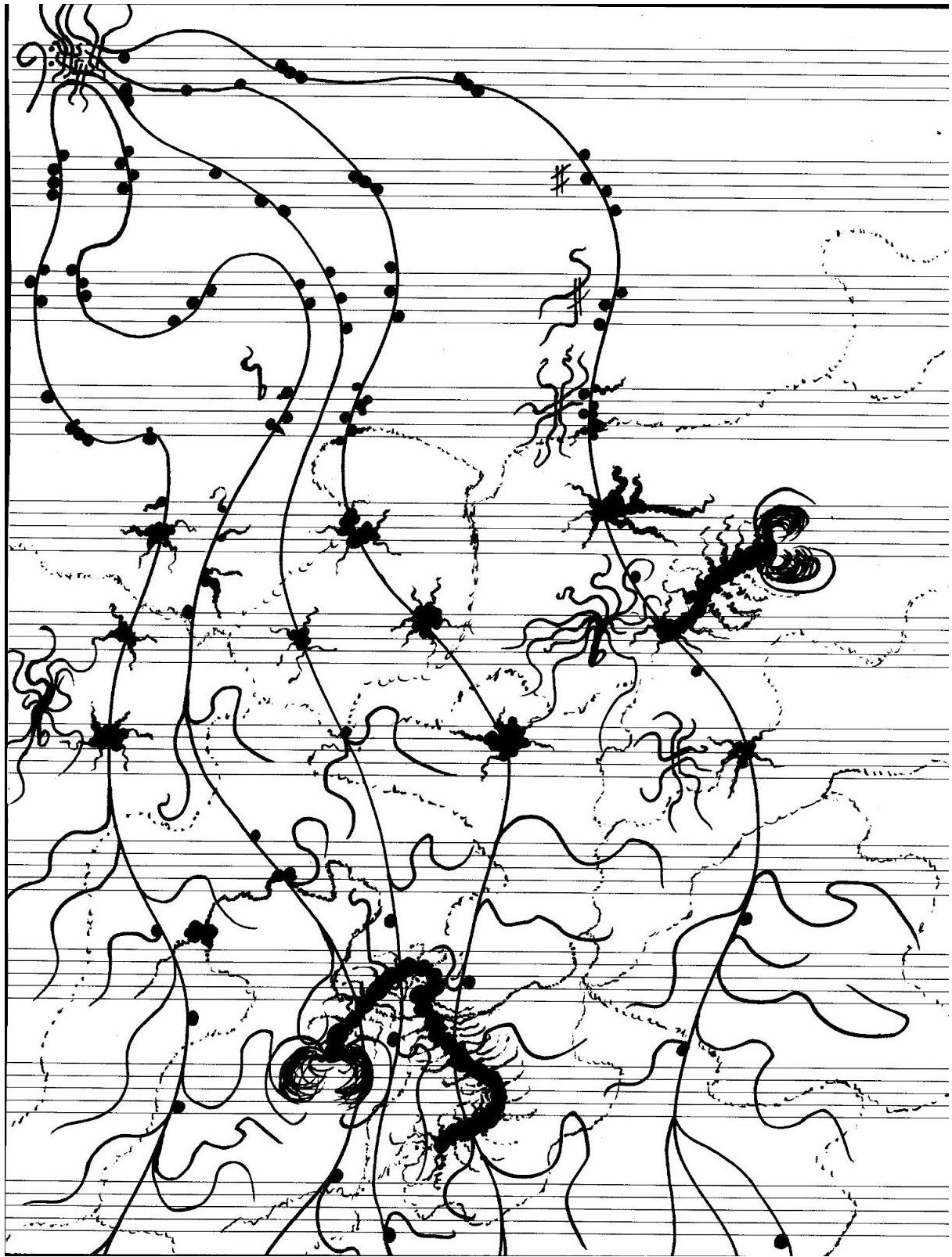
*Let the beauty we love be what we do.”- Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*

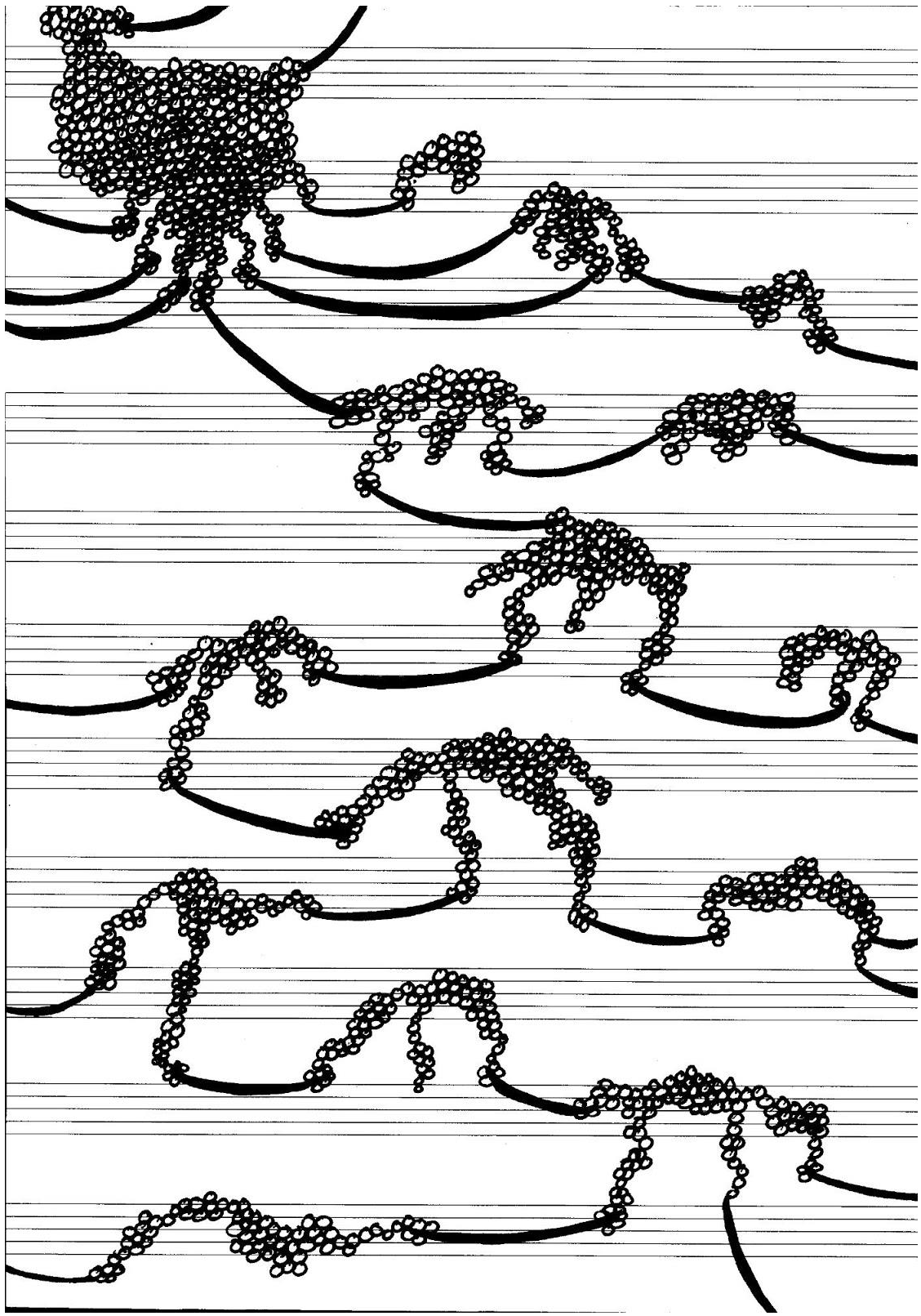
The mandala represents the universe: wholeness, structure, and the infinite. It is often difficult to explain why becoming and being a musician is so important, when all that seems to be accepted for reasoning is tied to economics, security, and comfort. I am holding my universe together, with music at the center. It is that simple.

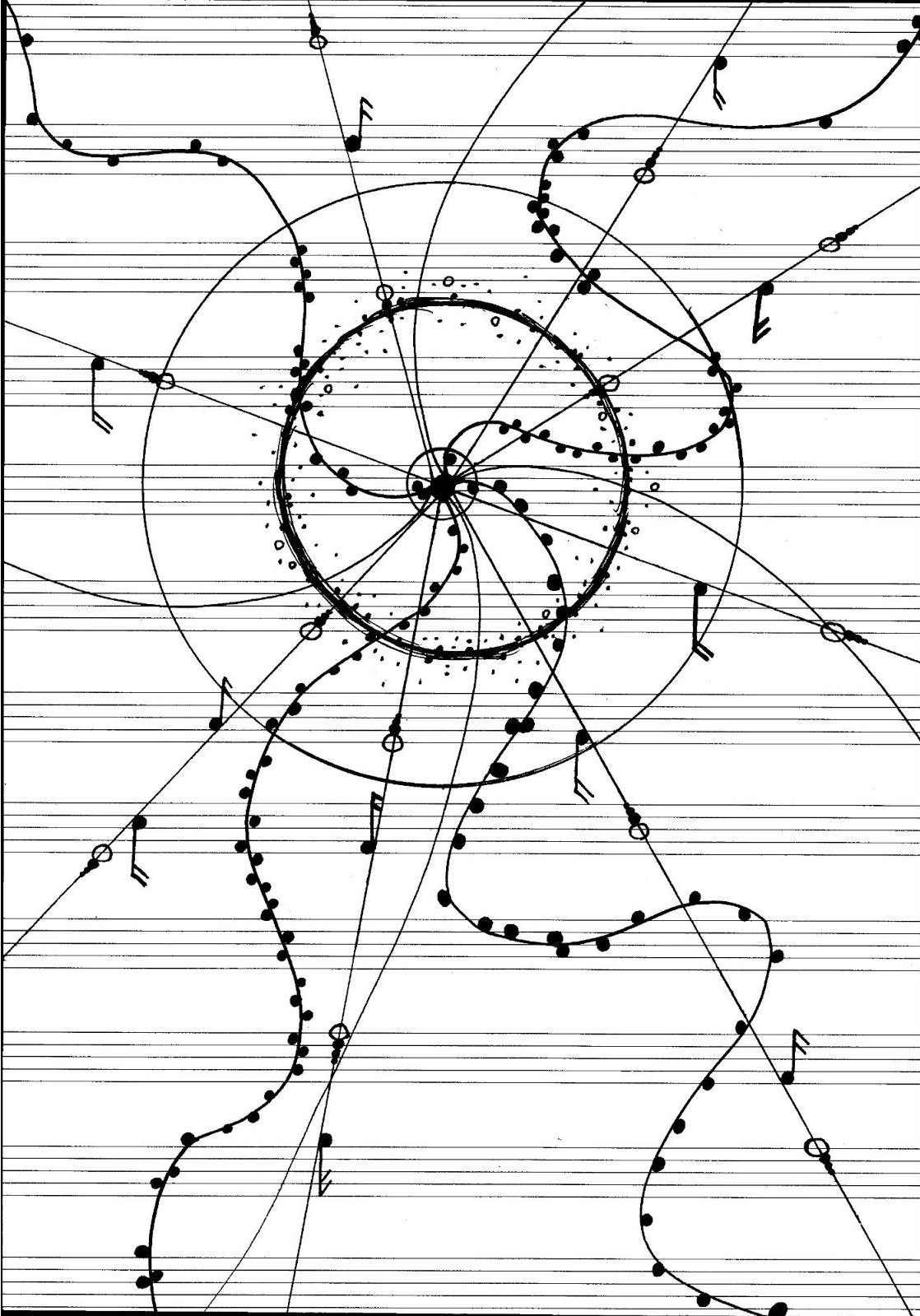


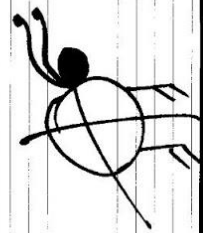
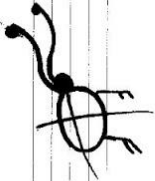
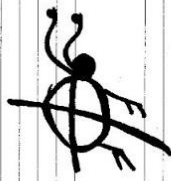
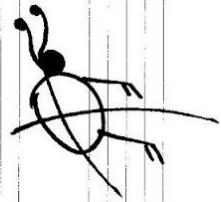
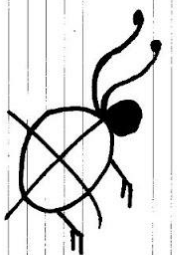
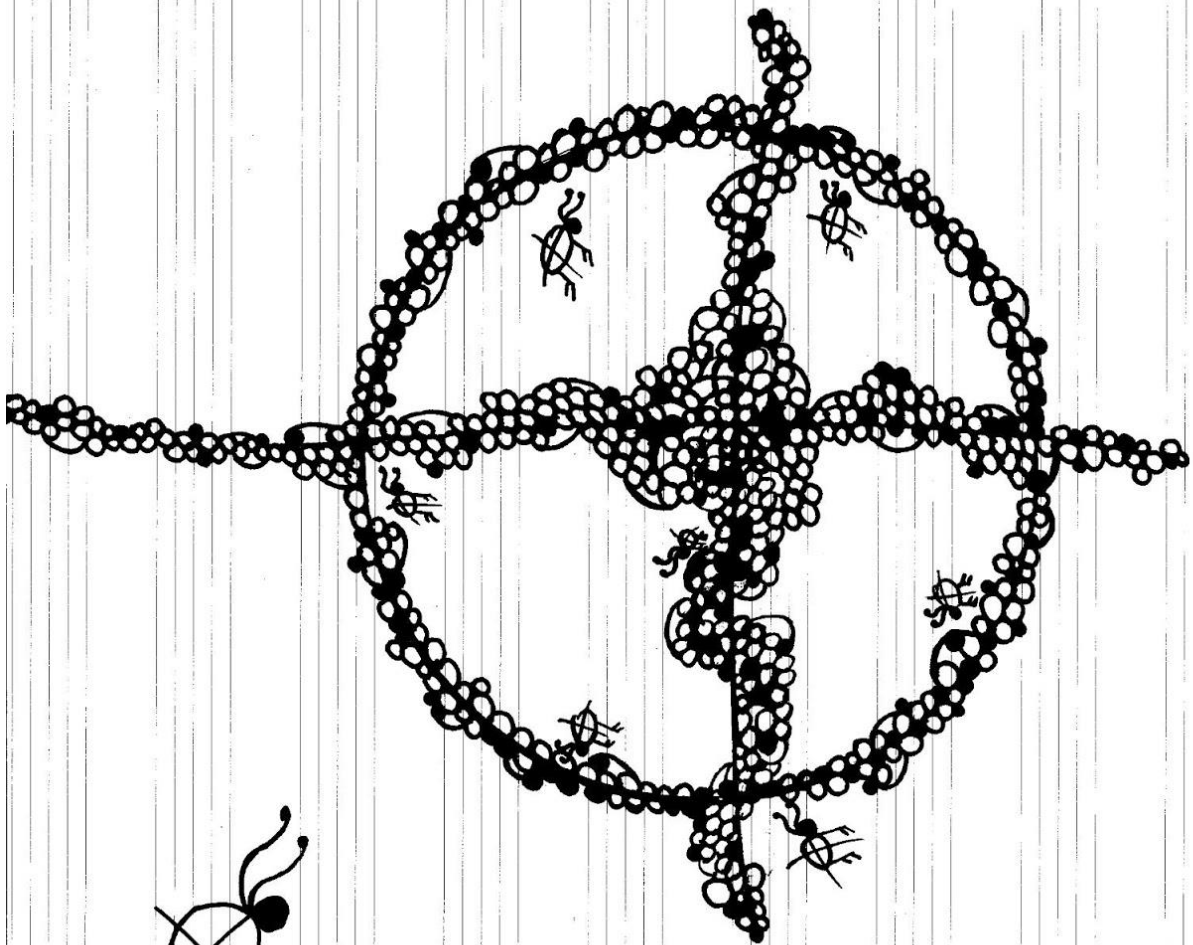


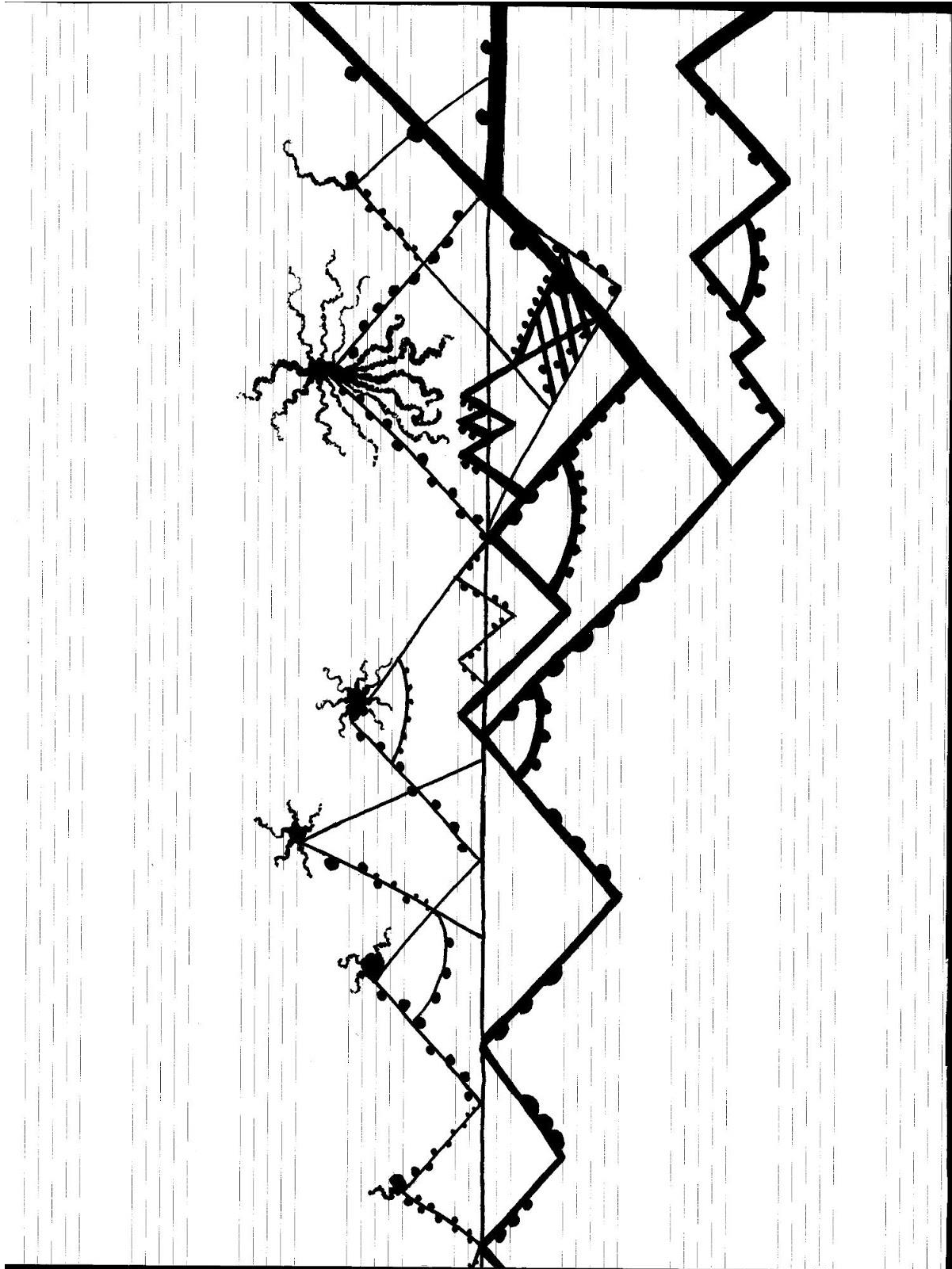


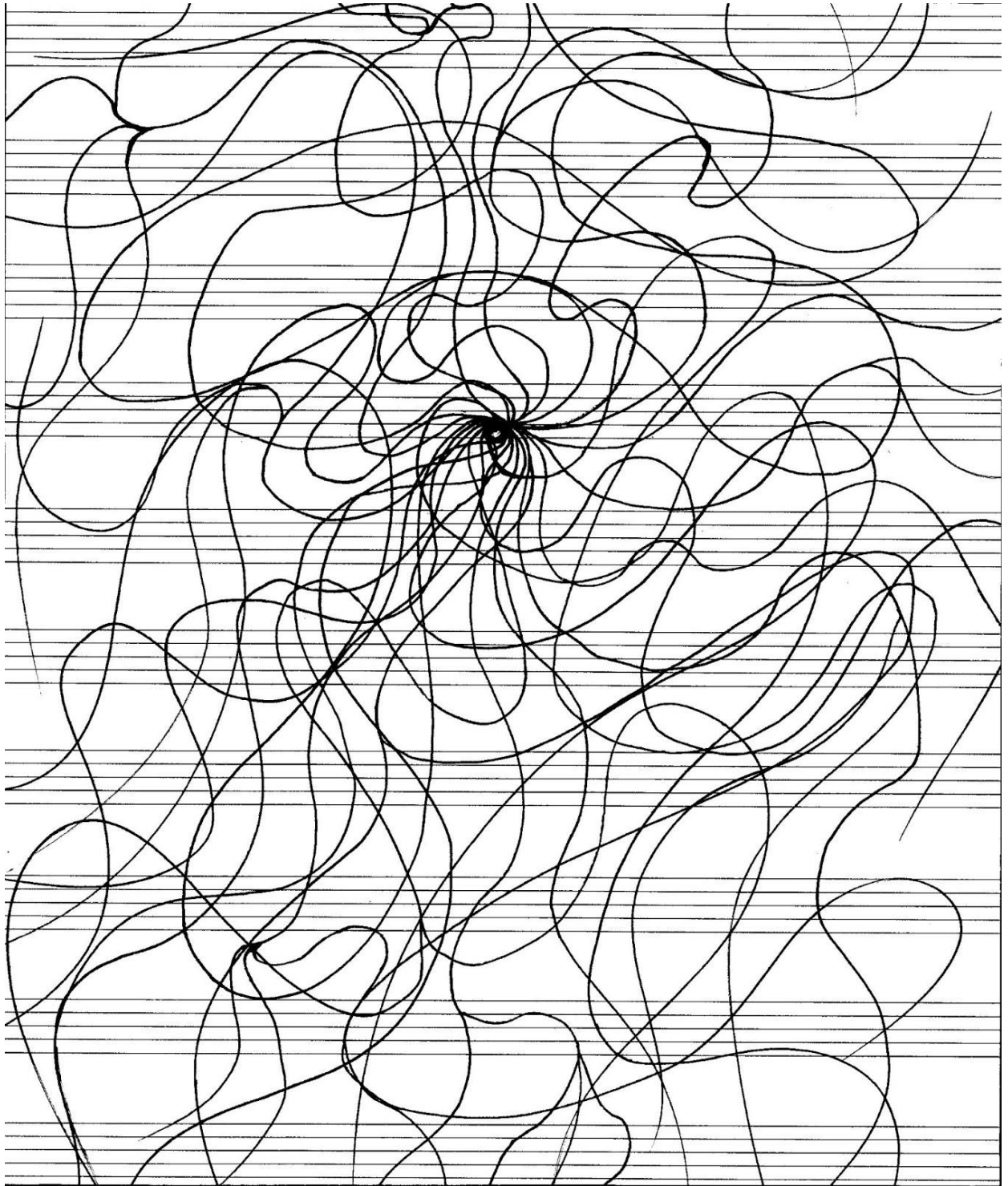


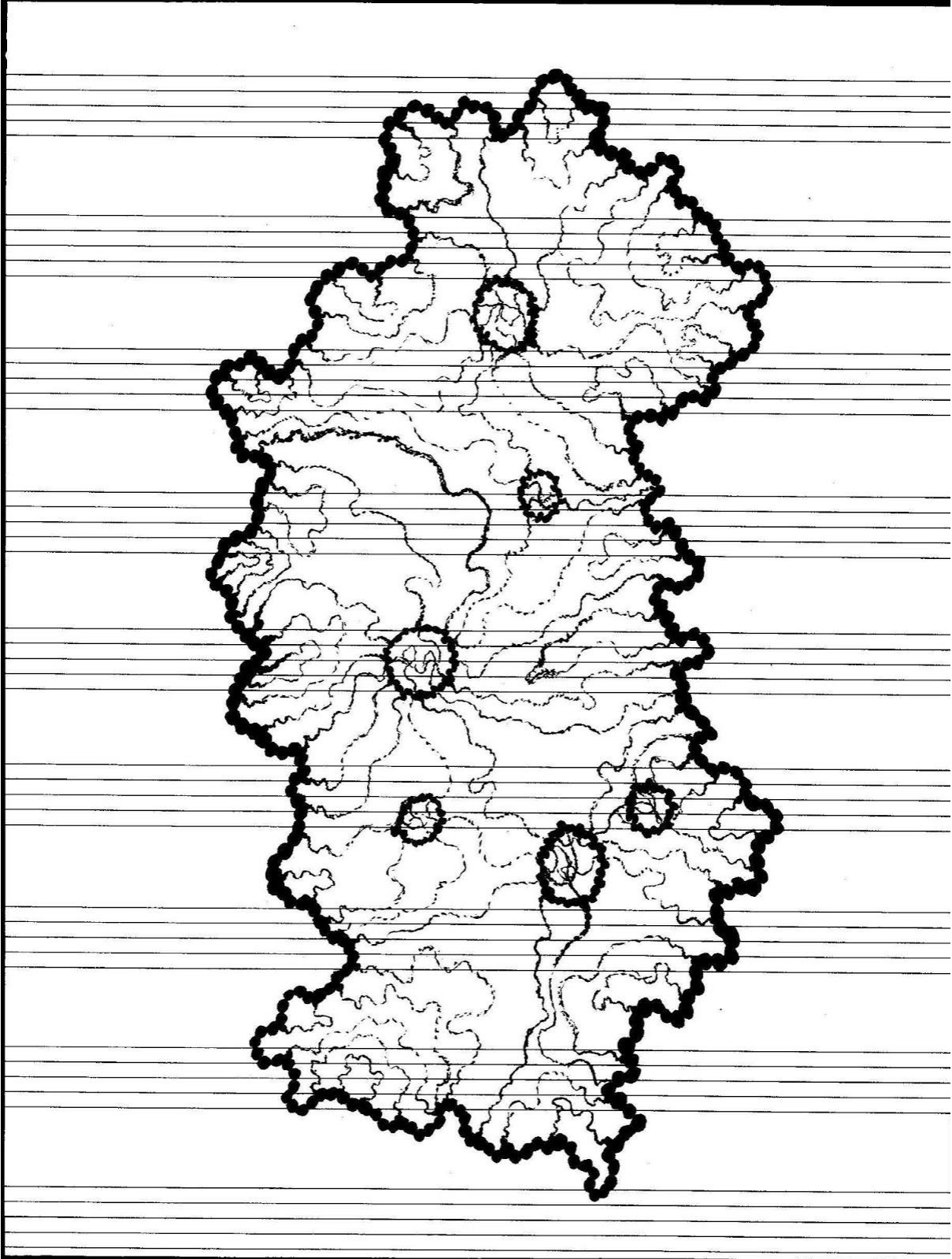


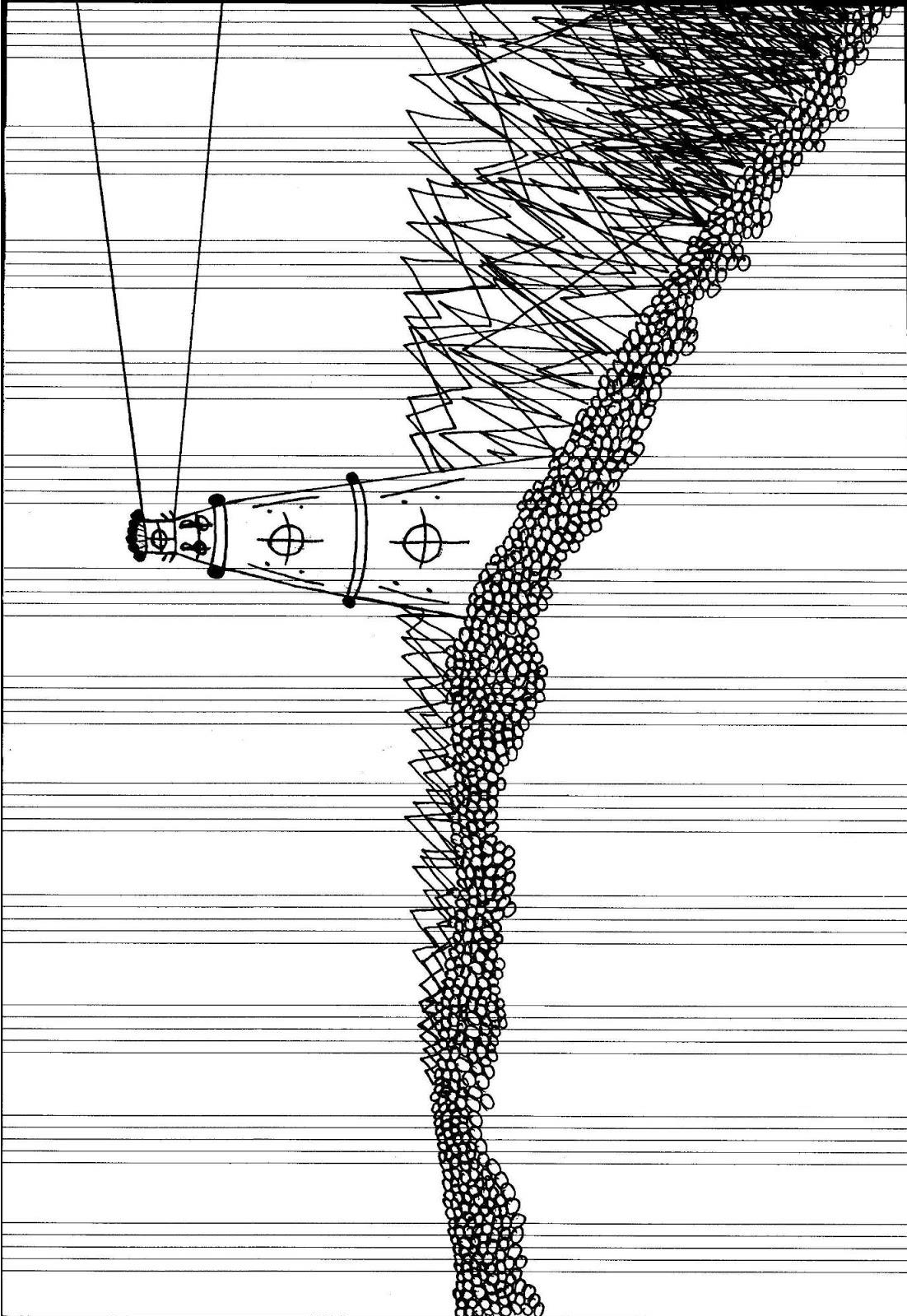


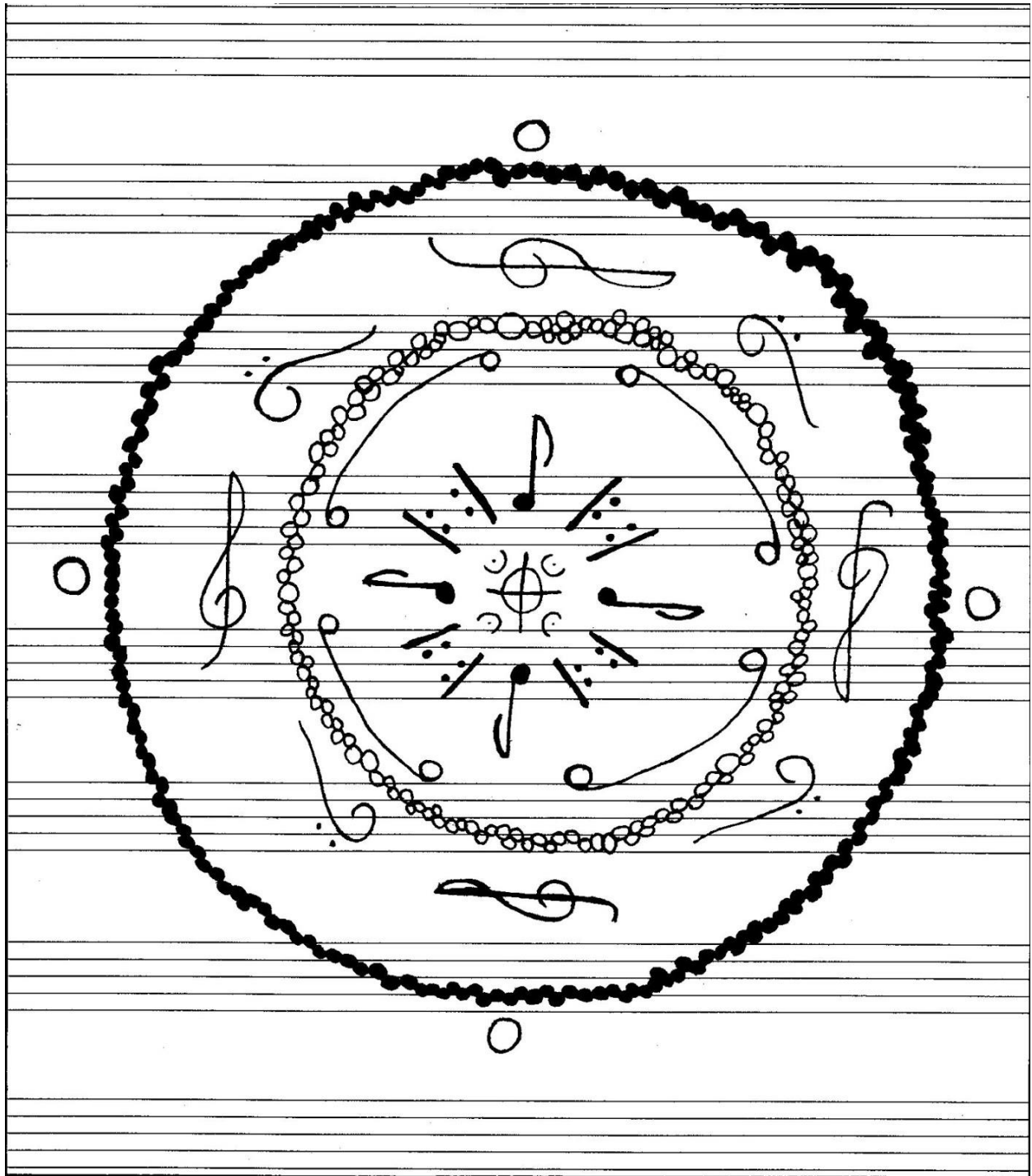












*Further Reading*

Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*

Ricardo Iznaola, *On Practicing*

Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man*

David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*